

## **Telepresence, cinema, role-playing. The structure of player identity in 3D action-adventure games.**

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The 3D action-adventure genre is a result of, first, the happy marriage of action games and adventure games, marked by *Super Mario Bros.* in 1985, and, second, the 3D revolution during the mid-nineties. In relatively quick succession we had *Doom*, *Tomb Raider*, *Quake*, *Super Mario 64*, *Silent Hill*, and then, finally, in 2001, *GTAVIII*, a significant expansion of the genre. Following a general rule of genre development, the 3D action-adventure has been steadily hybridising with other genres, or taking up elements from them, notably from role-playing games.

Which brings me to the topic of this talk, the structure of player identity. What does it mean, according to the particular conventions of this genre, to *be* James Bond in *GoldenEye 007*, or to step into the shoes of April Ryan in *Dreamfall*?

As my title indicates, there seems to be 3 major kinds of identities or "you"s at play in the action-adventure. First, there is what we may call, roughly, the Virtual Reality you, who is perceptually immersed or transported somehow, into a gameworld. Second, there is the role-playing "you", who in some way acts out, or acts through, a character in a story. Third, there is the "you" who is expected to disappear into the diegetic world of cinema.

The optimistic take would be that these three are essentially about the same thing, and that combining them therefore is a matter of degree or quantity. So whenever you add together a compelling cinematic storyline, a perceptually immersive real-time world, and, for good measure, some deep role-playing, you will end up with *more* immersion, a stronger dose, as it were, of heroic identity.

And maybe it does work like this, for some players, in one way or another. Who knows what players do or feel when they play. However, on a formal level, if we try to identify the defining principles of player (or viewer) interaction and engagement in VR, cinema and role-playing, there seems to be important tensions and conflicts. In the following I will suggest a rough model for how we can understand the nature of these tensions.

### **Prosthetic telepresence**

What is the avatar? In contemporary action-adventures, I would argue that the avatar function is primarily taken care of by the navigable camera. During play, it is the navigable camera that allows you to see, hear, move, travel and explore. Let me explain this a bit more.

When you are playing a First Person Shooter, the awareness that there may be a threat *behind* you, or more precisely: the awareness that there is a you, behind which there may be threat, is not something that follows from reasoning or logic or calculation. Rather, it follows from your inescapable embodied presence within game space.

By inescapable, I mean that once you master the controls, once movement and navigation has become intuitive and second nature, you cannot *not* have this awareness. It is as if our relationship to the navigable camera has hi-jacked your way of being in the world as a body.

Yes, you are still on the couch in front of your TV, but in the moment of perceiving and acting via the navigable camera, you are actively present elsewhere. In that moment, when you are fully tuned in, your sense of space is grounded in your attention towards the space beyond the boundary of the screen.

This is what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002) calls body intentionality: your phenomenal body – that is, roughly, your body-as-you-experience-it – is always directed in its nature. It is geared towards a field of purpose and meaning, and this intentionality towards something defines your awareness of your own body. This directedness is also what allows your body to be hi-jacked.

Playing a First Person Shooter is not so unlike driving a car. When the relationship between the car and its surroundings has grabbed your entire attention, from head to toe, this relationship becomes the project towards which your body is being directed; your very movement and posture will be meaningful in light of the relationship between vehicle and its environment.

It is in this sense we can say that a car, in the moment of driving, can become a part of you, a *prosthetic extension* of your own body. You expand beyond the boundary of the cabin, and start inhabiting the world as a unit of driver-and-vehicle, a new kind of being, an *avatar*.

In a similar way, the navigable camera of a First Person Shooter re-directs your body from across the boundary of the screen. The combined apparatus of game controls and navigable camera is being transplanted into your eyes and fingers, like an artificial limb, a prosthesis. You are, in actual fact, moving, seeing and hearing somewhere else, through your extended body.

The technology of navigable 3-dimensional graphical environments is quite unique in this respect, although it is a fairly simple trick. The prosthetic virtual camera replaces or hi-jacks not just your hands or your eyes, but your entire apparatus of locomotive perception. This means that you as a self-moving perceptual being, you as a perceiver-in-motion, is being transported across the boundary of the screen.

This is not a fantasy or an act of imagination. You are in fact being re-located into game space. A relevant analogy from *Phenomenology of Perception* would be the blind man with a stick. "Once the stick has become a familiar instrument", Merleau-Ponty says, "the world of feelable things recedes and now begins, not at the outer skin of the hand, but at the end of the stick" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 175-176).

However, the stick does not *re-locate* the blind man's moving body. That would require more sophisticated technology. A closer analogy would be piloting a Remotely-Operated Vehicle, of the kind that is being used for submarine exploration, or for military drone attacks. I am not sure to what extent such vehicles actually become prosthetic in nature, given the complexity of their interfaces, but the parallel is still instructive. Via a first-person screen view, a pilot in a control room can act and perceive somewhere else, across the border in Afghanistan, or down in the deep

sea abyss.

In a similar fashion, the game player is *tele-present* in game space via the virtual camera as a prosthetic avatar.

Let me emphasise, at this point, that prosthetic telepresence is not merely a matter of *agency*, or merely a matter of subject-positioning, or spatial awareness. Unlike a mouse cursor, which would be the typical mediator of agency in digital media, a prosthetic avatar *belongs* in the game environment, and has objective presence in it, otherwise it would not be an avatar. In this respect, the camera-body of a computer game can be compared to a live transmission camera at a sport event or a royal wedding – or a documentary camera, of the kind that is being faked in the beach landing sequence in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*.

This objective presence separates the avatarial camera of the action-adventure from the workspace camera of for example 3D graphics software like Sketchup. The whole point of a prosthetic avatar is precisely that it extends the body's dual nature as both subject *and* object. The point is not just to have agency, but to be acted *upon* by the game environment, in other words: to be an object among other objects. Extended by the avatar, we bump into things, we fall down, we are being shot at, in short: through the avatar, we are truly being incarnated in a game world, in which our key goal is to survive and to conquer.

When one is being telepresent, whether in Afghanistan or in screen-rendered computer space, one's embodied presence is not a fiction, not an image. Virtual space is neither imagined space, as Espen Aarseth (2005) has pointed out, nor image-space. Virtual space is real space; just like in Disneyland, everything is staged for make-believe, but this does not mean that you are not actually there. In computer game telepresence, the boundary of the screen is one of materiality, not actuality.

The idea of Virtual Reality, in spite of a few misleading connotations, may not be such bad association after all. If Merleau-Ponty's theory of body intentionality is correct, there is no reason to assume that avatar-based VR is any less perceptually immersive than full sensory encapsulation, of the kind that we find in for example CAVE installations. The main difference would be that the former is more rich and interesting than the latter, and certainly a lot cheaper.

## **Travel companions**

But where does this take us? Why, once again, bring up the phenomenology of embodiment when speaking of avatars, virtuality and identity?

First, the role of the playable character. Telepresence, or the notion of perceptual presence in general, has nothing to do with characters, playable or otherwise. This is fairly obvious, but can nevertheless seem confusing, since the term "avatar" is quite often taken to mean both. In any case, what I have been talking about so far is the kind of embodied identity-play that the action-adventure has in common the flight simulator, the racing game, or other character-less 3D-navigable worlds like *Marble Madness*. Or, at a stretch, *Super Monkey Ball*.

But the action-adventure is also about a playable character, a hero, without whom there would be

no story world, no journey, no adventure. So far I have been using the First Person Shooter as a case to illustrate tele-embodiment. This is very handy, because in the FPS, being an avatar means being a camera-body, quite literally; you float around, like a Steadicam, or a kind of gyroscopic camera-gun machine. The *character* that you are supposed to be driving is not even seen during play; the game just basically tells you that he or she is there, and that he or she is "you".

The so called third person perspective is different from the first-person variant in terms of how it configures your relationship to a playable character. You get to observe, during play, the character that is supposed to be you, and you get to operate it as a puppet, a marionette.

But it's a strange thing. It is certainly not like other kinds of puppetry. During play, the character is no more than a figure; it makes no choices and has no will, no intention, and indeed no, or hardly any, signs of perception or consciousness. The navigable camera is attached to it like a follow-cam, as illustrated in Gus van Sant's film *Elephant*. When playing, you are driving or *piloting* the character, as a figure, an empty shell, a vehicle. The only perceiving and acting is done by *you*, the telepresent player, the player-as-incarnated.

"First-person" and "third-person", therefore, are different configurations of the same kind of telepresent embodiment. The main difference between the two is that in third-person, the marionette carries the main burden of objective embodiment in game space, not the camera that tags along. It is through the marionette that you are able to manipulate objects, shoot and being shot at, jump up and fall down, and so on.

But it is the virtual camera that allows you to see and hear in the environment, that enables you to look around, investigate objects, peek around corners – in short, the camera still takes care of the most basic ways in which you are actually perceiving the world and relating yourself to it. The unity of camera and marionette is the incarnated body of the player, just like the unity of camera and gun is the body of the player in a First-Person Shooter.

The third implication of the notion of prosthetic telepresence that I would like to address, is memory. When I recall some of my fondest memories from action-adventure games that I have played, most of them quite a long time ago, who's experience am I remembering? It certainly cannot be a *character's* experience, that would make no sense. In some cases I don't even remember my playable character's name, and I certainly have no idea what he or she was doing in those places that I remember.

The straightforward answer would be that I remember my *own* experiences (whatever that means), similarly to how I remember any other experiences from the past, people I have met and places I have been to. In other words, the *me* that I remember would be the me in front of the television or computer screen, playing the game, in all its aspects, of which avatar-based immersion would be just one of them.

And I certainly remember that too. But my most vivid memories are of a different nature. They are about places I have been to, and about what I felt when I was there. When I close my eyes and re-experience them in my mind, typically single moments, a situation, a landscape, my memory is of being there. I remember the snowy Phendrana Drifts in *Metroid Prime*, the atmospheric beauty that surrounded me, and that I felt alone.

My memory of being there, as avatar, is different from how I remember places from novels or films, and more similar to other first-hand experiences. The Phendrana Drifts is a place that I have struggled to get to. I put a lot of time into that journey and those landscapes, and as such I guess I transformed them from "spaces" into "places", as geographers would say.

Eventually, the Phendrana Drifts became the last place I remember from that particular journey, as I could not mobilise the skill and patience to beat the next upcoming boss. So in a sense, therefore, I died there, in the snow, and with that beautiful theme music – at least that is how I remember it.

So what, then, about Samus Aran? Well, she has her own story, I suppose. To what extent her story mirrors my own in some important way, I am not sure, and I am not going to speculate. I assume her journey did not end there, in the snow with me, half-way through the book. I do remember, however, a kind of companionship or resonance between us, in spite of her absence during play. But I have no idea what she was up to, or why she was there.

## Role-playing

This is different from my experience with other partners-in-arms. Take Nico Bellic in GTAIV. He is a guy with a lot of personal baggage, a deep thinker and a poetic mind, who struggles to come to terms with the path in life that has been chosen for him. His story, and his world, hardly resonate at all with my own experiences in game space. Yes, I do get to act through a puppet that *looks* like him, but the way I make the puppet behave shows no connection whatsoever to the character Nico Bellic. My world, as avatar, and his world, as the *person* Nico Bellic, are two different planets, two separate tracks of existence.

There is a way, however, in which I can attempt to connect with the character of Nico Bellic, and make him – sort of – come to life. I can *be* him by acting in character, by role-playing him.

At every moment while playing through the marionette, I would be guided by the question: What would Nico do? What would he feel, and not least: how would he *perceive* the situation? What would he know? On a very banal level, he would not, for example, be able to defend himself from enemies he cannot see, attacking him from behind. And I guess an action-adventure game could be played in this way, somehow.

But there is another option: The *computer* can role-play the playable character. This means that in addition to being the game master, who directs the scenarios, the computer can also 'be in character', as it were, so that you don't have to. You will be allowed to influence some of the choices that must be made, and you will be told that this character is *you*.

Action-adventure games often borrow this modality of player address from single player computer role-playing. In this way you can have your cake and eat it; "you" means the telepresent you as well as the you that the computer role-plays.

Role-playing is gaming's own territory. Since long before the action-adventure, role-playing and hypertext fiction has developed as the unique and characteristic form in which gaming

engages with the art of storytelling. The principle of playing through character – that is: having the computer determine what can happen next based on the playable character’s perception and knowledge – is a principle that role-playing games share with Interactive Fiction and point-and-click adventure games. When you are told that ‘you’ investigate an object in point-and-clicker, or when ‘you’ hear a sound to the north in a role-playing game, or when you learn a new skill, or when you remember something, it refers of course to your *character’s* perception and knowledge, not your own.

This principle is very difficult to square with the type of avatar-based play that has come to define action-adventure gaming as a genre. It can only be injected into it by force, in a way that insists on a schizophrenic structuring of player identity.

Two factors mitigate the clash between character play and telepresent play. First, the player must expect role-playing, understand what it is about, and be tuned into the right frequency. Otherwise, being told things like ‘‘You see a rusty dagger. It looks broken’’ can easily confuse players who might expect to be doing the seeing themselves. Secondly, crude graphics will do you a great favour. In 1992, you could not actually see whether that thing in the corner was a dagger, or whether it was rusty, or whether it appeared broken.

Nevertheless, what we are looking at here, I would suggest, is an epistemological clash, and there is no way around it, whether by technology or by design. The two different kinds of in-game identity contradict each other. Either you are perceiving and acting via a playable character’s perceptions and actions, as determined by the computer, or you are acting and perceiving in the world as yourself, extended into game space.

This epistemological clash becomes apparent in any game that attempts to translate a role-playing game or a point-and-click adventure into a real-time 3D environment, like Funcom’s *Dreamfall* from 2006. For example, in the subterranean city level, playing as April Ryan, you need to hide behind an altar in order to observe a troll that comes along to open a combination lock with a code. There are two options. You may try and look real closely at what the troll is doing, without getting seen, and then open the door using the code that you picked up from observing him. This would be consistent with how you learn to acquire important information and deal with combination locks earlier in the game.

Alternatively – and this is the correct solution – you move April into a position so that she can watch and learn the combination, and then open the door for you. Or, if we shift perspective: you are supposed to be using your marionette first as a code scanner, and then as a door opener. This illustrates the challenge facing interactive fiction and role-playing when they seek to merge with real-time navigable 3D, in order to be *even more* immersive. Who is perceiving and acting in the game? Who’s adventure is it?

Prosthetic telepresence in real-time 3D worlds does not support role-playing very well. It is not just that the player’s prosthetic telepresence in game space messes up the whole idea of playing through a playable character. The problem is twofold. Firstly, a role-playing system does not *need* a real-time embodied world and was never made for it. A role-playing game is rooted in the idea of a fiction-generating system. Unlike the relatively simple principles of adventure gaming, an RPG system is a machine that generates character relationships and story events. In

collaboration with the players, this machine keeps transforming and expanding the game world as a space of possible actions and relationships. When taken into navigable 3D, this means that the world that the player inhabits via the avatar becomes a concretised expression or even *illustration* of the events and relationships generated by the RPG system.

When a role-playing system is being squeezed into a 3D action-adventure world, the telepresent player will soon discover that, in ontological terms, the action is going on elsewhere. In the tutorial level of *Fallout 3*, for example, the player learns that it is possible at any time to sneak up on game characters and pick their pockets. However, when attempting to do so, nothing happens. That is: a lot of things happen, but it has no impact whatsoever in the world that the player inhabits via the navigable camera. Instead you are simply told that you have been attempting to steal money from this person, you have been discovered, you have been to jail, and they have taken some money from you.

This kind of gaping ontological hole in the player's embodied time-space-continuum is not particularly noteworthy given the nature of the beast that is action-adventure role-playing. It is simply a reminder that in role-playing, the real action is going on somewhere else. That other gamespace, the RPG gamespace, it is outside the realm of the telepresent player-as-avatar.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the current dominance of avatar-based 3D has put the traditional role-playing game space under pressure. And in a way, first-person role-playing has always, as evident in the fan expectations that preceded *Ultima Underworld*, been pushing towards and dreaming about Virtual Reality; it would be like a glorious return live role-playing, only this time inside the Holodeck.

As a result of this pressure from action-adventure player embodiment, and the lure of Virtual Reality, it seems that first-person RPG are finding themselves being pulled towards less system-oriented and more real-time friendly kinds of role-playing, which means less emphasis on the complexities and flexibility of a fiction-generating system, and more emphasis on the performance aspect of role-playing: less emphasis on constructing and developing fictional worlds, and more emphasis on embodying them.

This points to a common ground between the 3D action-adventure and a certain way of doing role-playing, a common ground between prosthetic telepresence and embodied make-believe, between telepresence and what we would broadly refer to as performance. In terms of its status as fiction, the 3D action-adventure can be compared to a dramatic contest; the whole world is a stage. Because prosthetic avatars re-locate players into game space, the events unfolding there are essentially similar in status to other kinds of embodied make-believe, other kinds of live performances in the physical world. Sometimes, as in live role-playing (or drama therapy), we are supposed to be playing along, playing our part. In other contexts we are not expected to participate in the same way, as in Disneyland, or when we accidentally stumble across a bank robbery in a Wild West theme park.

## **Diegesis**

Cinema, finally, is a very different species of fiction. Its promise is that you can *suspend*

yourself, not just your disbeliefs but agency, your body, your entire here-and-now, so that you can disappear into a world of discourse, a world that you imagine. We may call this the *diegetic principle*, a slight modification of the concept of the “diegetic effect”, as first used by Noel Burch (1979).

The diegetic principle is a very peculiar and uncompromising thing. Suppose I read you the following sentence: "Colin Hansen was late for work again".

Does this not imply that Colin Hansen is a *person*, in a world, and that he is late for work? The kind of discourse exemplified by such a sentence is a diegesis-triggering discourse. It creates a world, in an instant. It does so by asking us to accept and identify with a world in which it must be recognised that Colin is a person.

This first moment of identification, which is at the same time the moment of world-creation, is not dependent on the quality or richness of character description. Colin will not become *more* person if he is fleshed out through narration that paints him as a nuanced or deep or convincing character. He is a person that exists in a world, and who is late for work, simply because the sentence says that it is so; this is how diegetic worlds are created in discourse. You could also say, as Paul Ricoeur (1991) insists, that a world is created by a *work*, implied by the sentence above: a novel, or perhaps a short story, or a song.

Who is Colin Hansen's mother? What does she do? Is she alive?

If you answer "I don't know" to this question (which I guess would be unlikely, at this point), you would reveal that you are still diegetically immersed, still abiding by the diegetic principle. You would still be what Marie-Laure Ryan refers to as *re-centred*, which means, in somewhat crude terms, that you relate to the world in which Colin is a person as an actual world. When you state that you do not know, you imply that you *could* know, or more precisely: that there are things in the world (Colin's world) that you do not know. This means that to you, his world is an actual, autonomous world; things that exist, or do not exist, do so independently of you knowing about it.

Your answer “I don't know” would also imply that Colin's world is complete. I could ask you any similar question, about anything, and you would either give a specific answer, or state that you do not know. In contrast, the moment you no longer identify with a re-centred version of yourself, and you no longer relate to a world that is autonomous and complete, no longer abiding by the diegetic principle, you would simply say that my question is meaningless, that there is nothing to know, or not know.

In fiction film, the diegetic principle is no different, even if it operates through a different kind of discourse. When you look at a scene in a film, you see two worlds. One of them is a piece of our shared, actual world, which you look into via the film camera. You see Brad Pitt, for example. Maybe you admire the set design, and you know, or at least you have good reason to assume, that what you see is a recording of what was in front of the camera.

The other world that you see, or rather, that you *imagine* that you see, is the diegetic world, the world in which the characters act, perceive and live their lives. Like the world of Colin Hansen,

this world comes into being through the diegetic principle, through discourse, as a matter of *language*, not a matter of seeing. There will be cues in the film image that tells you that you are being asked to imagine a diegetic world.

The two worlds, the one you are seeing and the one you imagine that you are seeing, both extend beyond the screen. By implication, the ontological status of the camera is different. In the world that you see, it exists, but in the world you imagine that you see, it does not.

It follows that navigable real-time spaces are comparable to recorded real spaces, not imagined ones, and that it makes no sense at all to refer to them as diegetic spaces or as computer game diegesis. There is no such thing as having embodied presence in a discursive formation, or in an imagined world. And there is no way in which you can *be* in the diegetic world of a fiction film. The idea, however intriguing, is a contradiction in terms.

So in games, there is an ontological gap between the real-time world, in which we engage through prosthetic telepresence, and the world of cut-scenes, which come into being through diegetic immersion. When a cinematic sequence is triggered, the world of the avatar is suspended and replaced with a discursive act, which addresses a very different kind of “you”, and creates an experience of worldness on a radically different premise.

So there is no need to ponder the presumed lack of synchronisation between how the telepresent player is experiencing his role in the game world, and what we are told that the playable character is experiencing. The two exist on separate ontological planes. There is no reason to assume, for example, that the heavily caricatured television programmes we can watch in Nico Bellic’s residence in *GTAIV* are similar to the programmes *he* is watching, in the world in which he exists as a person. I have no idea what he watches, but I find it very unlikely that it would be anything like those videos.

For the same reason, we should not be surprised to find a lack of meaningful connection between characters as they come to life in cinematic sequences, and the same characters as they inhabit the real-time environment, as AI-controlled agents. When a cinematic sequence is triggered, it is as if in-game characters – for example sitting in a tavern – become suddenly transformed and animated into persons, like magically possessed from the realm beyond. Once the cinematic sequence is over, they are de-spirited again, falling back into their autistic routines, as dead puppets who are rarely very convincing in the way they are made to perform. The split between those two states is of an ontological nature, and cannot be bridged through clever technology or clever design.

The incompatible nature of diegesis and embodied telepresence is no reason to assume that the two should not be combined, quite the contrary. Many great games allow them to clash in interesting and evocative ways. One of the things that I find attractive about the action-adventure genre, is that there *can* be a companionship across the ontological gap, a felt resonance between your own experiences and your character's experiences, and a slow realisation that the two of you are, after all, travel companions and brothers in arms.

This is a resonance not just in terms of shared goals and obstacles, but in terms of time that has passed, shared history and shared places, resonant memories. For the player, I don’t think there

is a shortcut to this experience. As with so many things in life, you have to put in the effort and the time, the struggle and the frustration. It is in this sense that the action-adventure is truly a journey.

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