

**The Ludic Subject and the Ludic Self:  
Analyzing the ‘I-in-the-Gameworld’**

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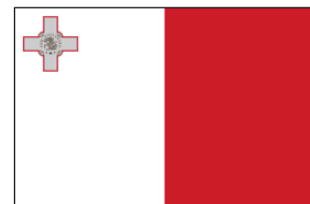
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## Abstract

It is a defining quality of the category of games fitting under the label of the ‘figure game’ that they not only establish a world to be explored and experienced, but also a subjective identity for the player to inhabit in relation to this world. It is this subjective identity within the gameworld, termed the *ludic subject*, that this dissertation takes as its focus. The question this dissertation sets out to answer is: *What is the nature of the ‘I’ that exists as a subject in relation to the experiential world established by the game?*

The investigative approach that shall be adopted with regard to the question of subjectivity is that of phenomenology. A twofold understanding of subjectivity is drawn upon – both as the ‘subject’ of experience in its first-personal givenness, and as the objectified ‘self’ that emerges in a second-order act of reflection upon first-order subjective experience. With regard to the ludic subject, these two dimensions of subjectivity are integrated in the development of a double perspectival structure of ludic experience, 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.

This twofold understanding provides the structure for the two-part claim this dissertation makes with regard to ludic subjectivity. Firstly, the player’s involvement with the gameworld through incorporation in the form of a playable figure (containing within it the senses of both ‘avatar’ and ‘character’) reflects the experiential and existential structures of embodied being-in-the-world. Secondly, the capture and representation of this ludic subjectivity within the frame of the game as a textual unity sets in motion an aesthetics of subjectivity, by which the player’s own in-game ‘I’ is offered back to her as a represented ludic self.

In addressing these dimensions of the ludic subject, this dissertation, firstly, engages in an analysis of the formal mechanisms by which the player is located within a specific *ludic subject-position* in relation to the gameworld, and is thereby determined as a *ludic subject*. The phenomenological investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are brought to bear upon this stage of the investigation. Secondly, this dissertation interrogates the nature of the *ludic self* that is enacted in the player’s engagement with the gameworld from the standpoint of the ludic subject-position, that the player identifies as ‘I’ within the gameworld. Here, the notion of a narrative self developed by Ricoeur and Zahavi is integrated with a literary-theoretical approach to *character* as a means of conceptualizing the ludic self as it is constructed textually through the game’s representation of the player’s actions and experiences as a ludic subject in the gameworld. Thirdly, on this basis, the dissertation maps out the web of relations – of identity and difference, proximity and distance, selfhood and otherness – that play out across the gap between the player outside the game and the ludic subject in the game, and which represent a formally-enshrined foregrounding of the experiential structures of subjectivity and selfhood.



## Resumé

En definerende kvalitet ved kategorien af spil som betegnes 'eventyrsspil' er, at de ikke kun etablerer en verden som skal udforskes og opleves, men at de også etablerer en subjektiv identitet for spilleren at påtage sig i relation til spilverdenen. Det er denne subjektive identitet inde i spilverdenen, kaldet *det ludiske subjekt*, som denne afhandling vil fokusere på. Spørgsmålet som afhandlingen vil besvare er derfor: *Hvad er 'Jeg's' væsen der eksisterer som et subjekt i forhold til den oplevede verden etableret af spillet?*

Den udforskende tilgang som vil tages i brug med hensyn til spørgsmålet om subjektivitet er fænomenologiens. Der trækkes på en todelte forståelse af subjektivitet – både som 'subjektet' af oplevelsen i sin første-personlige givethed, og som det tingsliggjorte 'selv' der opstår i en andenordens refleksionshandling på en førsteordens subjektive oplevelse. Med hensyn til det ludiske subjekt, så er disse to dimensioner af subjektivitet integreret i udviklingen af den ludiske oplevelses dobbelt perspektiverende struktur, hvorved spilleren påtager sig både et perspektiv internt til spilverdenen, som indrammer det ludiske subjekt som en genstand for erkendelse.

Denne dobbelte forståelse giver en struktur for den todelte påstand som denne afhandling laver med hensyn til ludisk subjektivitet. Først og fremmest reflekterer spillerens engagement med spilverdenen igennem inkorporering i form af en spilbar figur (som indeholder forståelserne af både 'avatar' og 'karakter' i sig) de erfaringsmæssige og eksistentielle strukturer af den kropsliggjorte væren-i-verden. For det andet, igangsætter indfangelsen og repræsentationen af denne ludiske subjektivitet inden for spillets rammer som en tekstuel enhed en subjektivitetsæstetik, hvorved spillerens eget 'jeg' i spillet gives tilbage til hende som et repræsenteret ludisk selv.

Til at behandle disse dimensioner af det ludiske subjekt, så beskæftiger denne afhandling sig først med en analyse af de formelle mekanismer hvorved spilleren er placeret indenfor en specifik *ludisk subjekt-position* i relation til spilverdenen, og derved er bestemt som et *ludisk subjekt*. De fænomenologiske undersøgelser af Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre og Merleau-Ponty lægger grund for denne del af udredningen. Dernæst undersøger denne afhandling det *ludiske subjekts* væsen, som udføres i spillerens deltagelse med spilverdenen ud fra det ludiske subjekt-positions standpunkt, som spilleren identificerer som 'jeg' inden i spilverdenen. Her er forståelsen af et 'narrativt selv', udviklet af Ricoeur og Zahavi, integreret med en litterær-teoretisk tilgang til *karakter* som et middel til at konceptualisere det ludiske selv, da det er tekstuel konstrueret igennem spillets repræsentation af spillerens handlinger og oplevelser som et ludisk subjekt i spilverdenen. Ud fra dette grundlag kortlægger afhandlingen et net af relationer – ud fra identitet og forskel, nærhed og distance, jeghed og andethed – der udspilles over kløften mellem spilleren udenfor spillet og det ludiske subjekt i spillet, og som repræsenterer en formelt forankret fremhævelse af de oplevelsesmæssige strukturer ved subjektivitet og jeghed.



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“Cold glass, how you insert yourself

Between myself and myself.”

- Sylvia Plath, “The Other”

“An inconsequential snow scene like this creates images in my mind, induces in me a desire to enter it. By entering the snow scene I would become the back of someone. This back of course would not have any particular meaning if I were not at this window looking at it.”

- Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*

Craig Schwartz: [as *Maxine Puppet*] Tell me, Craig, why do you like puppeteering?

Craig Schwartz: [as *Craig Puppet*] Well Maxine, I’m not sure exactly. Perhaps the idea of becoming someone else for a little while. Being inside another skin – thinking differently, moving differently, feeling differently.

- *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze)

“Then the system of strings tugs at the tip of my wings

(Cut from cardboard and old magazines)

Makes me warble and rise, like a sparrow.”

- Joanna Newsom, “Sawdust and Diamonds”



# Table of Contents

<b>Chapter One: Introducing the ludic subject</b>	1
1.1 The Adventures of You	5
1.2 The playable figure	7
1.3 The ‘figure game’ as domain of study	11
1.4 Ludic subjectivity as analytical focus	14
1.5 A twofold methodology for a twofold understanding of subjectivity	17
1.6 A clarification of concepts	21
1.6.1 <i>The implied player and the ludic subject</i>	23
1.6.2 <i>Ludic subjectivity as opposed to role-playing</i>	24
1.7 The structure of this dissertation	25
<b>Chapter Two: The aesthetics of ludic engagement</b>	31
2.1 The aesthetic approach	32
2.1.1 <i>The aesthetic object as ‘concretization’ in experience</i>	33
2.1.2 <i>The formal specificity of the aesthetic object</i>	34
2.1.3 <i>The formal unity of the aesthetic object</i>	36
2.1.4 <i>Aesthetic disinterestedness</i>	38
2.2 Play as aesthetic action	39
2.2.1 <i>Fink and the ontology of the play-act</i>	40
2.2.2 <i>Merleau-Ponty and the abstract movement</i>	43
2.2.3 <i>Gadamer and the task of play</i>	45
2.2.4 <i>‘Play’ as frame</i>	47
2.3 ‘Game’, ‘gameworld’ and the formal unity of play	50
2.3.1 <i>The notion of the play-world</i>	50
2.3.2 <i>From the play-world to the gameworld</i>	52
2.3.3 <i>The gameworld and the ludic subject</i>	53

2.4	The double perspectival structure of ludic engagement	55
2.4.1	<i>“Game as an experiential route” versus “game as a map or system”</i>	57
2.4.2	<i>First-person perspective versus third-person perspective</i>	60
2.4.3	<i>The implications of the dual perspectival structure</i>	64
2.4.4	<i>The dual perspectival structure and the ludic subject</i>	69
2.5	Conclusions	72
 <b>Chapter Three: The phenomenology of the gameworld</b>		 77
3.1	An intentional structure of ludic experience	79
3.1.1	<i>Perception of things-in-the-gameworld</i>	80
3.1.2	<i>Phenomenology, intentionality, world and subject</i>	81
3.1.3	<i>The ludic subject-position and the ludic subject</i>	84
3.2	The twofold phenomenological structure of subjectivity	85
3.2.1	<i>The twofold structure of the subject’s relation to the world</i>	86
3.2.2	<i>The twofold structure of the subject’s relation to herself</i>	87
3.2.3	<i>The twofold structure as applied to games</i>	88
3.3	The gameworld as lifeworld	90
3.3.1	<i>‘World’ as the ground of perception</i>	91
3.3.2	<i>‘World’ as lifeworld</i>	92
3.4	The gameworld as <i>cosmos</i>	94
3.4.1	<i>Cosmology as an ontology</i>	96
3.4.2	<i>The interpretation of the gameworld</i>	97
3.4.3	<i>The gameworld and the game-system</i>	99
3.4.4	<i>The notion of the heterocosm</i>	104
3.4.5	<i>Integrating the systemic and the heterocosmic framings of the gameworld</i>	109
3.5	The game as ‘earth’	112
3.5.1	<i>Husserl and the limits of the perceptual field</i>	113
3.5.2	<i>Heidegger and the opposition of ‘world’ to ‘earth’</i>	114
3.5.3	<i>The difficulty of materiality in games</i>	115

3.5.4	<i>The actuality of the game component and facticity</i>	117
3.6	Conclusions	120
<b>Chapter Four: The sense of being-in-the-gameworld</b>		123
4.1	Subjectivity, perspective and the heterocosm	125
4.1.1	<i>A noetic mode of presentation</i>	125
4.1.2	<i>Painting and the viewer's perspective</i>	127
4.1.3	<i>Focalization in literature</i>	130
4.1.4	<i>Focalization and games</i>	133
4.1.5	<i>The filmic subject and the viewer</i>	136
4.1.6	<i>Heterocosmic subject-positioning and ludic subject-positioning</i>	139
4.2	Immersion, presence and telepresence	141
4.2.1	<i>The experience of immersion</i>	141
4.2.2	<i>The problems with immersion</i>	143
4.2.3	<i>Presence (or telepresence)</i>	145
4.2.4	<i>Immersion reconsidered?</i>	146
4.3	Recentering	148
4.3.1	<i>The conceptual difficulties with sensory immersions</i>	148
4.3.2	<i>The notion of recentering</i>	151
4.3.3	<i>Recentering and the ludic subject</i>	153
4.4	Agency	156
4.4.1	<i>Immersion and the capacity of taking action</i>	156
4.4.2	<i>Theorizations of agency</i>	158
4.4.3	<i>Agency and the ludic subject</i>	161
4.5	Conclusions	163
<b>Chapter Five: Embodiment in the gameworld</b>		167
5.1	Point of action, locus of manipulation, Game Ego	169
5.1.1	<i>Point of action</i>	170

5.1.2	<i>Locus of manipulation</i>	172
5.1.3	<i>Game Ego</i>	174
5.2	Embodiment and games	175
5.2.1	<i>A “virtual body”</i>	175
5.2.2	<i>An opposing understanding of embodiment</i>	178
5.2.3	<i>‘Incorporation’ and the ludic subject</i>	180
5.3	The phenomenology of the body	182
5.3.1	<i>The ontological necessity of the body</i>	183
5.3.2	<i>The body as ‘first co-ordinates’</i>	185
5.3.3	<i>Facticity and situation</i>	187
5.3.4	<i>Contingency, purpose and resistance</i>	189
5.3.5	<i>The instrumental complex and the “I can”</i>	192
5.4	The phenomenology of the ludic body	196
5.4.1	<i>The extensional theory</i>	198
5.4.2	<i>The problems with the extensional theory</i>	200
5.4.3	<i>Leino and “hybrid intentionality”</i>	201
5.4.4	<i>Klevjer and the “prosthetic marionette”</i>	203
5.4.5	<i>The two phenomenological aspects of the body</i>	204
5.4.6	<i>The embodied ludic subject and the ludic self</i>	208
5.6	Conclusions	210
 <b>Chapter Six: The playable figure</b>		213
6.1	The ontology of the playable figure	214
6.1.1	<i>The ontological and phenomenological dualities of the playable figure</i>	215
6.1.2	<i>Avatar</i>	217
6.1.3	<i>Player-character</i>	222
6.2	The phenomenology of the playable figure	225
6.2.1	<i>The identity distinction</i>	225
6.2.2	<i>The perspectival distinction</i>	228

6.2.3	<i>The interrelation of the two distinctions</i>	231
6.3	A model of the player-figure relation	233
6.4	Case study: <i>Kentucky Route Zero</i> , Act 1 Scene 2	235
6.4.1	<i>The opening</i>	236
6.4.2	<i>Looking at' the world</i>	239
6.4.3	<i>Walking the path</i>	242
6.4.4	<i>Defining through choice</i>	246
6.4.5	<i>A record of the ludic subject</i>	250
6.4.6	<i>Sharing the gaze</i>	254
6.4.7	<i>Drawing things to a close</i>	257
6.5	Conclusions	258
<b>Chapter Seven: The structure of the ludic subject-position</b>		261
7.1	The ludic subject-position and the gameworld	263
7.1.1	<i>The multiple senses of 'perspective'</i>	263
7.1.2	<i>From perspective to the ludic subject-position</i>	265
7.2	The dimensions of the ludic subject-position	266
7.2.1	<i>Spatial standpoint</i>	267
7.2.2	<i>Point-of-view</i>	272
7.2.3	<i>Auditory standpoint</i>	279
7.2.4	<i>Capabilities and limitations</i>	280
7.2.5	<i>Goal-orientation</i>	283
7.2.6	<i>Passion</i>	287
7.3	Case study: <i>Minecraft</i> and <i>Proteus</i>	290
7.3.1	<i>The wanderer in the wilderness</i>	290
7.3.2	<i>Minecraft: the landscape as standing-reserve</i>	292
7.3.3	<i>Proteus: the Romantic individual in the landscape</i>	297
7.3.4	<i>A mode of being-in-the-world</i>	303
7.4	Conclusions	305

<b>Chapter Eight: From the ludic subject to the ludic self</b>	309
8.1 The enactment of the ludic subject	310
8.1.1 <i>The mineness of ludic subjectivity</i>	311
8.1.2 <i>Action, intention and the subject</i>	313
8.1.3 <i>The ludic subject in action</i>	319
8.1.4 <i>The ascription of ludic action</i>	322
8.2 From the subject to the self	324
8.2.1 <i>Self-consciousness and the subject of experience</i>	325
8.2.2 <i>Reflection and the self</i>	328
8.2.3 <i>The ‘narrative self’</i>	330
8.2.4 <i>Calleja and the notion of “alterbiography”</i>	331
8.3 The presentation of the ludic self	333
8.3.1 <i>From the internal to the external perspective</i>	334
8.3.2 <i>The objective relation to the enacted ludic subject</i>	337
8.3.3 <i>The mediation of the enacted ludic subject</i>	343
8.4 Case study: Narration in <i>Bastion</i>	347
8.4.1 <i>Narration and the playable figure</i>	348
8.4.2 <i>The formal functions of the narration</i>	352
8.5 Conclusions	355
<b>Chapter Nine: Character and the ludic self</b>	359
9.1 “Character” in games	360
9.1.1 <i>The narrative question</i>	361
9.1.2 <i>‘Character’ as the unity of representation of the ludic self</i>	365
9.2 The two senses of ‘character’	368
9.2.1 <i>Character as a heterocosmic individual</i>	369
9.2.2 <i>Character as textuality</i>	370
9.3 A semiotic-structural model of the player-character	371



9.3.1	<i>Two existing approaches to the theorization of the player-character</i>	372
9.3.2	<i>Margolin and the taxonomy of “characterization statements”</i>	373
9.4	Static mimetic elements	375
9.4.1	<i>Represented elements</i>	376
9.4.2	<i>Contextual elements</i>	381
9.4.3	<i>Ludic elements</i>	384
9.5	Dynamic mimetic elements	392
9.5.1	<i>Character actions</i>	393
9.5.2	<i>Player actions</i>	397
9.6	Formal patterns	399
9.7	From the player-character to the ludic self	402
9.7.1	<i>Reading the subjectivity beyond the textuality</i>	403
9.7.2	<i>The enactment of the ludic subject and the textuality of player-character</i>	405
9.8	Conclusions	408
	<b>In conclusion</b>	413
	<b>Bibliography</b>	421
	<b>Ludography</b>	439
	<b>Filmography</b>	442

# Chapter One

## Introducing the ludic subject

William Crowther and Don Woods' seminal work of interactive fiction, *Adventure* (1976), begins with these lines:

*You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building. Around you is a forest. A small stream flows out of the building and down a gully.*

To a contemporary reader, there is little in these lines that appears to be particularly noteworthy. However, looking at these sentences in the light of the novelty with which they announced themselves, what they reveal is the emergence of a new aesthetic form. Espen Aarseth (1997, 100) argues that we can trace the impact of *Adventure* across more than thirty-five years of this form's historical development. His analysis grounds itself firmly within the structural effects of the text-based adventure game (or interactive fiction (IF)), before suggesting that the same observations are essentially true of games as diverse as *Rogue* (Toy and Wichman 1980) and *Doom* (id Software 1993). What unites this broad genre, Aarseth writes, is the focus each of these games has on "spatially oriented themes of travel and discovery" (ibid., 101). This paves the way for the privileging of questions of spatiality in the field of game studies: witness Stephan Günzel's observation that "space is the one category that has come to be accepted as the central issue of game studies" (2008, 171). With regard to *Adventure*'s opening lines, directly concerned as they are with the presentation of a locus that invites exploration, it is an observation that could hardly appear more apt.

At the same time, Aarseth's statement masks a number of assumptions regarding the aesthetic foundations of the genre. Firstly, while we might speak of a space that is made available to be explored and traversed by the player (cf. Aarseth 2000; Wolf 2001; 2010; Günzel 2008; Nitsche 2008; Gazzard 2013; Leirfall 2013), if it is indeed a space that *Adventure* establishes, it is a very particular kind of space. *Adventure*'s representation of the Mammoth Cave system in Kentucky, no less than the Mushroom Kingdom in

*Super Mario World* (Nintendo 1990) or the colony on Phobos in *Doom*, is not continuous with the player's actual space – or, indeed, with any space the player recognizes as actual in her own world.<sup>1</sup> Instead, it constitutes a discrete, bounded world established by, and exclusively accessible through, the game artefact.

This observation – that *Adventure* establishes what can, in experiential terms, be understood as a world – could be framed in several terms. One way to deploy this insight is to use it as a criterion by which to identify *Adventure* as a particular kind of game. We might say that *Adventure* belongs to the category of games that have been termed “games in virtual environments” (Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå 2003, 48; Calleja 2011, 14). This is a useful approach, allowing for the foregrounding of a specific subset of the vast array of objects gathered under the umbrella of the term ‘game’, while highlighting the notion of ‘virtual environment’ (Klastrup 2004, 27; Calleja 2007, 44), a computationally upheld ontological domain experienced as a spatiotemporal organization.

At the same time, this world-establishing quality can be used to align *Adventure* – and, by extension, the genre it founds – with a wider aesthetic tradition upon which it draws, and to which it grants a new inflection. An established body of critical work exists which looks at the notion of the *heterocosm* – the idea of a textual, represented world (cf. Abrams 1971a; Ruthven 1984; Doležel 1998; Ryan 2001a). Locating *Adventure* within the aesthetic tradition of the heterocosm would open up the possibility of investigating the milieu it establishes according to the techniques developed for the analysis of such textual worlds (cf. Pavel 1986; Ryan 1991; Eco 1994; Ronen 1994).

However, it is not enough to stop at considering the world of *Adventure*, or other games of its ilk, in the same light as the world of a novel, a play, or a film. It is certainly true that it qualifies as a textual artefact which established a world, but this is a *ludic* heterocosm, indebted for its ontological nature and aesthetic character to the formal

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, unlike these latter two examples, the space set up by *Adventure* does have a representational relation to a space the player recognizes as actual in her own world, and – especially if the player is familiar with the represented space in the actual world – this can certainly colour the player's relation to the game space in significant ways. This, however, is another matter entirely to the question of the relation between the space established by the game – in this case, the virtual environment modeled on the Mammoth Cave system – and the space of the player's actual embodiment, which are not, in any meaningful sense, continuous.

qualities of the medium of its presentation – that is, through its being established as a gameworld (cf. Aarseth 2008; Leino 2010; Gazzard 2011b; Jørgensen 2013; Wolf 2014).

If the formal tradition to which *Adventure* belongs is one that foregrounds – to return to Aarseth’s phrasing - “spatially oriented themes of travel and discovery”, it is so by virtue of its establishment of a heterocosm that stands to be explored. However, it is not enough that there is a spatial expanse to be travelled through and discovered, one that takes the form of a heterocosmic world. It is just as essential that there is someone, an agent of some sort, who does the travelling and discovering. This agent has to be a member of the world in question, literally *in place* within it: phenomenological approaches to the conceptualization of space have forcefully argued that it is only in relation to an active, embodied position within it that space can be brought forth as meaningful in an experiential sense – that is, as a space that is lived (cf. Tuan 1977; Casey 1993).

Of course, that a perceptual standpoint needs to be established for the world to be brought into view is as true of the world of a novel, a play, a film or a painting as of that of a game: witness the various attempts to determine *perspective*, *point of view* and *focalization* in relation to literary heterocosms (cf. Genette 1980; Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Chatman 1986; Prince 2001; Bal 2006; Margolin 2009) or filmic ones (cf. Mitrý 1965; Branigan 1992; Sobchack 1992). However, the formal operations by which such a standpoint is established in relation to the ludic heterocosm are fundamentally different, and need to be considered in their own right.

It is perhaps by means of a case of direct contrast that an initial glimpse of this difference can be obtained. J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* opens with the line, “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit” (1994[1937], 3). By contrast, in its IF adaptation (Beam Software 1982), the scene is set with the line, “You are in a comfortable tunnel like [sic] hall with a perfectly round green door like a porthole.” The setting established by these two sentences is the same – the description offered by the IF sentence matches the description of the hobbit-hole that Tolkien himself provides right after the opening sentence. But what about the agent we encounter in that setting?

Should we wish to talk about the agent encountered in Tolkien's novel, we would not hesitate in naming him "Bilbo Baggins," including him under the category of entities we might term 'fictional characters,' and investigating him through the lens of the various theoretical apparatus literary theory and narratology provide us with (cf. Price 1983; Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Margolin 1986; 1990; Phelan 1989; Palmer 2004; Heidbrink 2010). However, if we then move on to a consideration of the agent encountered in the opening lines of the IF adaptation, we might experience a telling moment of hesitation. Certainly, it is possible for us to decide that the agent being addressed – the entity standing in the hall in front of a perfectly round green door – is the same Bilbo Baggins described by Tolkien; or, at least, a representation in a new medial form that refers intertextually back to this earlier entity. We might, in other words, conclude that we are still dealing with a character here. However, it is also inevitable for us to note a recurrence of the 'you' we have already encountered in *Adventure*, and surmise that, as in the earlier title, it is the player herself, as the 'reader' of this 'you', that is being addressed.

The two answers would appear to be incommensurable, requiring a decision in one direction or the other. However, it is precisely in the hesitation between the two understandings of the entity that a glimpse of its unique nature can be caught. An advertisement published at the time of *The Hobbit's* release proclaims:

Based on the fantasy land described in J.R.R. Tolkien's brilliant novel, in this program you take on the role of Bilbo, the hobbit: danger, adventure, and excitement are all part of it, presented to you in words and graphics, but it is you who must confront and solve the problems this time. (*Your Computer* 1982(12), 4)

This linguistic conflation of "you" and "Bilbo" is echoed in reviews at the time of the game's release: a review in the April/May 1983 issue of *ZX Computing* states that, "you take the role of Bilbo, the hobbit of the title, and your task is to steal treasure from a dragon" (Garratt 1983).

This intertwining of the second-person pronominal 'you' (as referring to the player) with the proper name designating an entity distinct from the player is emblematic of a duality that is fundamental to the entity under investigation, which can be

summarized by saying that, from the player’s perspective, the entity is grasped as both *self* and *other*. By way of setting the scene for this dissertation, I shall now proceed, in this introductory chapter, to outline these two dimensions of the entity under investigation.

## 1.1 The Adventures of You

Though I have used *Adventure* as a means of introducing this apparent identification of the player with a heterocosmic individual – and though it constitutes a major historical milestone in this regard – its originality should not be overstated.<sup>2</sup> Aarseth (1997, 98) notes the debt of inspiration Crowther and Woods’ game owed to the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1974, henceforth referred to as *D&D*). Nor did *D&D* itself constitute a bolt from the blue – as Jon Peterson argues, its roots could be identified in a set of earlier practices which, in various ways, explored the idea of establishing a role for the player in relation to a simulated situation (2012, 376-457).<sup>3</sup> What *Adventure* takes from *D&D* is both the sense of spatial exploration within the bounds of a systemically-upheld heterocosm (the dungeon becoming a cave, but, in principle, changing little) – and, crucially, the structuring of the player’s engagement with this heterocosm on the basis of her investment in a playable figure– whether we call this figure a character, a hero, or, as in the case of *Adventure*, simply ‘you’.

It is hardly surprising that Frank Mentzer’s 1982 *D&D* manual makes use of second-person address that effaces the distinction between the player and the character, directly identifying the player with her character in the ludic heterocosm: “a dungeon is a

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to its debt to *D&D*, *Adventure* is also preceded by *Hunt the Wumpus* (Yob 1972), which, though it featured a much sparer and more matter-of-fact verbal dimension than *Adventure* and later IFs, anticipated them in making use of second-person address to refer to the player and locate her in its maze of interconnected rooms (“You are in room 2”).

<sup>3</sup> In Peterson’s comprehensive survey of the prehistory of the tabletop role-playing game, which is far too extensive to cover in depth here, he lists such practices as the mid-1950s shift, in US military practices of strategic simulation, from a more rigid, *kriegsspiel*-style paradigm of wargaming to a freer, less formalized style in which each player would take on the role of the government of a country in the playing-out of political and diplomatic encounters, an innovation which found its way into the board game *Diplomacy* (Calhamer 1959); Gygax’s stressing that *D&D* answered to the same impulse that animated childhood games of “Let’s Pretend”; the imaginary worlds of ‘Coventry’ developed within the Los Angeles science-fiction and fantasy fanzine community in the late 1950s and early 1960s; and that of ‘Midgard,’ developed among a similar community in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s.

group of rooms and corridors in which monsters and treasures can be found. And you will find them, as you play the role of a character in a fantasy world” (1983, 2). By this time, the notion had become an established trope: one year earlier, Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone’s *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (1982), the first in the influential *Fighting Fantasy* series of adventure gamebooks, described itself, on its front cover, as “a fighting fantasy gamebook in which YOU become the hero!”<sup>4</sup> Over the next years, it would become apparent that this same idea – and the typically hyperbolic language by which it is described – had become firmly entrenched in the wider cultural consciousness. In the film *The Last Starfighter* (Castle 1984), for instance, the line by which the protagonist, Alex Rogan (Lance Guest), is addressed by the titular videogame becomes a repeated mantra: “Greetings, Starfighter! You have been recruited by the Star League to defend the frontier against Xur and the Ko-Dan armada!” By 1992, the trope was prominent enough to become the subject of parody in the title of Terry Pratchett’s videogame-referencing novel *Only You Can Save Mankind*.

The move from a linguistic to an audiovisual mediality of the ludic heterocosm has meant that the direct address inherent in the usage of the grammatical second person has lost its centrality. Still, the fact that the underlying subjective and aesthetic structure remains unchanged is borne witness to by the continuing resurgence of the second-person mode of address whenever a recourse to verbal presentation is made – witness, to select two examples at random, the scrolling chat text in massively multiplayer online role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2003), informing the player that, “You have gained loot,” or the on-screen text informing the player that “You died” in *Dark Souls* (From Software 2011).

The centrality of this direct second-person address across a wide category of digital and non-digital games, then, is beyond question – a point already observed in Jill Walker’s exhaustive survey of the trope (2000). It is easy to locate precedents for this trope in literary techniques of second-person address. In classical rhetorics, Quintilian

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that Jackson and Livingstone’s series of books was itself following in the wake of Edward Packard and R.A. Montgomery’s *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, which started with Packard’s *The Cave of Time* (1979) and was initially – and tellingly – titled *The Adventures of You*.

(1953[c.95CE], 3: 38-39) and Longinus (1890[c. 1<sup>st</sup>c. CE, 51-52) extol the virtues of such direct address for its “effect of placing the reader in the midst of the scene of action” (Longinus, 51-52). In literature, direct second-person address to the reader is a common device – as, for instance, in the famous opening line of J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, where the narrator begins by directly addressing the reader as narratee: “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born”. Some narrative texts – for instance, Italo Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (2002[1979]) – go much further in fleshing out this ‘you’ into what Bruce Morrissette terms a “narrative “you”” (1965), an entity to which distinct attributes are ascribed: the “you” in Calvino’s novel is male, is attracted to a female reader, and so on.

It need hardly be said that, in its inherently deictic nature,<sup>5</sup> this is a ‘you’ that is intended to be read – by the player of *Adventure* as much as by the reader of *The Catcher in the Rye* – as ‘I’. Just as the *Adventure* player identifies the perspective of the textual second person as ‘her own’ within the heterocosm, such that, for her, it is she herself that sees a small brick building in front of her and a forest surrounding her, so does the graphical adventure player – in the act of playing, say, *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) – identify the subjective position through which the ludic heterocosm is framed as being, primarily, her own. As such, its function is that of establishing a heterocosmic first-personal subjectivity and, in the same move, locating the player within it.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 The playable figure

Despite this take-up of the second-person pronominal reference to ‘you’ as demarcating

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<sup>5</sup> I am here drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s usage of the notion of deixis, as referring to terms that are determined according to “the relation to the utterance, taken as a fixed point” (1992, 30). Ricoeur’s ontological investigations into the nature of selfhood shall prove instrumental in later sections, and shall be drawn on extensively.

<sup>6</sup> It is tempting to compare this mechanism to Louis Althusser’s influential concept of *interpellation*, by which the individual is similarly constituted as a subject in relation to the social sphere through being hailed by the police officer’s call of “Hey, you there!”, and through the inevitable realization on the part of the individual that she is the one addressed by this “you” (1971). This is an observation which invites a consideration of the ideological nature of ludic constructions of subjectivity. However, such an analysis – fruitful though it may be – is beyond the scope of this current study, which must limit itself to the necessary initial work of determining the formal aesthetic structures by which we might speak of a ludic subjectivity in the first place.



an agent and a subjective existence that is identified by the player as ‘I’ in the gameworld, it is crucial not to fall into the trap of simplistically equating this in-game ‘I’ with the player. The brief consideration of the IF adaptation of *The Hobbit* is already sufficient to make it apparent that this second-person pronominal reference identifies an entity which stands against the player. This is true even when the player refers to the entity in the first-person: it is not “This is me,” but “That (over there) is me.” At a basic, initial level, this entity is encountered by the player as a ‘thing’ prior to any identification or to being taken up as ‘I’.

Moreover, as with Morrissette’s “narrative “you,”” the entity is rendered concrete through the attribution of qualities and characteristics. Just as in the case of the ‘you’ in *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, the ‘you’ addressed in such games, even if it is a ‘you’ that the player takes up in the first-person, is established as an entity that, through these qualities or characteristics, is distinguished from the player. An example will serve to highlight this. In the survival horror game *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996), the player’s exploration of a mysterious mansion leads her to the kitchen. There, an examination of the counter results in a verbal description which states, simply, “A bunch of spices you’ve never seen before.”

One might insist that the “you” being addressed here is still the player – this information is received in response to the player’s decision, as an agent traversing and discovering the gameworld, to walk into the kitchen and investigate the counter, and, as such, the information is intended to be read as ‘her’ viewpoint upon the gameworld. However, what the response highlights is that this is a viewpoint obtained through eyes that are not the player’s own. It makes no difference whether the player, as an actual individual playing the game, knows nothing of cookery or gastronomy, or whether she is an experienced chef with extensive knowledge of spices. In either case, at this moment in her playing of *Resident Evil*, she has taken on the mantle of S.T.A.R.S. operative Chris Redfield, an ‘I’ whose culinary skills apparently do not extend to an in-depth knowledge of spices.

Such attributions of distinct qualities and characteristics can be understood as the establishment of the entity addressed by this ‘you’ as a character, a distinct member of the represented heterocosm (Margolin 1986, 206). In fact, the identification of the entity taken up by the player as ‘I’ within the gameworld as a character is one that is as old as the form itself. In the introduction to Eric Holmes’ 1977 update to Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson’s original *D&D* player’s manual, which itself eschewed introductions or scene-setting,<sup>7</sup> the notion of a character that serves as a proxy for the player within the confines of the heterocosm is already present:

Each player creates a character or characters, who may be dwarves, elves, halflings or human fighting-men, magic users, pious clerics or wily thieves. The characters are then plunged into an adventure in a series of dungeons, tunnels, secret rooms and caverns. (1977, 5)

Here – five years prior to Mentzer’s updated manual, which made an explicit equation between the player and the character – the nature of this entity as a distinct character was strongly underlined. Already in Gygax and Arneson’s original 1974 documentation, this entity described as a ‘character’ was present at the core of the game, as the player’s entry point to its fantastical domain. Operating within a heterocosm defined primarily in statistical terms, the character was itself a statistical entity, existing as a set of numerical variables which could be placed in mathematical relations to the other entities constituting the gameworld (see Fig. 1.1).

<b>Name:</b> <u>Xylarthen</u>		<b>Class:</b> <u>Magic-User</u>
<b>Strength:</b> <u>6</u>	<b>Intelligence:</b> <u>11</u>	<b>Wisdom:</b> <u>13</u>
<b>Constitution:</b> <u>12</u>	<b>Dexterity:</b> <u>9</u>	<b>Charisma:</b> <u>8</u>
<b><u>Gold Pieces</u></b>	<b><u>Experience</u></b>	
<b>70</b>	<b>Nil</b>	

**Figure 1.1.** Character record for “Xylarthen” (Gygax and Arneson 1974, 10)

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<sup>7</sup> As Peterson notes, the embedding of *D&D* in a subculture already familiar with the practices mentioned in footnote 3, meant that although “its three rulebooks said nothing on the subject of role-playing, of how a player should relate to or act as their character,” it was the case that “seasoned role-players read between the lines,” drawing on “the tacit assumptions that both the authors and the players of the game derived from their previous experiences” (2012, 375).

This fleshes out the understanding of the nature of the ‘character’ as an entity: it becomes apparent that it is, in the strictest ontological terms, what Aki Järvinen would term a “game component” (2008): one of the set of interrelating entities constituting the computational game system. For this reason, ‘character’ might start to seem an inadequate term for addressing this entity. While the idea of ‘character’ covers the nature of the entity as a represented individual within the textual heterocosm, it does not account for the status of the entity as an element of the game system.

I shall instead refer to this entity as the *playable figure* - the benefit of this term is that it encapsulates both the fact that the entity is taken on and ‘played out’ by the player (in the sense that the player might say she is “playing Bilbo” in *The Hobbit*), but also the fact that it remains a figure in its own right. In this sense, as has already become apparent, the playable figure has at least two distinct dimensions. I shall take up Rune Klevjer’s argument that “we must make a distinction between ‘avatar’ understood as a playable *character* (or persona), and ‘avatar’ understood as a vehicle through which the player is given some kind of embodied agency and presence within the gameworld” (2012, 17),<sup>8</sup> and shall examine the work that has been done to date within game studies in terms of defining the playable figure as both *avatar* (Klevjer 2006; 2012; Jørgensen 2009; Mukherjee 2012) and *player-character* (Jørgensen 2010; Fernández-Vara 2011; Lankoski 2011). Complicating this binary distinction, I shall make the argument that the playable figure is an entity defined by two linked but separate dualities: the *ontological duality* that has already become apparent – that is, from the player’s perspective, between *self* and *other*, and the *phenomenological duality*, which, as I shall outline at a later stage, describes the fact that the figure is both a *subject*, with a perspective upon the gameworld that the player adopts, and an *object*, being itself perceived.

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<sup>8</sup> For this reason, adopting the term ‘playable figure’ also allows me to make use of a neutral term that does not bear any of the implications of either ‘avatar’ or ‘player-character’.

### 1.3 The ‘figure game’ as domain of study

The aesthetic form that the opening lines of *Adventure* announce, then, depends not only upon the establishment of a ludic heterocosm, but also upon the location of the player within the heterocosm as an active entity. In tandem, these two criteria combine in the sense, on the part of the player, of being-in-the-heterocosm, and it is arguably this sense that constitutes the particular aesthetic effect defining the form under investigation. This insight allows me to clarify both the scope of this dissertation and the primary question that serves as its motivation.

In terms of scope – keeping in mind Gordon Calleja’s caution that games “diverge so much in their constituent characteristics that they cannot all be taken as one homogeneous mass” (2011, 3) – this dissertation is concerned exclusively with the set of games that fulfil the two basic criteria I have just outlined: firstly, the establishment of the ludic heterocosm as an experiential world for the player, and, secondly, the player’s incorporation into this heterocosm in the form of an entity belonging to the world. The genre of games defined by these two criteria is, as I have already pointed out, that defined by Aarseth as the adventure game – though it should be noted that this sense of ‘adventure game’ has a wider remit than the more restricted usage defined, for instance, by Clara Fernández-Vara (2008). As such, to avoid confusion with a term that has developed an entrenched set of significations, I shall refrain from using the term ‘adventure games’ to refer to the form in question. Instead, I shall use the general term ‘figure games’ to refer to the set of all games that establish a world within which the player is located as an entity, or figure, belonging to that world.

This dual criterion is met not only by the tradition of games belonging to the various formulations of the adventure game genre – IFs such as *Adventure*, graphical adventure games such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990) and action-adventure games such as *The Last of Us* – but also the majority of games typically classed in, for example, the platform game, first-person shooter (FPS) and role-playing game (RPG) genres, all of which, therefore, shall be considered to fall within the remit of my

investigations. At the same time, it needs to be stressed that this does not mean that the set of games my investigations shall relate to is coterminous with the set of games we call ‘videogames’. The criteria I have determined are formal, not technological. Many generic traditions associated with videogames – including, for instance, the majority of strategy games, puzzle games, management games and team sports games – fall outside these bounds, and shall only be considered, where necessary, by way of contrast with the games with which this dissertation is directly engaged. Conversely, a number of analogue games *do* match the two criteria. Under this category, we can include not only tabletop role-playing games such as *D&D*, to which I have already made reference, but also a number of board games: *Arkham Horror* (Fantasy Flight Games 2005), in which each player takes on the role of an investigator dealing with supernatural events in the titular town, can serve as an example here.<sup>9</sup> As such, though this investigation shall primarily take videogames as its focus, attention shall also be paid, wherever relevant, to figure games operating in non-digital formats.

Upon this ontic foundation – the player being granted an existence within the gameworld through being interpellated in the form of the entity addressed as ‘you’, that is, being made a literal *being* in the gameworld – is built the phenomenological structure which represents the key aesthetic function of the figure-game. The presentation of the ludic heterocosm as a space that is available for the player to inhabit and explore implies

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<sup>9</sup> As always, points of clarification regarding borderline cases are an indispensable aid to the more precise drawing of boundaries. An unstructured childhood game of make-believe might appear to clearly fit these two criteria: such a game might, perhaps along the lines suggested by a Waltonian understanding of make-believe (1990), turn a playground into a set of props representing the Spanish Main, within which the children participating in the game take on the roles of infamous pirate captains. There is certainly a great degree of overlap between such play and the games with which this study is directly concerned – and, indeed, as noted in footnote 3 above, a line can be drawn between this form of “let’s pretend” play and more formalized systems of role-playing. However, this formalization is a key distinction that sets the two apart. The investigations I shall undertake in later chapters shall make it apparent, firstly, that it is in the nature of the heterocosm that it is a textual construct possessing the qualities of fixity and totality inherent to its textual nature; secondly, and relatedly, in the games I am concerned with, the ludic heterocosm is materially upheld by the game system in such a way that it offers concrete resistance to the player, resistance which, as I shall argue, is integral to the formation of the ludic subject. Of course, no game of make-believe is entirely freeform, gaining structure through its adherence to generic conventions and to the unspoken social rules that determine such play, and such a game can become more and more structured as, over time, it accrues rules and fixed patterns of play emerge. This might lead us to conclude that the difference between such play and the games this study is directly engaged with is one of kind rather than degree, but it nonetheless remains the case that the distinction is an essential one to make, and that, as a result, unstructured make-believe play does not fall within the remit of this study.

that the player is made present within the heterocosm, such that she is able to adopt an internal perspective on it, perceiving herself to exist not, primarily, as a subject engaging with the game as an artefact from a detached standpoint (though this perspective, as I shall argue, is also an intrinsic aspect of the phenomenology of ludic engagement) but as a subject belonging, in an ontological sense, to the gameworld, thereby perceiving it from a perspective internal to it.

This was already evident in the kitchen scene in *Resident Evil*, where the individuality of Chris Redfield as a character distinct from the player was signalled by means of his subjective perspective upon the spices on the counter. An even more striking example of this kind of subject-positioning can be found in the role-playing game *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle 1999). Here, the player takes on the role of the Nameless One, an immortal being in the fantastical city of Sigil who has lost his memory of his previous incarnations. At one point, the player finds an apparently ancient mummified arm. Examining it on the inventory screen provides the following description:

Upon closer inspection, you know for a fact that this arm is yours. How long it has been lying around waiting for you is anyone's guess. You can't explain why, but you feel like you should take this arm to a tattoo artist and have it examined...the tattoos might tell something of what happened to your previous incarnation when this arm was still attached to him.

The 'you' that is invoked repeatedly in this passage is a 'you' who recognizes the arm as their own, who has a sense that the markings on the arm should be examined for any insights they might lead to regarding their *own* past lives. The player is here being asked to look at the arm as the Nameless One sees it – its significance is highlighted in relation to the Nameless One's own personal history (he recognizes the arm as having been his own) and in terms of how it can help him in pursuing his goals (he believes it can help him recover his lost memories of his past life). In other words, the player is being asked to step into the consciousness of a heterocosmic subject, to see the things in the gameworld from his subjective standpoint, as determined by this subject's history,

inclinations, abilities and goals, and to take action (take the arm to a tattoo artist) on this basis – in short, to see the ludic heterocosm *as*, and to act within it *as*, a subject belonging to it. This is the subject I propose to call the *ludic subject*, and it represents the object of inquiry upon which this dissertation is focused.

#### 1.4 Ludic subjectivity as analytical focus

In order to understand how it is that a player can experience a sense of being-in-the-gameworld, then, it is necessary to investigate the ludic subject, the ‘you’ that is addressed by the game system which the player identifies as ‘I’ within the confines of the ludic heterocosm. I shall argue that such an identification – and the adoption of a particular subject-position it implies – is the basic phenomenal structure by which a sense of immersion (Murray 1998; Ryan 2001a; Grau 2003; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Thon 2008), presence (Lombard and Ditton 1997; McMahan 2003) or telepresence (Minsky 1980; Steuer 1992; Taylor 2003) within the gameworld is rendered possible, constituting a mechanism of “recentering” of the player’s indexical frame of actuality (Ryan 2001a, 103) to a position internal to the gameworld. Moreover, the ontological foundation for the ludic subject in the playable figure means that the nature of ludic subjectivity can best be conceptualized with reference to notions of embodiment (Taylor 2002; Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007a; 2007b; Gee 2008; Leino 2010; Gazzard 2011a; 2011b; Norgård 2011) and incorporation (Calleja 2011).

Despite these close links, however, the ludic subject is distinct from the playable figure. First of all, if the ludic subject is defined as the ‘I’ the player adopts in relation to the gameworld, we would have no difficulty in finding examples of ludic subjects that are not linked to a playable figure: the Mayor in *SimCity* (Maxis 1989) is an example of such a ludic subject, and, indeed, many genres (including strategy games in most of their formulations) operate almost exclusively through such ludic subjects. In the light of this observation, a distinction can be made between an *embodied* and a *transcendent* ludic subject. These represent radically divergent modes of player involvement with the

gameworld, and it would be difficult to speak of both kinds of ludic subject without falling into vague generalizations. Instead, I shall make the clarification that the focus of this investigation – as the introduction by way of *Adventure* and the delimitation of the field of study to the figure game form will have already made apparent – is the structure of the embodied ludic subject.

Even within this narrowed remit, however, the tie of ludic subject to playable figure should not be taken to signal an equation between the two. The playable figure does not become a ludic subject until it is picked up and played. It is initially encountered as a distinct entity, encompassed in the player's perception as an element of the ludic heterocosm. However, when the player takes on the ludic subject-position and enacts a ludic subjectivity, she is, to paraphrase Aarseth (2004, 48), no longer looking *at* the playable figure, but looking *at* the gameworld *through* the figure.<sup>10</sup> This shall be discussed at greater length in Chapter 5, when I shall bring phenomenology of the body to bear upon the question of the influence of the playable figure upon ludic subjectivity; for now, it is enough that the distinction be kept in mind.

In the opposite direction, the ludic subject must also be thought of as distinct from the player. As I shall go on to argue, though the ludic subject is indeed taken on as 'I' for the purposes of the player's engagement with the gameworld, its foundation in an entity that is a member of both the game system and the ludic heterocosm means that this is inherently an identification which bridges a chasm of difference.

An echo might be read here of James Paul Gee's argument regarding the emergence of a shared "projective identity" between the poles of the playable figure's "virtual identity" and the player's "real-world identity" (2004, 54): if the parallel were followed, *ludic subject* could be equated to Gee's formulation of the projective identity. Gee's notion of a projective identity grants us indispensable insights into the relation

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, this is not to say that the ludic subjectivity played out through the playable figure cannot itself, in a reflexive turn, be made into an object of perception – in fact, I shall make the case that this is one of the primary dimensions of the relation of the player to the ludic subject. However, what is brought into view is no longer the playable figure as its own entity, but rather the playable figure insofar as it represents an embodiment for the ludic subject which is constructed through the player's engagement with the game. I shall focus on this point in Chapter 8.



between the player and the figure – particularly insofar as the double signification of the term ‘projective’ accounts for the status of this in-game identity both as a *projection* of the player into the gameworld, and as a *project* that requires active development by the player through her engagement with the game. A similar insight can be identified in Kelly Boudreau’s notion of the “hybrid-identity,” which “does not belong solely to the player, nor to the playable character” (2012, 13), but which, instead, is “a fluid, sometimes fleeting form of being that exists somewhere between the player and the avatar (or player character) during the process of videogame play” (ibid., 86). While these are crucial insights, Gee’s and Boudreau’s accounts of the phenomenon are limited. Firstly, there is no anchoring of the notions of projective identity or hybrid-identity in a rigorous understanding of the ontological status the player is granted in relation to the game, and, secondly, there is no attempt at a systematic approach to explaining, in phenomenological terms, how this identity is brought into view as an aspect of the player’s experience of the gameworld.

The question this dissertation sets out to answer, then, is: *What is the nature of the ‘I’ that exists as a subject in relation to the experiential world established by the game?* The first part of my two-part claim with regard to this question is that the player’s involvement with the gameworld through a phenomenal incorporation into the form of the playable figure reflects the experiential and existential structures of embodied being-in-the-world, as explored in the phenomenological tradition. The second part of my claim is that the capture and representation of this ludic subjectivity within the frame of a game artefact that constitutes an aesthetic unity to the player as external observer sets in motion an aesthetics of subjectivity, by which the player’s own in-game ‘I’ is offered back to her as a focus of aesthetic engagement.

As taken by the player as an ‘I-in-the-gameworld’, the ludic subject is significant in two distinct senses answering to the two parts of this claim. First, the ludic subject is the first-personal pole of experience of the gameworld, establishing a *ludic subject-position* for the player: this constitutes a perspective upon the gameworld and hence, at a fundamental level, determines the form in which the game is made phenomenally

available to the player as a *lifeworld* (Husserl 1970[1936]). Secondly, a subjective identity or self coalesces around the ludic subject-position, the ‘who?’ that gathers into a coherent unity the complete set of the player’s perceptions of, and actions towards, the gameworld: to distinguish this dimension of ludic subjectivity, in which it is perceived by the player in a mechanism of self-consciousness, I shall term this the *ludic self*.

In order to address these dimensions of ludic subjectivity, firstly, it is necessary to analyze the formal mechanisms by which a *ludic subject-position* is established - that is, by which the player is located within a specific subjective standpoint in relation to the gameworld. Secondly - in an extension of the first task – one must interrogate the nature of the *ludic subject* that is enacted in the form of ludic engagement from the standpoint of the ludic subject-position. Thirdly, this investigation shall need to consider the ways in which this subjective existence is represented to the player in the form of a *ludic self* that she identifies as ‘I-in-the-gameworld’.

These three avenues of inquiry shall guide my investigations over the course of this study, and shall structure an engagement with the web of relations – of identity and difference, proximity and distance, selfhood and otherness – that play out across the gap between the player outside the game and her ludic subjectivity in the game. Due to the inherently interrelated nature of these questions, however, they shall not be treated as separate queries, but shall instead be interwoven during the course of this dissertation.

## **1.5 A twofold methodology for a twofold understanding of subjectivity**

What I have attempted to isolate from the player on the one hand and the playable figure on the other under the name of the ‘ludic subject’ is the idea of a subjectivity that stands in relation to the gameworld. By invoking the notion of subjectivity and the related idea of selfhood, I am of course bringing into view a tangle of vexing and long-standing debates cutting across fields as diverse as philosophy, cognitive science and sociology, crystallizing around questions such as the social determination of subjectivity, the nature

of the self as a dimension of experience, the deconstruction of the very notion of a unitary self, and so on.

Needless to say, it is beyond the scope of this investigation to venture into such debates, much less to attempt to untangle the *aporias* they underline in our received conceptualizations of subjectivity. Nonetheless, it is necessary to identify a theoretical framework through which to approach the question of subjectivity as it applies to the ludic subject. With this in mind, I shall take up Dan Zahavi's explanation that subjectivity and the self have tended to be formulated within two primary conceptualizations (2008, 8) as my starting-point. On the one hand, Zahavi argues, one finds the idea of "the self as an experiential dimension", in which the subject is equated with the first-person perspective that is the ground for any sensible experience, but that, by that token, cannot itself be experienced: this is the phenomenological subject which finds its initial concretization in the work of Edmund Husserl (1973[1900/01]; 2012[1931]), before being developed through Martin Heidegger's conception of human being as *Dasein* or being-in-the-world (2008[1927]), the existential phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre (1966[1943]) and the embodied phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002[1945]; 1968). Opposed to it, we find the idea of "the self as a narrative construction", an *a posteriori* postulate created after the fact in order to unite the disparate strands of moment-to-moment experience under the sign of a coherent identity, and which finds its expression *par excellence* in the writings of Paul Ricoeur (1992) (Zahavi 2008, 8).

Zahavi's argument is that, rather than siding with one approach or the other, it is crucial to seek to understand these two senses of subjectivity as the two faces of the same coin: "the investigations of self and experience have to be integrated if both are to be understood" (ibid., 106). The amenability of this twofold framing of subjectivity to the ludic subject as an object of study becomes clear once we draw out the parallel between the two dimensions Zahavi identifies in the subject and the two senses of the ludic subject I have already outlined: the *ludic subject* as the first-personal pole of the player's experiences and acts in the gameworld, and the *ludic self* that gathers the player's acts within the gameworld under the unifying sign of a personal identity.

These two understandings of the subject constitute two distinct, albeit interrelated, projects, both of which directly imply their own methodology through the determination of their respective domains of study. Ricoeur terms the first of these projects an “egology,” whose theme is that of identifying the first-personal pole of experiences of the world, the ego to which experiences relate and which allows me to grasp sensations and other experiences of the world *proprioceptively*, that is, as *my* experiences (1992, 323). This dimension of the subject – and, for our current purposes, of the ludic subject – is the domain of phenomenology, and it is in this direction that I shall turn in bringing to light what Zahavi calls the “minimal or core self” (2008, 8) – the self that emerges in the first-personal givenness of experience – that forms the basic foundation of the ludic subject.

However, there are limits to the understanding of the subject that can be reached through such an approach: for this reason, Zahavi argues, the egological project needs to stand alongside what Ricoeur terms a “philosophy of the self” (1992, 323) that can bring my *self* into light as a significant identity that emerges in relation to the world. This latter project, Ricoeur writes, is an inherently narrative one: “to answer the question ‘Who am I?’ is to tell the story of a life” (1985, 447), and Zahavi, following the same lines, speaks of the “narrative self” (2008, 8), that can frame the acts of the subject – acts understood in the broadest sense, to include physical actions, acts of perception, speech-acts, mental acts, etc. – as meaningful events within a coherent narrative under the sign of a consistent identity.

I shall undertake both of these projects in relation to the ludic subject. Firstly, I shall draw upon the phenomenological tradition in order to determine the nature of the ludic subject as the bearer of experience of the gameworld. In adopting a phenomenological perspective on player experience, I am following in the wake of Klevjer’s deployment of Merleau-Ponty to ground an understanding of the embodied phenomenology of avatar-play (2006; 2012), as well as Olli Tapio Leino’s application of Sartre’s existential phenomenology to the foundation of a theory of the gameplay condition (2010). However, while Klevjer and Leino’s insights shall be granted due

attention in my arguments, my own research aims to go further in this regard, attempting to establish the basic structure of subjective experience of the gameworld, and, inseparably, of the subjective existence the player adopts in relation to the gameworld. In order to do so, I shall reach back to the basic foundations of phenomenological inquiry in Husserl's development of the intentional model of consciousness (1973[1900/01]; 2012[1931]), while also drawing heavily on Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's crucial elaborations to the phenomenological method.

My approach to the narrative dimension of ludic selfhood shall initially be framed through Ricoeur's philosophy of the self (1992). However, since the ludic subject – unlike the selfhood of a human individual in the actual world – is played out within the bounds of the game artefact, and thereby constitutes a heterocosmic subject, I shall also be drawing on narratological and literary-theoretical models of character, in particular the structural approach proposed by Uri Margolin (1986; 1990).

The implications of this essential duality, by which a subjectivity is established that is experienced by the player in the first person –as “I”, the player herself – but that, at the same time and inseparably, constitutes an external entity within a mediated heterocosm – warrant closer examination, particularly once we take into account the logical conclusion that what this dual structure renders possible is a form of autoscopia (Mishara 2009) by which the player's subjectivity, externalized in the shape of a figure within the ludic heterocosm, can itself become an object of aesthetic perception, thereby establishing what we can term an aesthetics of subjectivity.

Moreover, as I shall argue during the course of my investigations, these two dimensions of the ludic subject are intrinsically linked to a double phenomenology of ludic experience, resulting from the fact that the player simultaneously inhabits two subjective standpoints in relation to the game. The structure of this double phenomenology, which shall be discussed in detail in section 2.4, is determined by the fact that the game is gathered into an experiential world around the ludic subject-position as an internal experiential standpoint, while, at the same time, from the perspective of the implied player external to the gameworld, the game (and all its constituent elements,

including the ludic subject) is perceived as an aesthetic artefact exhibiting a formal organization.

The three dualities I have highlighted – the duality of the ludic subject as experiential standpoint and as perceived figure, the duality of the subject as the first-personal pole of experience and as a narrative self, and the duality of internal and external perspectives upon the game – reflect and implicate each other, and are perhaps best understood as an uptake by the aesthetic form of ludic engagement of a fundamental duality in the structure of subjective experience. In its various implications, this duality shall serve as the primary structuring principle of the investigation at hand.

## 1.6 A clarification of concepts

The ludic subject exists at the centre of a network of closely related concepts that must, for analytical purposes, be kept distinct. As such, before proceeding directly towards an engagement with the ludic subject, it is vital to engage in a clarification of these concepts.

In short:

- The *playable figure* is the entity in the gameworld that is taken up and played out by the player; it is both an *avatar* – a game component under the player’s direct control – and a *character* – the representation of an individual within the ludic heterocosm.
- The *player* that shall be referred to during the course of this investigation is an *implied* player (Aarseth 2007b, 132), defined by the formal structure of the game object, rather than any actual individual who might occupy this role.
- The *ludic subject-position* is the perceptual standpoint the playable figure establishes for the player in relation to the gameworld; *standpoint* is to be understood not only in spatiotemporal terms but also, more generally, as the particular subjective relation in which the player is placed towards the gameworld. As such, the ludic subject-position is as a set of interrelating formal mechanisms which coalesce around the form of the playable figure.

- The *ludic subject* is the subjective ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ the player crystallizes through engaging with the gameworld by means of the playable figure (hence, from the standpoint of the ludic subject-position), and can be understood as the set of experiences of, and in, the gameworld gathered together in their first-personal *mineness*.
- The *ludic self* refers to the representation of this ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ that is made available to the player as an object of perception, as a coherent and distinct identity.

These terms – all of which I shall return to, and expand upon, over the course of subsequent chapters – shall also be contrasted against other terms that have been used to define the ontological status of the player’s active existence within the gameworld – not only ones I have already touched upon, such as *avatar* and *player-character*, but also others such as *point of action* (Neitzel 2002; Thon 2006), *locus of manipulation* (Zagal et al 2005; Bayliss 2007a) and *Game Ego* (Wilhelmsson 2008).

In addition, it might also be helpful to clarify the distinctions between a second cluster of terms, those related to the conceptualization of the domain established by the game, which the ludic subject takes as its own:

- *Game system* refers to the complete set of game components, as computational objects, and the mechanics of their interrelations (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 50).
- *Virtual environment* refers to the organization of the elements of the game system into a perceived spatiotemporal arrangement (Calleja 2007, 44). In this sense, the virtual environment can be understood as the ‘material’ underpinning of the experiential gameworld.
- *Gameworld* refers to the taking-up of the virtual environment as an experiential world for the player (Leino 2010, 186), towards which her existential projects can be directed.
- *Ludic heterocosm* refers to the *diegetic* world represented by the virtual environment. The ludic heterocosm can extend far beyond the virtual environment, in that a

much wider world can be suggested than is actually modelled as part of the game system. This should not be confused with the notion of a ‘fictional’ world: the domain of reference of the represented heterocosm can just as easily be actual, as, for instance, in the case of the representation of Liberty Island in the opening level of *Dens Ex* (Ion Storm 2000).

It is according to these definitions that these concepts shall be used throughout the course of this investigation.

### 1.6.1 *The implied player and the ludic subject*

I shall linger for a moment on the crucial distinction between the ludic subject and the implied player. First, a note on the notion of ‘implied player’ itself: my approach in this study is not that of the social-scientific “player studies” paradigm which places an ethnographic focus on the specificities of actual players as historically situated and culturally determined individuals and communities. Instead, what concerns me in this study is the player as existing as an element of the game’s formal structure.

To define a similar notion with relation to the literary text, Wolfgang Iser described the “implied reader”, an entity that “has its roots firmly planted in the structure of the text” (1980, 34). It is an element of the text’s formal structure, not to be identified with any actual reader: “no matter who or what he may be, the real reader is always offered a particular role to play, and it is this role that constitutes the concept of the implied reader” (ibid., 34-35). The implied reader, as a formal element within the text, constitutes the perspective – and hence the standpoint or subject-position of perception – the reader is to adopt: “the text must therefore *bring about* a standpoint from which the reader will be able to view things that would never have come into focus as long as his own habitual dispositions were determining his orientation” (ibid., 35).

Aarseth has adapted Iser’s concept into that of the *implied player*, which he defines as “a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to “exercise its effect”” (2007b, 132). All of this makes the implied player a close conceptual companion to the ludic subject that is my focus in this study:



both are formal structures established by the game for the player to inhabit, and both can be taken as the answer to the question as to who is the 'I' to whom ludic experience belongs. However, despite the links between the two, they must not be understood as synonymous. The distinction between the two can be expressed most simply in this way: the ludic subject is an entity that belongs to the gameworld, and is thus in a position to perceive the gameworld from an internal perspective, while the implied player is the standpoint the game establishes for the player as an individual outside the gameworld, engaging with the game as an artefact.

Another way of illustrating the distinction is by noting that, in the course of a single game, it is possible for the player to play out multiple ludic subjects, but all of these only ever relate back to a single implied player. In *Giants: Citizen Kabuto* (Planet Moon Studios 2000), for example, the player is invited to interact with the gameworld through a successive embodiment in three different playable figures: Baz, a gun- and jetpack-equipped Meccaryn, Delphi, a magic-using Sea Reaper, and Kabuto, the eponymous giant, each of which grants the player different sets of capabilities and puts her in radically divergent subjective relations to the gameworld. Each of these, then, represents a distinct ludic subject-position, with their respective abilities and limitations leading to very different modes of being-in-the gameworld. However, the implied player that moves in succession between these three ludic subject-positions remains singular. The implied player of *Giants* is one caught in a pattern of learning to relate to the gameworld as a particular ludic subject, only to have these learned assumptions and behaviours challenged in the shift into a different ludic subject-position. Although, in many cases, the gap between the ludic subject and the implied player might be narrower than it is in *Giants*, it remains not only ever-present but is, I would argue, an essential formal structure of the medium.

### 1.6.2 *Ludic subjectivity as opposed to role-playing*

As an additional aside, it is important to note that ludic subjectivity and ludic subject-positioning should remain conceptually separate from the notion of *role-playing*. It is true

that ludic subjectivity can be construed as a form of ‘role-playing,’ in the broad sense of the latter term, insofar as the nature of ludic subjectivity is precisely that of the taking-on of a role in relation to the ludic heterocosm. However, the specific meanings that ‘role-playing’ has accrued in relation to games are at once too specific and too broad to fit the notion of ludic subjectivity. Ludic subjectivity does not depend upon the specific set of game-mechanical affordances typically associated with the RPG genre (such as an experience-based character progression system and inventory management), nor does it require the conscious adoption of a role-playing attitude wherein the dramatic performance of a character takes precedence over a direct engagement with the game system (in the sense in which Gary Alan Fine, in his sociological study of *D&D* players, distinguished between the goal-oriented “gamer” and the “role-player” whose fantasy-orientation leads her to “play the character” (2002[1983], 207)). As such, ludic subjectivity can be identified and discussed even in a game such as *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) or *Protens* (Key and Kanaga 2013), where it would be limiting in the extreme to speak of role-playing in the traditional sense.

## **1.7 The structure of this dissertation**

In this introductory opening chapter, I have identified the ludic subject as the focus of my investigations, specifying the methodologies and theoretical paradigms by which I shall be tackling this focus, and clarifying the central concepts that shall be at play during the course of this study.

In Chapter 2, I shall lay the ground for the investigations to follow by making explicit the implications of an aesthetic approach to games. I shall present the assumptions underpinning aesthetics as a specific approach to the art object (Rancière 2009) developed within the philosophical tradition emerging in the wake of Kant (2007[1790]), focusing on the insights to be gleaned from adopting this perspective on the game object. Eugen Fink’s working-out of an ontology of play (2012[1958]) and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s aesthetic approach to play (1989[1960]) shall be utilised as the

basis for proposing an aesthetics of ludic action. Upon this foundation, I will outline the operation of a double perspectival structure of ludic experience resulting from the player's simultaneously inhabiting two perceptual standpoints. Building on existing work in this direction (Grodal 2003; Leino 2010; Möring 2013) I shall discuss these standpoints as the *external* and the *internal* perspectives, identifying the subjective bearers of these perspectives as being, respectively, the (implied) player and the ludic subject, and defining the object of the two perspectives as, respectively, the *game as text* and the *game as world*. Here, the dual structure of the ludic subject shall be brought into view, as the exploration of the two perspectives shall lead to the insight that the ludic subject-position, which constitutes the standpoint for the internal perspective, is itself brought into frame as an object of perception by means of the step into the external perspective, thereby coming into view as a ludic subject bearing its distinct identity.

In Chapter 3, I shall then engage with the multiple implications unfolding around the notion of a 'gameworld' when approached from a phenomenological perspective. Providing an overview of notions of 'world' within the phenomenological tradition, I shall make the case that there are three senses of 'world' which are relevant to an understanding of the experiential character of gameworlds: the *lifeworld* of direct, first-personal lived experience and existential praxis, the *cosmos* or total, ordered system as it emerges in third-person contemplation as the result of an act of interpretation upon direct experience, and the *earth* or material substrate underpinning the phenomenal world while resisting being entirely subsumed into it. A multi-dimensional phenomenological understanding of the idea of a gameworld shall be established upon this structure, keeping in mind previous work that has been done in this direction (cf. Aarseth 2008; Nitsche 2008; Leino 2010; Jørgensen 2013; Wolf 2014). Briefly, it shall consist of the following dimensions: the primary first-personal experiential dimension of the gameworld as lifeworld accommodating an existential praxis; hermeneutical interpretations of the gameworld (Arsenault and Perron 2009) that move simultaneously in two directions – as game system and as represented heterocosm; and the underlying

*ludic materiality* that stands to be encountered as a factual situation against which the player's project of play can manifest itself (Leino 2010).

Chapter 4 shall take on the task of defining the experiential nature of the player's sense of being-in-the-gameworld. This task shall be unfolded against the background of a survey of notions that have been proposed within game studies to account for this sense: namely, immersion (Murray 1998; Ryan 2001a; Grau 2003; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Thon 2008), presence (Lombard and Ditton 1997; McMahan 2003), telepresence (Minsky 1980; Steuer 1992; Taylor 2003), focalization (Neitzel 2002; Nitsche 2005; Arjoranta 2013), recentering (Ryan 2001a) and agency (Murray 1998; Mateas and Stern 2005; Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009), finally leading to an explicit link between the player's experiential sense of existing in the gameworld and her embodiment through the playable figure as a member of the same gameworld.

Taking up the argument at this juncture, Chapter 5 shall focus on the role of the playable figure in establishing an ontic habitation for the player within the gameworld. In doing so, I shall build on the work done in elaborating a theory of player embodiment (Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007a; 2007b; Gee 2008; Leino 2010); this shall be explored against the background of the phenomenology of the body developed in the writings of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, which shall lead to the development of a phenomenology of the *embodied* ludic subject-position.

This engagement with the phenomenological character of embodiment as it relates to the player's involvement with the playable figure shall then be directed, in Chapter 6, towards concretizing a structural approach to what can be termed the *player-figure relation*. A model shall be proposed that breaks down this relation into four interlinked aspects, organized at the intersection of an *identity* distinction between the figure's status as self and as other, and a *perspectival* distinction between the figure being related to subjectively and objectively. The four aspects of the player-figure relation that the model shall isolate, then, are the *subjective relation of self*, the *subjective relation of other*, the *objective relation of self* and the *objective relation of other*. A close analysis of a scene in *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013-) shall be used to demonstrate both the

distinctions delineating these relational dimensions and their intertwining in the aesthetics of ludic engagement.

With the multiple dimensions of the player-figure relation having been laid out, Chapter 7 shall then expand upon the phenomenal character of the subjective relation. The primary aim of this chapter shall be to map out the structure of the embodied ludic subject-position as a set of formal mechanisms organized around the form of the playable figure. These mechanisms shall be listed as: the establishment of a spatial standpoint, point-of-view and aural standpoint, the delimitation of capabilities and limitations, goal-orientation and passion (in the sense in which the term is opposed to *action*, that is, as referring to the ways in which the figure, as an entity in the gameworld, is open towards that world and can be passively affected by it). In its second half, this chapter will consider the integration of these mechanisms in the establishment of a particular mode of being-in-the-gameworld for the player. To this end, this chapter will conclude with an analysis of *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) and *Protens* (Key and Kanaga 2013) – the two having been chosen both for their thematic similarity in drawing upon the trope of the lone wanderer in the natural landscape, and for the radical contrast that emerges against this common ground in terms of the respective relation they structure between the player and the heterocosmic landscape.

While the earlier focus on the ludic subject-position being geared towards understanding how perception of the gameworld is coloured by the particularities of the ludic subject-position, in Chapter 8 attention shall be directed to answering two questions. Firstly, the focus shall be on how the player's taking-up of the ludic subject-position, and the adoption of the comportment it determines, leads to the enactment of a ludic subjectivity the player recognizes as her own being-in-the gameworld. In this regard, the mechanisms for the conceptual analysis of action within the analytical philosophical tradition (von Wright 1971; Anscombe 1979[1957]; Davidson 1980) shall prove instrumental. Secondly, this consideration of action and the enactment of ludic subjectivity will clear the ground for a shift, in the second half of the chapter, into a consideration of the second dimension of ludic subjectivity – the *ludic self* that is

represented to the player in the game's textual presentation as an object of perception. In order to conceptualize this, an overview of phenomenological approaches to the self-reflexivity of experience – the givenness of the subject in her own subjective stream of experiences – shall lead to an engagement with Ricoeur's investigations into identity and selfhood. The usage of voice-over narration in *Bastion* (Supergiant Games 2012) shall be explored as an exemplification of the capacity for games to mediate a representation of the player's own performance of a ludic subjectivity – that is, of her own in-game 'I' – back to her, thereby establishing an aesthetic mechanism of "autoscopy" (Günzel 2013).

The question that shall remain to be answered is that of the form taken by the ludic subject when it is considered as an element of the textual unity of the game as an aesthetic object. Following on from the deployment of Ricoeur's notion of the self as a narrative construct in the previous chapter, Chapter 9 shall advance the proposition that the ludic self, as the perceived representation of the ludic subjectivity enacted by the player in the course of engaging with the game, takes its place within the unity of the game's heterocosmic presentation in the form of a "possible non-actual individual" (Margolin 1990, 847), a member of the heterocosm – in other words, a character. The chapter shall therefore be dedicated to an investigation into the *player-character* as the form taken by the presentation of the enacted ludic subject. Starting off with a survey of existing approaches to the question of character in game studies (Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman 2003; Montfort 2007; Westecott 2009; Jørgensen 2010; Fernández-Vara 2011; Lankoski 2011), it will then be suggested that it is to narratology that we must turn in order to locate a more satisfactory approach to theorizing character (Price 1983; Margolin 1986; 1990; Phelan 1989; Palmer 2004; Heidbrink 2010). The chapter will proceed to suggest a modification of Uri Margolin's structural approach to character as the foundation for a systematic conceptualization of the player-character, developing this in relation to analyses of the player-characters of Joel in *The Last of Us* and Kaitlin Greenbriar in *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013).



## Chapter Two

### The aesthetics of ludic engagement

Before I can justify the claim, stated in Chapter 1, that the ludic subject is both the lens through which the player's experience of the gameworld is focalized *and* the object of an aesthetics of subjectivity, it is necessary that the ludic subject in both of these dimensions is brought to the fore within a conceptualization of the aesthetic and experiential form of games as concretized in the player's experience. In doing so, I do not propose to venture down the path of defining the notion of 'game'. The practical and conceptual difficulties intrinsic to the endeavour of reducing 'game' to a set of constitutive qualities has been amply demonstrated in the historical overviews of such attempts mapped out by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004, 72-79) and Jesper Juul (2005, 29-42), and I shall not rehearse them here.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the necessity of fixing a coherent sense for the term upon which to found my investigations is clear:

Are games works of art? Are they rule-based systems? Are they player-driven processes? Are they media? Are games just for fun, or can they be as serious as life itself? Games are many different things to different people and their societies and practices, and, therefore, to different academic disciplines and practices.

When two or more game researchers are using the word "game", they may or may not be speaking about the same thing. (Aarseth 2011, 50)

As such, taking on board Ludwig Wittgenstein's caution regarding the intellectual pitfalls of essentialist definitions of inherently hazily-bordered concepts,<sup>2</sup> my intention is only

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<sup>1</sup> Salen and Zimmerman list Huizinga 1955; Caillois 1962; Abt 1970; Suits 1978; Crawford 1984; Parlett 1992; Costikyan 1994. Juul's overview covers Huizinga; Caillois; Suits; Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971; Crawford; Kelley 1988 and Salen and Zimmerman's own definition. In one way or another, all the definitions surveyed are engaged in attempting to define 'gameness' by locating the elements an object or activity needs to possess in order to be considered a game – Salen and Zimmerman identify a set of fifteen elements identified by at least some of the definitions as being constitutive of games – although no one definition features more than six of these elements, while Juul summarizes his overview by means of set of six criteria for gameness.

<sup>2</sup>In his oft-quoted – though ultimately only tangentially relevant to game studies – commentary on defining the concept of game, Wittgenstein, noting the undesirability of drawing hard borders on a concept that is inherently blurred around its edges, does not argue as he is often taken to be saying, that we should entirely



that of arriving at a contingent framing of games, one that shall allow me to say: *this is the understanding of games to which my analysis of subject-positioning and the ludic subject relate*. In this sense, this chapter shall be as much about defining the frame through which I intend to conceptualize games as it shall be about pinning down a particular dimension of these objects we call ‘games’.

## 2.1 The aesthetic approach

By having referred to games as aesthetic objects, I have, of course, already made a set of far-reaching assumptions. In this chapter, I shall set out aesthetic theory as the epistemological frame through which games shall be considered in this study. In highlighting the implications of an aesthetic perspective on games, and in identifying what an aesthetics of games would entail, I shall aim to provide a conceptual foundation for the investigations into ludic subjectivity that shall follow in subsequent chapters.

The “aesthetic regime of art” (Rancière 2009, 51) refers to a broad understanding of art developed against the background of the field of philosophical aesthetics which, to a great extent, finds its point of origin in the work of Immanuel Kant (2007[1790]). In this sense, the term ‘aesthetics’ has a very different import to the meaning it is typically granted within both popular and academic discourses surrounding games, where it often refers to extra-ludic elements, such as a game’s visual style, soundtrack, etc., that are distinguished from the game’s mechanical dimension. This is not to say that there have not been examples of aesthetic theory being fruitfully applied to games. The influence of philosophical aesthetics can be observed, for example, in David Myers’ consideration of play as form (2009), while the most involved application of aesthetic theory to the study of videogames to date has been in the work of Graeme Kirkpatrick (2011). While aesthetics is not the focus of this investigation, it is still necessary to provide an outline of the principles that are relevant to this investigation, their implications when applied to a

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refrain from attempting such definitions, but that we should not fall for the temptation to essentialize. When defining ‘game’, we should not claim the last word on the matter, but only define them *for such and such a purpose* (Wittgenstein 2009[1953], 37, §69)

perspective on games as objects of study, and the benefits that adopting an aesthetic perspective grants a theoretical approach to the ludic subject. In this section, then, I shall pause briefly on four characteristics of the aesthetic approach to the art object, focusing on how these shall inform the approach to ludic engagement I shall adopt over the course of subsequent chapters.

### 2.1.1 *The aesthetic object as 'concretization' in experience*

Jacques Rancière offers a particularly succinct *précis* of the aesthetic approach to art, writing that aesthetics describes “a mode of thought that develops with respect to things of art and that is concerned to show them to be things of thought” (2009, 4). The object of study for the aesthetic perspective is not the artwork as a physical object, but the mental object determined by the recipient’s faculties in the encounter with that physical object: in other words, the phenomenal representation of its appearance as it is experienced by its recipient. A painting, considered as an aesthetic object, is not understood as an distribution of pigments of varying chemical compositions on a flat surface: instead, the aesthetic object is the resolution of this material “extrafunctional invariant” (Genette 1997, 8) into a perceived spatial arrangement of colour, line and shape, bearing formal and potentially representational dimensions. In this regard, Roman Ingarden theorized a distinction between the objective artwork and the aesthetic object, which results from the work’s “concretization” in the recipient’s mind (Ingarden 1985).

Taking the insight further, Wolfgang Iser, using the literary artwork as his focus, distinguishes between two polarities of the work: the artistic pole refers to “the author's text”, while the aesthetic pole is “the realization accomplished by the reader” (1980, 21). The duality of the material object and its aesthetic realization is captured in Iser’s delineation of the *verbal* and *affective* aspects of the literary work: “the verbal aspect guides the reaction and prevents it from being arbitrary; the affective aspect is the fulfillment of that which has been prestructured by the language of the text” (1980, 21). Iser’s suggestion is that the work is not to be identified with either pole: instead, its essence lies in the process that is set in motion between the two polarities, by the mobilization of the

reader's faculties of aesthetic judgment in forming, reassessing and reforming an image of the text in the imagination. What is revealed by this understanding of the literary work – which we can extend, *mutatis mutandis*, to an understanding of the artwork in whatever form, including that of games – is “the character of the text as a happening and the experience of the reader that is activated by this happening” (ibid., 22).

Of course, this focus on the concretization of the aesthetic object in its phenomenal dimension should not be taken to mean that the artwork as physical object becomes irrelevant. On the contrary, it is an essential quality of the character of the aesthetic judgment that the aesthetic object is the result of a perceptual encounter with an actual, empirical object. Though the aesthetic object is an object of thought, liable to changing form and character as the recipient's understanding of the artwork develops, it is not a freewheeling, subjective flight of fancy, but a structured response to the formal properties of a concrete, intersubjectively verifiable object – a fact which leads aesthetic inquiry to stress the essentially artifactual nature of the artwork. Taking the aesthetic perspective on games as artworks therefore allows us to link the understandings of the game as an empirical object and as an experience for the player – that is, combining an ontology of games with a phenomenology of games in the structure of an aesthetic relation.

### 2.1.2 *The formal specificity of the aesthetic object*

It is not enough, however, to say that the starting-point of aesthetic engagement is the material encounter with the extrafunctional invariant constituting the ontic foundation of the art object. This still reveals nothing about the nature of the outcome of the process of aesthetic concretization – that is, the shape of the resulting aesthetic object in the recipient's experience. In order to gain a clearer idea of the manner in which the artifact is unfolded in the experience of it, it is necessary to pay attention to the formal nature of the art object under consideration. For this reason, considerations of the formal specificities of different forms of art are part and parcel of aesthetic theory.

It is important to note here that ‘form’ is understood less as referring to the art object’s material dimension, and more as describing the structures of experience relating to the art object in question. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s influential *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766[1766]) is typical of art criticism informed by philosophical aesthetics, in that its approach is founded upon an understanding of different art forms as constituting different structures of experience. Offering a comparative consideration of the arts of painting and poetry, for instance, Lessing argues that “their imitations make use of entirely different means and symbols – [painting] of form and colour in space, [poetry] of articulated sounds in time” (ibid., 91), and that, as a result, they mobilize different structures of experience:

...the meaning of a poem as an aesthetic object is that it should unfold in time, that its signs should form a sequence of before and after [...] whereas the meaning of a painting is that everything should be given at once. (Wallenstein 2010, 5)

This stress on the specificity of the art form in terms of its aesthetic effects can be witnessed at the birth of game studies as a discipline, in Aarseth’s assertion that “games are not a kind of cinema, or literature” (2001), but a new form that must be studied on its own terms. Of course, this emphasis on the absolute uniqueness of each art form can be taken too far – Noël Carroll has underlined the problems inherent in what he terms the “medium specificity thesis,” arguing that the assumption that underpins the thesis is an unexamined equation of what he terms the excellence and difference requirements – that is, “that what a medium does best will coincide with what differentiates media (and art forms)” (1985, 12). This is, at best, a problematic assumption – no art form exists in a cultural vacuum, and an understanding of the formal specificities and experiential character of a given medium needs to be balanced out with an awareness of what it shares with other art forms. This, in fact, appears to be the direction that Aarseth’s later work develops in, making the point that the direction in which games have developed as a cultural form arguably renders them more amenable to analysis as “integrated crossmedia packages” requiring a “ludonarrative approach” (Aarseth 2012) than to a

purely ludological analysis. Nonetheless, this note of caution does not change the fact that one of the crucial tasks of an aesthetics of games remains precisely that of identifying the form that games take as a structure of experience – in Kirkpatrick’s term, as “shapes and patterns in the experiential order” (2011, 14). The observation of the formal specificity of the aesthetic experience therefore leads to the question of *what* idiosyncratic structures of experience are established by games considered as aesthetic objects. It is my assertion that the notion of ludic subjectivity can be framed as an answer to this question.

### 2.1.3 *The formal unity of the aesthetic object*

Another important quality of the aesthetic object is that it appears to the recipient as a formal unity. This observation implies, firstly, that the aesthetic object is brought forth, in its singularity, as a distinct figure against its contextual ground; secondly, by the same token, that, even if the recipient’s moment-to-moment sensory intuitions might capture different objects of perception (as when the viewer’s attention wanders between different elements in a painting, or the reader follows, one by one, the sequence of sentences constituting a novel), the focus remains on the overarching totality which each individual intuition relates back to. All the parts and aspects of the object are subsumed to the whole; furthermore, this whole is understood not simply as a gathering of its constituent elements, but as displaying a *logos* or principle of order determining the selection and arrangement of these elements.

This observation invites the obvious question of where this *logos* is to be found, if it is not equal to any of the moment-by-moment sensory intuitions of the art object. The difficulty we encounter in attempting to answer this question, Rancière argues, is what separates the aesthetic regime of art from the earlier “representative regime”, which framed the work of art as the self-evident embodiment of its *logos*, an ““ordered arrangement” of thinkable concepts” (2009, 51). By this understanding, the single ‘meaning’ of a work of art was available to be extracted like a seed from a husk. Instead, following the foundational philosophical development of the notion of aesthetic

judgment in Immanuel Kant's third *Critique* (2007[1790]), it might be more accurate to say that it is the *expectation* of an ordered *logos* that makes the art object appear as a formal unity, and not the actual intuition of such an order.

This warrants some explanation. In Kant's account of the faculties of reason, the manifold that is received in sensory intuition is given shape through the bringing-to-bear of the rational concepts provided by the faculty of the understanding: it is this which allows the faculty of the imagination to give this sensory manifold the shape of a comprehensible representation. However, the aesthetic object is a special case, one which occurs with respect to "that representation of the Imagination which occasions much thought, without, however, any definite thought, i.e. any *concept*, being capable of being adequate to it" (ibid., 117, §49). Here the relation between the two faculties is inverted: the faculty of the imagination supersedes that of the understanding, producing a 'complete', unified representation, a formal whole, without the help of the latter faculty. The faculty of the understanding, struggling to find concepts to match up to the representation that the imagination has presented, finds itself not up to the task. The aesthetic judgment is therefore a response to that object which occasions a rupture in the operations of the faculties of reason by presenting an image that bears the properties of a formal unity, but for which no formal concept seems satisfactory:

Kant describes an aesthetic idea as that procedure by which we attempt to subsume the unity of the manifold under a concept, but fail to do so. In other words, it is never possible for us to say what a work of art is exactly about, although it appears to have advanced into a depth that could not have been reached by any other means. We will have to continue to make attempts to express what this depth contains, but no single one can be satisfying and final.

(Hammermeister 2002, 30)

The aesthetic object, then, escapes the grasp of a single, determining concept, revealing "the presence of non-thought in thought" (Rancière 2009, 28) – it is this fundamental resistance to closure that, as Iser observes, gives the aesthetic object the character of a "happening" (Iser 1980, 22) – or, in Kant's terms, sets in motion a productive "*free play* of

the cognitive faculties” (2007[1790], 38, §9)<sup>3</sup> a creative back-and-forth between the imagination and the understanding in an open-ended attempt to bring the aesthetic object under the sign of a concept.

Of course, such an interpretative impulse – opening, when taken to its logical conclusion, upon the hermeneutical dimension of the aesthetic reaction that is most fully articulated in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s aesthetics (1986) – is predicated upon the fact that, in the first place, the aesthetic object is already received, prereflectively, as the intimation of a formal unity that demands an interpretative movement by which the various elements of the object are subsumed to the logic of the whole. The fact that the process does not admit closure (ibid., 146) does not change the fact that it is in view of a putative final resolution that the recipient encounters the work of art in the interpretative mode. An aesthetic approach to games, then, needs to follow the same impulse, understanding the player’s disposition towards the game as being structured around a hermeneutic engagement with the game object (Aarseth 2003; Arsenault and Perron 2009; Arjoranta 2011; Karhulahti 2012; Möring 2013) oriented towards the expectation of an underlying principle of order or *logos*.

#### 2.1.4 *Aesthetic disinterestedness*

The fourth, and final, point I wish to highlight regarding the implications of the aesthetic perspective on games is the notion of *disinterestedness*. For Kant, one of the key characteristics of the aesthetic judgment is the fact that the object of such a judgment is encountered in a relation of disinterested contemplation (2007[1790], 28, §2). By ‘disinterested,’ Kant is underlining the fact that the object does not disappear against some extrinsic purpose or goal towards which it is put – it is the object *itself* which holds

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<sup>3</sup> As a side note, it is pertinent to point out here that the usage of the term ‘play’ to describe the cognitive operations pertaining to the aesthetic encounter is a constant theme within aesthetic discourse. A more sustained engagement with the intersection between aesthetics and the philosophy of play would have the scope to engage more fully with the conceptual overlap between the two fields revealed by the terminological connection, which could be extended, by way of Friedrich Schiller (1967[1794]), as far as Hans-Georg Gadamer’s location of the “to-and-fro movement” of play at the foundation of art (1989[1960], 104) and even, tangentially, to Roland Barthes’ writing regarding the play of signification set in motion by the text (1977, 162).

the subject's attention, not any ulterior interest or function which the object might serve. Kant frames this disinterested engagement as a prerequisite for attention to fall onto the object's formal properties. In the famous terms of a later philosopher, the aesthetic object is encountered as *present-at-hand* rather than *ready-to-hand* (Heidegger 2008[1927], 98[H.69]), figured in detached, objective contemplation rather than disappearing into the affordance it reveals in the direction of the world.

For the purposes of the current investigation, it is pertinent to point out that the attribution of this quality to the aesthetic perspective aligns it closely with a number of the most influential theorizations of play. As diverse as their approaches are, Johan Huizinga (1950), Roger Caillois (2001[1958]), Eugen Fink (2012[1958]) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989[1960]) all, in various ways, propose as one of the determining characteristics of the playful its dissociation from the network of means and ends giving shape to practical life. Huizinga puts it succinctly when he writes that “not being “ordinary” life [play] stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites” (1950, 9). I shall take this observation of a congruence between the conceptualizations of aesthetics and play as an impetus to proceed from this introductory presentation of the implications of the aesthetic perspective, to its direct application in developing an understanding of the aesthetic nature of play and games.

## 2.2 Play as aesthetic action

Once we turn from the consideration of aesthetics in general to the specific matter of its application to the study of games, it becomes evident that, despite the advantages the approach affords, we are also brought face-to-face with a fundamental difficulty. After all, games demand a mode of engagement that is entirely different to the receptive contemplation inherent to the aesthetic relation. The mode in which games are encountered is that which Espen Aarseth (1997, 1) termed the *ergodic*, defined through the operation of a user function that is not merely *interpretative*, but also *exploratory* and *configurative*, demanding active effort in order to actuate a path of traversal. The question



that needs to be addressed, then, is: how can a game be an object that is encountered both in the mode of aesthetic contemplation and ergodic engagement?

To a great extent, answering this difficulty aligns closely with the focus of this study as a whole. The argument I shall build to, in short, is that the active, ergodic effort undertaken by the player is both an element of the process of reception of the work and an element of what is received. In particular, in my discussion of what I shall term, in section 2.4, the double perspectival structure of ludic experience, I shall present the argument that it is thanks to the establishment of a phenomenal structure that locates the player within two simultaneous subjective standpoints - as a ludic subject *in* the game *and* an implied player *outside* the game – that the player’s own ludic subjectivity, through which she engages in active effort within the gameworld, can be disclosed to her perception and contemplation, both as an aesthetic object in its own right, and as an element of the aesthetic whole of the game.

For this reason, an analytical privileging of the aesthetic function of the game object should not be read as entailing a dismissal, or a relegation to the background, of the ludic functions which defines the status of games as games, and which has, inevitably, been the focus of much scholarship in the field of game studies.<sup>4</sup> It is only on the basis of their first being ludic objects that games can subsequently be taken as aesthetic objects – or, put differently, their ludic nature *is* their aesthetic character.

### 2.2.1 *Fink and the ontology of the play-act*

As a starting-point in attempting to pin down the aesthetic character of games, I shall take Fink’s development of an ontology of play. Fink figures play as a self-reflexive phenomenal structure defined primarily by its capacity to bring *itself* into view, rather than any final purpose it opens onto. This is achieved through a contextualization of play within an existential understanding of human being as fundamentally forward-looking and future-oriented:

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<sup>4</sup> The term “ludology” as a descriptor for the analytical approach developed with respect to the game object *as game* (Frasca 1999) is indicative in this regard.

We know ourselves to be “on the way.” We are always torn away from and driven beyond [*weg- und vorwärtsgerissen*] each present moment by the force with which we project our life onto the proper and successful existence [...] We are entranced [*bingen*] by the urge to complete and fulfill our fragmentary being. We live in the prospect of the future. We conceive the present as a preparation, as a station along the way, as a way of passage. (2012[1958], I)

Against this context, play is understood as the phenomenal mechanism which allows us to momentarily step out of this purposive future-orientation and, in bringing itself into view for its own sake, serves as the vehicle by which the structures of existence can be represented to perception, through being ‘played out’:

Play is a fundamental phenomenon of existence, just as original and independent as death, love, work and mastery, but it is *not* directed, as with the other fundamental phenomena, by a collective striving after the final purpose. It stands *over and against them*, as it were, in order to assimilate them into itself by portraying them. (ibid.)

Play stands for the existential phenomena that constitute human being-in-the-world, modeling and thereby presenting them. In other words, “play is a specific way of engaging with Being or with one’s existence, since it makes some essential laws and structures of Being experienceable” (Möring 2013, 118). If we were to follow Fink in this observation, we would conclude that what is revealed here is the inherently aesthetic nature of the play-act, as a model of acting-in-the-world that is removed from its purpose and made to represent itself. We might go even further and claim that the very idea of play can be defined precisely as *aesthetic action* – action that constitutes an aesthetic object not by virtue of its end product, but in its very status as an action. To put it differently, if play represents the structures of being-in-the-world, it does so not statically, but by *enacting* these structures – literally, by putting them into action.

The status and nature of ‘action’ is a problem that has been taken up in the most sustained manner within the analytic philosophical tradition. I shall not wade far out into these waters, though I shall touch upon the conceptual analysis of action again in section

8.1.2, when linking ludic action to the ludic subject as agent. At this stage, by way of providing a working understanding of ‘action’ against which the notion of aesthetic action can be defined, I shall point out that, on a basic level, the central problem tackled by the philosophy of action is the distinction between an action and a ‘mere’ happening or event. Clearly, an action is an event – on a basic level, it is something that happens – but what distinguishes actions from other kinds of events is that they are motivated by an *intention* (Anscombe 1979[1957]; Davidson 1980) – an action is not a happening but a *making-happen*. As such, it is *teleological*, oriented towards and determined by an end. It is this quality of the action which, as Paul Ricoeur argues, renders it a valid object of hermeneutical analysis, insofar as “action can be treated as a text and the interpretation of motives as a reading” (1992, 64).

Moreover, following the trail of questions which such an interpretative project would move through, proceeding through the ‘why?’ and ‘what?’ of the action that are joined together in being answered by the identification of the pertinent intention,<sup>5</sup> eventually leads to the question ‘who?’, at which point both action and intention must be ascribed to an agent (ibid., 88-112). Action, then, implies the extension of an agent towards the things of the world, embodying the same agent’s intention to effect a change in the state of one or more of these things.

It is against the background of this general idea of action that I shall attempt to tease out the implications of the notion of an aesthetic act. First, however, I shall make the obvious caveat that, in a way, it is not at all surprising to state that an action can be taken as an aesthetic object – Ricoeur’s assertion that an action can be read and demand interpretation in the mode of textuality speaks to precisely this possibility. Action has traditionally been the preeminent matter of a number of art forms, among which drama and the novel take particular prominence – witness Aristotle’s claim, in the *Poetics*, that “imitative artists represent men in action” as their primary task (2004[c.335BC], 59).

However, what concerns this investigation is something different: it is not the aesthetic

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<sup>5</sup> That is, Ricoeur argues, in stating the intention underpinning an action, one does not only answer the question of *why* the action was performed, but, even more fundamentally, of *what* the action was: “to say what an action is, is to say why it is done” (1992, 63).

reception of the actions of another individual, whether actual or fictional, in whatever medium of presentation or representation, but rather the taking of *one's own actions* as aesthetic. Here – once, in Ricoeur's terms, the questioning of the play-act is extended to address the 'who?' of the act – it starts becoming apparent how closely this consideration of the aesthetics of play is returning us to the territory of the ludic subject.

Using as a starting-point the understanding of action I have just outlined, it is possible to establish two divergent interpretations of the notion of an aesthetic action, understood as an action that is geared towards its own presentation rather than towards effecting change in the world. I shall briefly expand upon both of these possible interpretations of the nature, focusing on their respective success (or otherwise) in dealing with the case of ludic actions as a sub-category of the wider range of play-acts.

### 2.2.2 *Merleau-Ponty and the abstract movement*

In order to explicate the first possible understanding of the notion of an aesthetic action, I shall turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's distinction, within his phenomenology of the body, between what he terms *concrete* and *abstract* bodily movements. An abstract bodily movement, as opposed to a concrete one, is not oriented towards an end in the world – a purpose having its terminus in an object towards which the gesture is oriented – but, rather, is focused on itself. It is not only the purposive nature of concrete action that is absent from the abstract movement, but also its transitive vector in the direction of an object in the world. In an abstract act, "my body, which a moment ago was the vehicle of the movement, now becomes its end; its motor project is no longer directed towards something in the world," but, reflexively, towards the active parts of my body:

...it is directed towards them, furthermore, in so far as they are capable of breaking with their involvement in the given world and giving shape round about me to an imaginary situation [...] The abstract movement carves out within that plenum of the world in which concrete movement took place a zone of reflection and subjectivity; it superimposes upon physical space a virtual or human space.

(2002[1945], 127-128)

Two points are important here. First is the suggestion that the abstract act projects or maps out an experienced, or phenomenal, space that is its own, meaning that it is set in contrast to the general sphere of action that constitutes the lived-world of the everyday. This is a point I shall return to in section 2.3 below, where I follow it to its conclusion in the positing of the ludic domain that can be termed, with varying emphases, the play-world, the gameworld or the ludic heterocosm. Secondly, while concrete movement – as shall become evident in later chapters, when Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body shall be drawn upon at length in outlining the experiential structure of ludic subjectivity – is centripetal, moving outward to outline the sphere of the world from the body-as-centre, abstract movement:

...is clearly centrifugal, outlining in space a gratuitous intention which has reference to one’s own body, making an object of it instead of going through it to link up with things by means of it. (ibid., 139)

The location of Merleau-Ponty’s insight within his development of a phenomenology of the body gives the notion of abstract action (or movement) a specifically corporeal inflection. The bodily movement performed for its own sake rather than for an instrumental purpose – the arm that is extended not to reach for a glass of water but simply in order to unfold the movement itself – thereby foregrounds not only the action itself, but also the embodied subject as actor.

This understanding of what the notion of aesthetic action might imply is a good fit for conceptualizing the nature of an activity such as dance as it is experienced by the dancer<sup>6</sup> – more broadly, its range of application would seem to overlap with the category of activities Roger Caillois identifies under the label of *ilinx*-play, which invoke the pure pleasure of movement and bodily action (2001[1958], 23). However, this is not an adequate description of ludic actions, which do in fact have a focus and a terminus in an object and a state of affairs external to the agent. The swing of a racket in a game of

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, this is not to deny that an alternative framing of the aesthetics of dance would be equally valid – one whose object would be the unity of the movement of the dance as it is unfolded for an audience. Such an aesthetics would hew closer to Gadamer’s framing of play as a ”patterned movement” (1989[1960], 107) which I shall consider in section 2.2.3 below.

tennis differs from the extension of the arm in a dance, in that the former is performed with the purpose of striking the ball and, by doing so, returning a serve. The same is just as clearly true of, say, mining a seam of coal in *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011), or throwing a brick to distract a clicker in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013). The intention and teleology of both of these actions is evident: in the first case, the aim of the action is that of obtaining coal; in the second case, it is that of shifting the clicker's attention away from the player's intended path. Both of these are actions in the fullest sense, requiring no qualification to fit the stipulated criteria. By the same token, they are evidently not 'abstract,' in Merleau-Ponty's sense.

A different understanding of aesthetic action is required to account for ludic actions, one that, in a seeming paradox, can allow it to retain the general teleological structure of action at the same time as it is granted the intransitive nature of the aesthetic object. It is such a conceptualization that I shall now work towards. Firstly, an engagement with Gadamer's aesthetics of play will bring to the fore the task-orientedness of ludic actions; secondly, the notion of play as a metacommunicative frame (Bateson 2000[1955]; Goffman 1961) shall serve to account for the aesthetic bracketing of the entire system of play, including not only the action, but also the agent and the thing towards which the action is directed.

### 2.2.3 *Gadamer and the task of play*

Gadamer writes that "every game presents the man who plays it with a task" (1989[1960], 107): the golfer must get the ball in the hole, the *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978) player must shoot the invading aliens before they reach the bottom of the screen, and so on. Indeed, task- or goal-orientedness has repeatedly been stated as one of the essential qualities of games, whether in the specific form of the delineation of a goal or through the notion of a preferred or disequilibrium outcome (cf. Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971, 7; Suits 1990[1978], 34; Costikyan 2002, 11-14; Juul 2005, 36).

These tasks are arbitrary, in the sense that they are only taken on as important in the context of the game. While getting the golf ball into the hole is a matter of the

utmost importance to the golfer while the game is in play, once the game is done it is entirely likely she will simply pick the ball out of the hole, perhaps to perform the task again. Another way of saying this is to say, as Huizinga does, that there is “no material interest” in the completion of the task (1950, 13), or, perhaps more accurately, to say, as Juul does, that games have “*negotiable consequences*” (2005, 36, italics in original) – that is, that any consequence attendant upon the completion of the task is not resultant from the task itself, but assigned by the social community within which the game occurs.

This arbitrary quality of its tasks is one of the key components of the understanding of play – to which Huizinga subscribes – as being defined in opposition to the ‘serious’ (1950, 3). Having said that, Gadamer argues that even if “what is merely play is not serious,” it remains the case that “seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play” (1989[1960], 101-102). For the purposes of play, it is crucial not only that the task is there, but also that it is taken on by the player as *her* task: that is, once the individual has taken on the mantle of player, the task stops being arbitrary, being adopted as the focus of the player’s existential project.

This observation touches upon the central question of the ludic subject: once the player has taken on the task of play as her own, she has taken on the ludic subjectivity which, as I shall argue in section 7.2.5, is, to a considerable extent, shaped precisely by this orientation towards a specific task. More relevant at the current stage of the investigation, however, is that this answers the objection raised against the first understanding of the aesthetic action. In this conceptualization, the ludic action is oriented towards the end of effecting a change in the state of the world. On the micro level, as the examples of the tennis serve, mining a seam of coal in *Minecraft* and throwing a brick to distract a clicker in *The Last of Us* demonstrated, each individual ludic action has its directly attached goal; on the macro level, each such action the player takes is linked in an overarching chain of cause and effect, intention and result, ideally culminating in the player’s achieving the task or goal she has adopted by playing the game (or, potentially, a decisive failure to do so).

However, in countering the difficulty presented by a conceptualization of the aesthetic action founded on Merleau-Ponty's notion of the abstract movement, we appear to have been left with no criterion on which to distinguish between ludic actions and general actions in the world, and, as such, no basis upon which to assign the former an aesthetic character. It remains necessary to find a way in which ludic actions can be distinguished as a special category of action, placed at a critical distance that allows them to come into view as objects of contemplation in their own right, and hence to be reincorporated into the practices of everyday life in the aesthetic mode.

That this is the case, for Gadamer, is evident: it is the play-act itself, and not the completion of the task, that is the vehicle for the "self-presentation" of play (ibid., 108). For this reason, it is important not to make the mistake of concluding that it is the achievement of the task that constitutes the crux of play, in a sense in which the process of play fades into the background as the means towards an end. Golf is not about placing a ball in a hole, but about how the golfer's orientation towards this task gives purpose and structure to her traversal of the golf course. Likewise, *Space Invaders* is not about saving the world, but about the test of strategies and reflexes the player is put to in directing herself towards the task of delaying the aliens' traversal of the screen's y-axis. It is, Gadamer insists, as a patterning of movement, a "comportment," (ibid., 107) that play is to be understood. Even if it is in view of the task that the player's movements are gathered into a particular pattern, and her disposition geared towards a particular comportment, it is nonetheless the patterning and the comportment that are the focus.

This is the decisive difference that sets the aesthetic action apart; however, Gadamer's project has little to say about *how* it is that attention is shifted away from the end result of the completed task towards the play-act in its own right. To put the question differently: in what way are play-acts labeled as play-acts, and, as such, made available for aesthetic contemplation?

#### 2.2.4 *Play' as frame*

In order to provide an answer to this question, I shall turn to Gregory Bateson's idea of



play as a metacommunicative frame delimiting a set of significant actions. Bateson articulates this insight upon a sustained analysis of an observed instance of animal play – a playful nip given by one monkey to another. What is understood through this observation is an inherent paradox of play – the playful nip both *is* a bite, in that a purely physical account of the action would equate it with the action of biting, and also *is not* a bite, in that it is marked as ‘only play’.

In order to follow Bateson’s insight, it is necessary, first of all, to adopt a semiotic perspective upon action – that is, to think of an act as bearing denotative significance in the context in which it is performed. This, in itself, is not incompatible with what I have already said regarding the notion of action: Ricoeur’s assertion that actions require interpretation is made on the basis of precisely such a distinction between the action as an event in the world and the underlying intention the action-event refers back to, as well as the context “composed of rules of *interpretation* and norms of execution” (Ricoeur 1992, 64) linking the agent with the observer of the action. It is such an understanding of action that allows Bateson to remark that, “the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (2000[1955], 180). In other words, the intention to be read in the playful nip is that of representing the bite, and, as such, the action does not bear the intention that the bite would have (such as, for instance, signalling aggression). Extended into a general conceptual formula, Bateson renders the insight as, “these actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote” (ibid.).

In this context, play is understood as the metacommunicative frame delimiting the set of actions to be identified by the collective pronominal reference (*these* actions) and highlighting their representative intention – representing actions shorn of the *telos* the represented actions would bear. This point is picked up by Erving Goffman, in his usage of games as an example in his development of social frame theory. Games, Goffman argues, are demarcated by means of the application of a ‘frame’ to contain and mark out the activities forming part of the game, and to determine the meaning that is to be attached to these actions: “games place a ‘frame’ around a spate of immediate events,

determining the type of ‘sense’ that will be accorded everything within the frame” (Goffman 1961, 20).<sup>7</sup>

This allows for a perspective on the aesthetic action would appear to be a much better fit for ludic actions. The first possible understanding of an aesthetic action – that of an act with no teleological orientation or reference to anything outside itself – was found wanting in relation to ludic actions, which are inherently bound up in relations of intention and effect with the objects of the game, and are purposively directed towards the task set by the game. Instead, then, ludic actions must be characterized as actions *first*, bearing the structure and attributes of action in a general sense, before being framed as play-acts, and hence, related to aesthetically.

This should not be taken to mean that ludic action, and ludic experience in a more general sense, should be understood as ‘fictional,’ or, in some other sense, ‘not real.’ Quite the opposite: this model of ludic action in fact requires that such an action is, first and foremost, a *real* action oriented towards a *real* object and governed by a *real* teleology. Moreover, as I shall argue in section 3.5, it is in the nature of games that the consequences of ludic actions are materially upheld: this is an integral dimension of what Olli Tapio Leino – standing similarly upon Gadamer’s shoulders – terms the “gameplay condition” (2009, 12; 2010, 101), the condition of responsibility for one’s in-game choices and actions insofar as it is the materially upheld results of these actions that determine the player’s success or failure in relation to the task that has been set.<sup>8</sup>

Another significance, then, needs to be attributed to the play-frame than that of demarcating ‘real’ actions and experiences from ‘unreal’ ones. Instead, what the play-frame should be taken to mark out is not simply the set of actions constituting play, but, rather, the complete sphere of action within which they occur, including within it the

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<sup>7</sup> Social frame theory has proven influential in game studies – see, for instance, Gary Alan Fine’s application of Goffman to the study of tabletop role-playing games (1983).

<sup>8</sup> This is also the reason why I must follow Leino in rejecting the psychologist Michael Apter’s notion of a *paratelic state* (1991, 16-18), which “refers to experiencing one’s actions as taking place within a protective frame” (Leino 2010, 44), and, as a result, of not having consequences beyond the present moment. The main problem with Apter’s concept is its adherence to what Leino terms the “fictional safety fallacy” (ibid., 48), as evidenced by Apter’s claim that the protective frame demarcates its contents as ‘not real,’ and is “supported by a fictional context” (Apter 1991, 17-21).

actions themselves, the system of objects towards which the actions are directed, and the goals in view of which the actions are performed. In short, the notion of the play-frame as a cognitive system refers to the establishment of this sphere as a distinct ontological domain, within which the significance granted to objects can be different from the significance those same objects hold within the frame of reference of the player's 'actual' world (to retain for the moment a problematic term I shall soon focus on).

What is needed, then, is an ontology of the sphere of action contained by the play-frame, and, linked to this, a phenomenology of this same sphere of action as it appears to the player in the act of playing. The notion of the play-frame as articulated by Bateson and Goffman does not provide us with the critical tools required to perform these tasks. In the next section, I shall argue that such a formulation can be identified in the notion of the sphere of play as a 'world'. Such an approach, moreover, will also have the side-benefit of providing us with a concept for the manner in which the free-form productions of play can coalesce into the formal unity of 'game' as an aesthetic object.

### **2.3 'Game', 'gameworld' and the formal unity of play**

The discussion so far has led to the insight that it is in the nature of the play-frame to act as a boundary around a sphere of activity, delimiting both the set of actions constituting play and the realm of objects at which these actions are directed. In order to think through this unity of the sphere determined by the frame of play, I shall begin by returning to Fink, specifically to his development of the notion of the play-world.

#### *2.3.1 The notion of the play-world*

For Fink, the ontology of play is founded upon its establishment of a *play-world*: "play is creative bringing-forth [...] the product is the play-world" (2012[1958], III). Here, "play-world" refers to the ontological domain of things as defined by the meanings given to them by the frame of play. Fink's account uses the example of a wooden doll as a

plaything: the doll “is a piece of material and wire or an artificial mass [...] but, seen from the perspective of a playing girl, a doll is a *child*, and the girl is its *mother*” (ibid., II).

In this case, the play-world is the world in which the child that the doll stands for is actual. It is in relation to these things that ludic actions are significant. Moreover, just as the plaything is granted its significance in the play-world, so does the player herself become a being of different significance – a member of the play-world, determined by the logic of its frame, or, in other words, a ludic subject.

Fink here builds on the recurring trope of the realm of play as a ‘world apart’ – antecedents can be traced from Huizinga’s notion of the *magic circle* as referring to the “temporary world circumscribed by play” (1955, 10),<sup>9</sup> to Kurt Reizler, who precedes Fink in using the term *playworld* to refer to a conceptual domain distinct from the actual world within which “things mean what we want them to mean” (1941, 511). Speaking of chess, specifically of the ontological nature of the queen as object, Reizler writes:

... [the queen] is an entity in the game defined by the movements the game allows her. The game is the context within which the queen is what she is. This context is not the context of the real world or of ordinary life. The game is a little cosmos of its own. (ibid., 505)

This begins to address part of the task identified in the previous section – that of determining an ontology for the sphere demarcated by the play-frame. The notion of the play-world highlights the establishment of a ludic domain that constitutes a world distinct from what can be termed the *player-world* – the world the player recognizes as her actual world. Nonetheless, it remains necessary to go further in outlining the ontology of this domain, in the sense of specifying precisely what is meant by the concept of ‘world’ in this context.

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<sup>9</sup> The magic circle is, of course, a much-contested term within game studies. The form in which the notion has been the subject of debate owes much to Salen and Zimmerman’s expansion of Huizinga’s concept (2004, 95-96). It is Salen and Zimmerman’s emphasis on the inflexibility of the magic circle and on the absoluteness of the separation it dictates between the game space and the ‘real world’ that has led to frequent and extensive critique of the notion (Castronova 2005; Copier 2005; Lammes 2006; Taylor 2006; Malaby 2007; Liebe 2008; Pargman and Jakobsson 2008; Consalvo 2009; Calleja 2012); though attempts have also been made at clarifying the notion into a more workable form (Juul 2008; Stenros 2012).

### 2.3.2 *From the play-world to the gameworld*

It is at this point that the argument circles back from the activity of play to the game artifact.<sup>10</sup> The distinction between *game* and *play* can be paralleled to that drawn by Caillois between *ludus*, as a structured, rule-bound activity, and *paidia*, as a free play or “uncontrolled fantasy” unbound by the fixity of a structure (2001[1958], 13).<sup>11</sup> By this understanding, for an activity of play to achieve the status of a ‘game’, what is required is precisely that delimitation into a clear, ordered form that also allows it to achieve the formal unity required of the aesthetic object. I shall therefore briefly outline the manner in which the productions of play can coalesce into the formal unity of a game.

The first, most obvious way in which a game sets limits on play is by means of the drawing of spatiotemporal boundaries – this is Huizinga’s point when he writes that play occurs “within certain limits of time and place” (1950, 9). Moreover, the formalization of play into the structure of a game is also accomplished by means of the specification of the total set of entities to which the game pertains. The material totality of the game of chess, for instance, consists of a board and thirty-two ‘pieces’, divided into sixteen of each colour. Once these boundaries have been set, it becomes possible to conceive of these entities as a defined set of “game components” (Järvinen 2008) organized into a structured game system (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 50).

A game, then, imposes limits and restrictions on a sequence of play through determining the totality of its components as well as its boundaries in space and time: as such, the difference between what Fink calls the play-world and what can be termed – to retain the more current term in the discourse of game studies – the *gameworld* is not necessarily one of kind, but simply one of degree of codification and fixity. This is a fundamental criterion for the domain of a game to obtain the status of a ‘world’ – in his

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<sup>10</sup> Though, of course, the linguistic distinction would not have been at issue in Fink’s or Gadamer’s original German texts due to the concept’s reduction to the single term *spiel*, it is evident that the phenomenon both writers have in mind is closer to the notion of ‘play’ than that of ‘game’.

<sup>11</sup> This is not to suggest that ‘play’ and ‘game’ stand in a diametric opposition. Both Huizinga and Caillois argue that the impulse towards formalization and delimitation is present within play from the start – in other words, one can say, play, in its primordially, already contains as an intrinsic element the drive towards gamehood. As such, rather than thinking of ‘play’ and ‘game’ as monolithic opposites, a better way to conceptualize the distinction might be to think of the two as the poles of a spectrum, with each particular activity lying at some distance between the two.

approach to solving the philosophical problem of grounding the demarcation of possible worlds as separate entities, David Lewis (1986) settled precisely upon the idea of the *isolation* of each distinct world as key. At the same time, this movement between the free self-determination of play and the structured finitude of a game – reflecting, incidentally, Gadamer’s notion of the “transformation into structure” by which the primordial energy of play is translated into the fixed forms of the artwork (1989[1960], 111) – is precisely what allows the world of the game – and the activity of play as an aspect of that world – to be concretized into a fixed aesthetic form.

Drawing the discussion back to the category of games this investigation is directly concerned with, as delimited in section 1.3 under the banner of the ‘figure game,’ one can note that the boundaries of the virtual environment as a distinct ontic domain not only determine the spatiotemporal expanse of the realm of play, but also specify the set of game components: the things in the virtual environment constitute the set of things that are in play, in all of their particulars that are relevant to the situation of play. For this reason, we can agree with Gordon Calleja (2012) that this category of games does not require the idea of the magic circle or any similar notion of a conceptual demarcation for the domain of play. The worlds of the category of games under our consideration form the intersection of the sets “play-world” and “virtual environment,” taking, from the former, their aesthetic character, and, from the latter, their computational ontology: it is to this intersection that I shall apply the term *gameworld* for the purposes of this study.<sup>12</sup>

### 2.3.3 *The gameworld and the ludic subject*

There is one final restriction which a game legislates upon the freedom of play in the interest of granting it structure and form. Once the first two restrictions have led to the

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<sup>12</sup> The term is one out of which multiple significations can be unfolded: I refrain from expanding upon the term here only in anticipation of a fuller development of the senses of ‘gameworld’ which shall be incorporated into the phenomenological account of gameworld experience I shall put forward in Chapter 3. In particular, there I shall specify the distinction between what I have been referring to as the *ludic heterocosm* and what I am now referring to as the *gameworld*. To anticipate this, in short: gameworld refers to the spatiotemporal arrangement of entities addressed by the game system and, hence, modeled computationally, while the ludic heterocosm is the represented textual world supported by the gameworld but extending beyond it.

establishment of an ordered, coherent and bounded gameworld, what is left is for the player to be given a defined role within this world. In a variety of ways, which I shall elaborate upon in Chapter 7 – for instance, through the definition of a lexicon of possible actions, and the setting of a goal towards which these actions are to be directed – the player is subjectively positioned in a more-or-less fixed relation to the gameworld: in other words, as a particular *ludic subject*.

Such an understanding requires this investigation to take a stand in opposition to the idea, expressed by Kristine Jørgensen, that games can be “understood as subsets of the real world, delimited by a conceptual and elastic boundary that defines what should be understood as part of the game and not” (2009, 1) – a point echoed by Leino’s argument that the term *gameworld* is best understood “a signifying shorthand [...] for a subset of the actual world” (2010, 177).

Instead, then, a ‘game,’ in experiential terms *for* the player, constitutes a discrete *lifeworld* (Husserl 1970[1936]) in miniature – ‘world’ being understood here in the phenomenological sense as lived-world, that is, a world as it appears to a subject through her existential practice. It is for this reason that the establishment of the gameworld as a distinct ontic and experiential domain is inseparable from the establishment of the ludic subject as the ‘I’ identified by the player in relation to this domain. As Sebastian Möring puts it, “existential phenomena are repeated in play, as if they were from a world in a world or a life in a life” (2014, 2). Playing a game thereby involves enacting a being-in-the-(game)world whose mode and disposition is, to a great extent, determined by the parameters of the game (recall here Gadamer’s point about the “comportment” particular to every game). Moreover, following the implications of the representational quality I have traced in play through Fink and Gadamer, and anchored in the structure of the play-frame, one can conclude that this mode of being-in-the-gameworld is not only adopted and enacted by the player, but also, through its status as play, reflected and brought forth into presentation: to paraphrase Bateson, the being-in-the-gameworld denotes a being-in-the-world. In the aesthetic mode, then, a game reveals both a lived

world and a subjective being towards that world, united in the form of an existential being-in-the-world that is both *lived* and *presented*.

#### 2.4 The double perspectival structure of ludic engagement

Starting with the investigation into the play-act as aesthetic action, it became evident that, insofar as the player is the agent of the ludic action, her relation to the action is not aesthetic, but, rather, teleological: it is not the action itself that concerns her but the achievement of the game's task. At the same time, the fact that both her ludic actions and the task towards which they are directed are caught within the ludic frame grants the practice as a whole a self-presentational orientation.

Speaking not on the level of the individual action, but that of the player's engagement with the game as a whole, one can say that the player simultaneously plays out her experiential and existential being-in-the-gameworld *and* perceives it from a point of view outside the game, from which her own being-in-the-gameworld is seen as an intrinsic part of the game's textual and aesthetic unfolding. The conceptualization of the aesthetic nature of games has thereby led this investigation to the threshold of a crucial insight: the player's experience of a game is determined by her simultaneous inhabitation of two distinct phenomenal standpoints: a perspective *internal* to the gameworld, from which ludic actions are taken in a teleological orientation towards the task set by the game, and an *external* perspective from which the game – and the player's own actions within it – is viewed in the aesthetic mode defined by critical distance.

It is around the internal perspective that the domain of play coalesces into a lived world, and it is here that the ludic subject finds its place, as the subjective existence the player takes on in relation to this ludic domain (as, in Fink's example, the girl takes on the role of mother towards the child that the doll represents in the play-world). At the same time, the player also engages with the game, *as* a game, from a perspective that can be considered external in relation to the gameworld.



This is by no means a novel suggestion. Marie-Laure Ryan, for instance, makes a distinction between *internal* and *external* interactivity within the form of what she terms “digital narrative”. As she explains this distinction:

In the *internal* mode, the user projects himself as a member of the fictional world, either by identifying with an avatar, or by apprehending the virtual world from a first person perspective. In the external mode, the reader situates himself outside the virtual world. He either plays the role of a god who controls the fictional world from above, or he conceptualizes his activity as navigating a database.  
(2001b)

Setting aside the question of Ryan’s invoking of the notion of fiction – a point I have already mentioned in section 1.5 – there are two salient points here which I shall be returning to during the course of this investigation. First is the point that, as Ryan has also observed, the conceptualization of such a perspectival structure is not new to games – in fact, she argues, Western approaches to the reception of art have for a long time theorized a distinction between *immersion* in the heterocosm established by an artwork and the standpoint of *critical distance* (2001a, 2-6).<sup>13</sup> Second is the point, which is of course central to this investigation’s primary focus on the ludic subject, that the internal mode requires the recipient of the work to become a member of the domain in question – and which, as I shall argue in Chapter 4, is what makes the matter of ‘being-in-the-gameworld’ fundamentally different, in both phenomenological and ontological terms, to the sense of immersion or transportation the reader might feel in relation to the world of a novel, or the film viewer towards a cinematic world.

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<sup>13</sup> A particularly influential example of this distinction is Schiller’s articulation of the difference between the “naïve” and the “sentimental” poet, with the former being immersed in the work and the latter exhibiting a self-consciousness in artistic creation (1993[1800]). A more contemporary example is Umberto Eco’s argument for the distinguishing between two different Model Readers of a literary text: “a mystery tale displays an astute narrative strategy in order to produce a naïve Model Reader eager to fall into the traps of the narrator (to feel fear or to suspect the innocent one) but usually wants to produce also a critical Model Reader able to enjoy, at a second reading, the brilliant narrative strategy by which the first-level, naïve reader was designed” (1991, 55). These two examples by no means exhaust the manifestations of this distinction in critical discourse, and are merely meant to illustrate the wide application and enduring popularity of this conceptualization of the relation between the recipient and the artwork.

Of course, what Ryan describes is an either/or distinction, while, as will become apparent, the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement implies an interrelation between both perspectives, held concurrently. According to the aesthetic approach to play I have followed to get to this point, such a double perspective is a basic quality of the activity of play. Moreover, it is my argument that the figure game form that I have taken as my focus for this investigation foregrounds this formal structure of play in a particularly pointed manner. Recall that, in section 1.3, I defined the criteria delineating this genre for the purposes of this study as being, first, the establishment of a ludic heterocosm, and, secondly, the placing of a playable figure in this ludic heterocosm, which the player takes up as ‘I,’ and around whom, subsequently, the ludic heterocosm can be gathered into a meaningful existential sphere. It is by its very definition, then, that the figure game doubles the player, setting her up as a ludic subject *inside* the gameworld while she remains a player *outside* the gameworld.

This notion of the double perspective of play is fundamental to understanding the player’s experiential engagement with the game, and, as such, it is one that will, to a great extent, shape the approach that this investigation as a whole shall adopt towards the ludic subject. Getting to grips with the idea of the double perspective and its implications, then, is crucial. In order to do so, I shall first survey of a number of approaches within game studies that have sought to articulate the basic phenomenological distinction between experience *in* the gameworld and experience *of* the game artifact. Secondly, I shall offer a synthesis of the insights gained through this survey in the form of a conceptualization of the double phenomenal structure of the player’s relation to the game in its multiple levels.

#### 2.4.1 “*Game as an experiential route*” versus “*game as a map or system*”

Torben Grodal makes the suggestion that engagement with a game admits to two possible approaches: the perspective of the “game as an experiential route” and that of

the “game as a map and as a system”,<sup>14</sup> framing the move between the first and the second perspective as being the result of the player’s drive towards mastery:<sup>15</sup>

When starting a new game we may follow different routes and have an experience of controlling many options. But when we gain mastery we may not only experience the game as a series of routes that we may follow but also create a total “map” of the game and realize that we have a set of limited options. In this stage, the game is more likely to be experienced as a “message” from the game producers [...] Experienced players may get to that stage sooner and shift more often between experiencing the game as an interactive world and reasoning about the possible intentions laid down by the producers. (2003, 144)

The experiential difference between the two perspectives is encoded by means of spatial metaphors. An “experiential route” describes presence at a sequence of spatiotemporal points connected in a path of traversal: in other words, it implies a *situated* subject following the route in question. On the other hand, the reader of a map stands in a detached perceptual position, relating not to the space directly from a point of presence within it, but to a representation (or, we might say, an interpretation) of it. In this much, Grodal’s distinction between the framing of the game as an experiential route and that of the game as a map or system parallels the distinction between the internal and the external perspective. This impression is reinforced when an echo of Grodal’s distinction can be identified in the course of Alison Gazzard’s study of maze structures in videogame spaces, in which she notes that “the maze can be viewed as a design or

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<sup>14</sup> It might be argued that an alternative way of framing the two perspectives would be to fall back on one of the stock notions of the game studies repertoire – namely, the distinction between the perspective of the ‘game as object’ and that of the ‘game as process’. Of course, this latter dichotomy is nowhere near as rigid as the opposition of the two terms might imply: if a game is an object, it is one that exists to set in motion a process; if it is a process, it is one that is determined by an object. ‘Object’ and ‘process’ are two sides of the same coin, and, as much as they might be separable on a purely conceptual level, one cannot be understood without the other. To an extent, the same is true of Grodal’s account of the two perspectives, which does not position them as mutually exclusive alternatives.

<sup>15</sup> A more fully developed working-through of this notion can be found in Arsenault and Perron (2009), where gameplay is understood as an interpretative process consisting of three nested heuristic spirals identified respectively as the gameplay, narrative and hermeneutic cycles. I shall return to Arsenault and Perron in section 3.4.2 when the model they propose shall prove instrumental in answering the need for a “real-time hermeneutics” (Arsenault 2003, 5) that bridges the gap between the player’s subjective experience of the game as a lived world and her understanding of the gameworld as a *cosmos*, or definite, ordered system.

understood as an experience, and [...] the experience of being in the maze is markedly different from that of viewing the maze from above” (2013, 17-18).

While Grodal suggests that the two points of view on the game both come into play at different stages of the player’s engagement with a game, Bernard Perron repositions them as alternative critical frames upon the game as an object of study. The difference between the two perspectives, in this case, would be epistemological: on a basic methodological level, the former implies an engagement with the player’s moment-to-moment “online perception” of the game in the act of playing,<sup>16</sup> while the latter requires a “leisurely analysis” at a critical distance (Perron 2012, 3).

Perron draws on the distinction in the context of a description of a scene in *Silent Hill 2* (Konami 2001), in which he recounts the experience of exploring the dark interior of the Wood Side Apartments. The darkness of the scene makes it difficult to see one’s way and impossible to read the in-game map, leading, Perron writes, to a sense of disorientation and fear that gives way to relief when, in one of the rooms she wanders through, the player finds a flashlight. This experiential account frames the sequence in an entirely different manner to how it would be perceived if “we know the flashlight is in Room 205 (and we know that we will find this flashlight based on our previous playing of [*Silent Hill* (Konami 1999)] and from the manual” (ibid.): that is, if the extent of our knowledge and our mental conception of the game as a whole were not linked to our situated experience as players within the gameworld.

For the purposes of his analysis, Perron privileges the experiential perspective as giving a more accurate account of the game in its affective dimension. This redeployment of Grodal’s distinction to highlight an analytical dichotomy, as well as the valorization of

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<sup>16</sup> Perron’s commentary introduces an echo of an earlier distinction made by James Newman between “on-line” and “off-line” engagement (2002). *On-line* engagement refers to “the state of ergodic participation”, that is, “playing the game”; *off-line* engagement, on the other hand, refers to “periods where no registered input control is received from the player,” resulting in instances of “non-ergodicity” (2002). During on-line engagement, then, the game is being *played*, while, during off-line engagement, it is being *watched*. It is evident, firstly, that the modes of engagement Newman highlights are not coterminous with the two perspectives outlined by Grodal. The equation of the perspective of the ‘game as an experiential route’ to on-line engagement certainly holds, at least insofar as both describe the in-the-moment experience of active participation in a game. However, while Grodal contrasts this to the objective perspective detached from moment-to-moment subjective experience of the game, the other term of Newman’s oppositional pair, “off-line engagement,” simply refers to non-ergodic sections in games, such as cut-scenes.

the experiential perspective as being more fundamental to an understanding of what games *are*, can be aligned with Jon Peterson's suggestion that there are "two distinct voices for describing games [...] the *immersed* voice<sup>17</sup> and the *detached* voice" (2013, 402). Peterson, however, does not go into detail regarding the implications of the two voices. A more fully developed articulation of the same notion of a double perspective can be traced in the distinction, developed by Leino (2009; 2010) and modified by Möring (2013), between the *first-person perspective* and the *third-person perspective*.

#### 2.4.2 *First-person perspective versus third-person perspective*

In articulating the novelty of the first-person perspective he proposes as the necessary corollary of the framing of the game as played, Leino's strategy is, firstly, to unite the poles of critical game analysis he attributes, following Aarseth (2007, 131), to the "critical player-theorist" and the "ethnographic player-observer", under the common banner of what he terms the "third-person perspective". The former approach, indebted to humanistic disciplines such as literary theory and cultural studies, takes as its object of study the game as text, and the latter, locating its methodological paradigm in the social sciences, shifts the focus onto the player. Nonetheless, Leino equates the two by reducing them to their common denominator: namely, that "they share the 'objective' scientific third-person orientation toward their object of study" (2009, 3). This allows Leino to position his conceptual development of the notion of the first-person perspective as a radical alternative that is more attuned to the "experienced significance of in-game events and objects" as directly figured for the player (Leino 2010, 95).

As with Perron's appropriation of Grodal's notion of the two perspectives, these are competing critical and analytical standpoints, not dimensions of the player's experience. To wit, the third-person perspective is articulated precisely as a pointed analytic disavowal of the player's subjective experience (Leino 2009, 3). In other words, critical projects adopting the third-person perspective fail to account for what it *feels* like to play a game, that is, for "gameplay as the player experiences it" (*ibid.*, 82). Conversely,

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<sup>17</sup> I shall be focusing on the notion of *immersion* as it relates to the internal perspective in section 4.2.

it is precisely to this subjective experience that the first-person perspective – which Leino conceptualizes by means of a phenomenological approach to player experience – is attuned.

Taking up both Leino’s dichotomy of perspective and a number of his conclusions regarding their implications, Möring argues that, with respect to a game, “it is possible to take either of two points of view: the first-person player of a game or the third-person observer of a game” (2013, 302). In Möring’s project, what is brought to the fore is the fact that these standpoints determine, not only the way in which the game comes to appear, but also the role it is necessary to perform in engaging with the game, and, therefore, the nature of the activity in question.

At the core of the distinction, Möring argues, is the difference between playing the game, and thereby experiencing it in the first person, and ‘merely’ observing, which implies taking the game textually, as representation:

...the interplay of play and representation always refers to the distinction between a first-person player and a third-person observer – or, in other words, between play as doing and play as representation [...] In this regard, for a first-person player play is primarily a doing, and, as such, a praxis, whereas for a third-person observer play as representation becomes important for its meaning. (ibid., 161)<sup>18</sup>

From the point of view of a first-person engagement with the game, the process of play is seen as a “praxis,” an active *doing*. From the third-person perspective, on the other hand, the same process gains significance through being taken in a representational

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<sup>18</sup> Two points should be made here: first, as his usage of the term ‘play’ (as opposed to ‘game’) implies, Möring is operating with a different frame of reference to Grodal, Perron and Leino, all of whom explicitly position their theory as an approach to the computer game artifact. Instead, Möring’s argument is constructed with a view towards the notion of ‘play’ in a more abstract, general sense. This fact should not be ignored: however, if the argument is initially developed with respect to ‘play’ in general, there is, on the face of it, no reason it cannot be applied to games, and, in fact, Möring goes on to put his conceptual model in the service of an analysis of specific computer game examples. Second, what is revealed here is Möring’s anchoring of his notion of a double perspectival structure in Fink’s conceptualization of play as a self-reflexive existential sphere that represents being-in-the-world by means of enacting it – a notion I have already invoked in section 2.2.1 as the basis for the approach I am adopting towards games as aesthetic objects. It is, as such, hardly surprising that Möring’s articulation of the two perspectives hews the closest, out of the approaches I have surveyed, to my own derivation of the double perspective.

function. This observation is also at the core of Möring's distinction between the role demanded of the user by each of the two perspectives: where the first-person perspectives requires the user to face up to the responsibilities of being a "player," the third-person perspective relegates the user to being a 'mere' "observer". Another way of phrasing this - by interweaving it with a different theoretical strand within the game studies discourse – is to say that the first-person perspective and the third-person perspective imply different *user functions*. What is being invoked here is Aarseth's typology of user functions, already touched upon in section 2.2: unlike the purely *interpretative* function offered to recipients of the traditional literary text, the function expected of the recipient of the ergodic<sup>19</sup> text can also be *exploratory* (if the user is given a choice of path), *configurative* (if the elements of the underlying textual engine can be configured by the user to form new semiotic sequences) or *textonic* (if the user has the capacity to modify the textual engine itself) (1997, 64).

Subsequent work in game studies has tended to follow Markku Eskelinen in collapsing this typology of user functions into a binary either/or distinction between a configurative and an interpretative user function, with the former – in a formulation that bears a revealing similarity to the philosophical theory of action sketched out in section 2.2.1 – leading to an understanding of the gaming situation as “a combination of ends, means, rules, equipment, and manipulative action” (2001).<sup>20</sup> With games as examples of cybertexts, it is the configurative user function which is granted primacy:

... literature is a dominantly interpretative practice, unlike games that are dominantly configurative or manipulable practices. To generalize: in art, we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret, whereas in games, we have to interpret in order to be able to configure. (Eskelinen 2012, 42)

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<sup>19</sup> The etymology of Aarseth's term is, of course, particularly apt in the context of the current investigation. Deriving from “the Greek words *ergon* and *bodos*, meaning “work” and “path”” (Aarseth 1997, 1), the term describes the fact that, in the cybertext, the user is required to work out her own path of traversal. That this aligns nicely with Grodal's notion of the game as an “experiential route” should, at this point, go without saying.

<sup>20</sup> The congruence this framing bears to the schema of action outlined in section 2.2.1 above should not go unremarked. Eskelinen's characterization of what he terms the *gaming situation* relates very much to what I have identified as the internal perspective, from which the player perceives the game as a lifeworld within which existential projects can be set in motion through the taking of action in the view of a goal.

Möring appears to subscribe to a similar conclusion. His argument is presented in relation to thematic ‘readings’ of games, exemplified by Janet Murray’s interpretation of *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984) as “the perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s” (Murray 1998, 144) and Ian Bogost’s analysis of *Tax Invaders* (Republican National Committee 2004) as a procedural representation of conservative Republican perspectives on taxation (Bogost 2007, 105). These, Möring argues, “are actually text interpretations, since a gameplay experience is retrospectively constructed as a text” (2013, 227). The point being stressed here is not that this renders these readings invalid, but that they are extraneous to the actual process of engagement with the game *as played* – in short, “this sort of interpretation is not necessary for playing the game” (ibid.).

Perhaps not by way of coincidence, Eskelinen also preceded Möring in engaging with Murray’s reading of *Tetris*, and was harsher on the subject:

Instead of studying the actual game Murray tries to interpret its supposed content, or better yet, project her favourite content on it; consequently we don’t learn anything of the features that make *Tetris* a game. (Eskelinen 2001)

However, Eskelinen’s argument that a textual reading such as Murray’s ignores the ludic nature of both the object and the experience at hand makes little sense once we realize that, as Möring notes, a third-person reading of the game is based on, and presupposes, a first-person experience of playing the game. As such, what is read as a commentary on the busy lives of contemporary Americans is not some hypothetical version of *Tetris* shorn of its ludic aspects (it is hard to imagine what would be left) but the experience of *Tetris* as played. Specifically, what is read as an analogical signifier for overtasked contemporary American lives is the player’s eventually inevitable sense of being unable to keep up with the constant flow of *Tetris* blocks - an experience determined, to a great extent, by the same temporal qualities – such as random order of events and accelerating speed – that Eskelinen highlights in the “phenomenology of *Tetris*” he offers as a more ludically-oriented alternative to Murray’s reading. Thus, while Möring may be right to say that Murray’s reading is irrelevant to the experience of playing *Tetris*, Eskelinen is



certainly mistaken to say that the experience of playing *Tetris* is irrelevant to Murray's reading.

#### 2.4.3 *The implications of the dual perspectival structure*

Given the basic similarities in the structural distinctions being drawn, it is inevitable to reach the conclusion that these various developments of the idea of two distinct perspectives upon the game object open onto a fundamental structure of ludic experience – one, moreover, which this investigation already shed light on through the engagement with Fink's ontology of play.

Having performed this survey, I am now in a position to build on the achievements of these earlier approaches, by proposing an understanding of the phenomenal structure that emerges in the duality between the internal and the external perspective, together with its experiential and aesthetic implications. The approach I shall take is that of unfolding a cluster of binary oppositions organized around the distinction between the internal and the external perspective across the multiple levels over which the distinction applies, each level already containing within it the implication of the next. The two perspectives shall be contrasted in terms of the *experiential subject* to which experience from the perspective pertains, the field of *knowledge* it delimits, the *object of perception* upon which it is trained, the *mode of actuality* in which the game is perceived, the *frame* it places upon the game, and the *mode and order of experience* associated with it.

- *Experiential subject*. Implicit in all of the approaches surveyed in the preceding sections is a mutual exclusivity to the two perspectives: one is either a player *or* a critical observer, or, in Grodal's case, a novice or an expert. Such an understanding is not adequate to address the fact that the character of ludic experience depends on the player being *simultaneously* situated in both an internal and an external standpoint with respect to the gameworld. However, even with both of these perspectives being attributed to the player, it is still necessary to distinguish, on some level, the subject of internal experience from the subject of external experience. For this reason, the structure of a double phenomenology implies a distribution of the player-as-subject between two, inevitably

linked, but fundamentally distinct, subject-positions. The internal perspective, necessarily belonging as it does to an entity that inhabits the ontic domain of the gameworld, can be attributed to the ludic subject: indeed, to a great extent, the standpoint for the internal perspective can be directly identified with what I have termed the ludic subject-position. On the other hand, the external perspective belongs to the player as an individual outside the game. More specifically, insofar as this perspective is given shape by the game object itself – and is as much an element of its formal structure as the internal perspective of the ludic subject – the external perspective can be attributed to the implied player.<sup>21</sup>

- *Knowledge.* This is most explicit in Grodal's account of the dual perspectives, and Perron's example from *Silent Hill 2* serves as the perfect illustration. When the player inhabits a subjective standpoint internal to the gameworld, her field of knowledge is limited to some degree by this standpoint: the player of *Silent Hill 2* cannot know, from her internal perspective, that there is a flashlight in Room 205 before she has been to the room in question. From an external perspective, on the other hand, there is no such necessary limitation of knowledge, and, at least in theory, total knowledge of the gameworld can be obtained.

- *Object of perception.* What is the object of the player's act of perception – or, what does the player see from this perspective? This is inevitably related to the question of knowledge, and refers back again to the situatedness of the player's perspective. The limited perspective of an internal standpoint cannot encompass the game as a whole – as such, the object of any given act of perception will be this or that individual game component, as one of the things in the gameworld. The point I am making here is similar to the one Iser proposes within literary theory regarding the viewpoint of the implied reader as a textual function within the signifying structure of the text: “instead of a subject-object relationship, there is a moving viewpoint which travels along *inside* that which it has to apprehend,” meaning that “the reader's wandering viewpoint is, at one and the same time, caught up in and transcended by the object it is to apprehend” (1980,

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<sup>21</sup> One should here recall the distinction made between the ludic subject and the implied player in section 1.5.1.

109). In other words (and returning to a ludic domain of reference) the player's subjective (hence, first-personal) standpoint constitutes a part of the game as a whole, which, by the same token, cannot be encompassed in its totality from the same standpoint. On the other hand, from the external perspective, the game *itself*, as a whole constituting one of the things in the player's world, can be encompassed in an act of perception. This point shall be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3, but, for now, it is enough to keep in mind this distinction: from the external perspective of the implied player, it is perfectly possible to say, "I see *Minecraft*"; from a perspective internal to the world of *Minecraft*, on the other hand, such a statement would be impossible. Instead, a statement describing the player's perceptions from this standpoint would refer to perceived things in the *Minecraft* world, such as, "I see a tree," or "I see a creeper."

This is not to say that the external perspective cannot be focused upon one element or other of the game whole; nor that no extrapolation towards the whole can be made on the basis of the restricted viewpoint relating to the internal standpoint. In the former case, however, the cognitive movement is top-down, that is, from the whole to the part, while, in the latter case, it is bottom-up – starting with the perception of the individual game component.

- *Mode of actuality*. For something to be *actual*, simply enough, means for it to exist *in fact*; but the determination of actuality depends upon the position from which the subject is speaking. This is the *indexical* definition of actuality proposed by Lewis, who writes: "'actual' is indexical, like 'I' or 'here', or 'now': it depends for its reference on [...] the world where the utterance is located" (1973, 69).<sup>22</sup> Actuality depends on the subject *for whom* a thing is actual, and her worldly standpoint: something is actual if it exists *in the world from which I speak*. By this indexical concept of actuality, the gameworld is only actual from the internal perspective – that is, from a perspective placed upon the same ontic plane as the things of the gameworld. This is what allows Fink to claim that the things of what he terms the playworld are, in a sense, both actual and non-actual, depending on

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<sup>22</sup> The notion of the indexical definition of actuality is taken up by Ryan in her examinations of the mechanisms of subjective "recentering" in relation to textual worlds (2001a, 103). I shall return to this point in Chapter 5.

whether or not one has stepped into the ludic domain. A better way of phrasing this, however, is that, from the respective perspectives, the objects in play are actual in different ways: as existents in the gameworld from the internal perspective, and as game components (aspects of the game artifact) from the external perspective.

- *Frame*. If the individual game component is isolated as an object of perception, the horizon it is perceived against is that of the gameworld; conversely, if the external perspectives frames the game as a whole as a distinct object of perception, it does so against the background of the player's actual world, within which the game thereby comes to appear as one of the things in the world. From the internal perspective, then, the game is experienced as an experiential and existential lifeworld, through phenomenal mechanisms I shall explore in Chapter 3. At the same time, from the external perspective, the game as a whole is perceived as an artifact, one among the things in the world of the player as "an individual who, among other activities, also plays" (Gadamer 1989[1960], 107). This is the basis of Grodal's distinction between the "game as an experiential route" and the "game as a map or system," as well as Möring's point that the double structure of play refers to the fact that the things relating to the play-act are both "objects from within the world" and "the totality of things in play" (2013, 119).

If, from the external perspective, the game is encountered as a thing in the player's world, it is still necessary to ask: as what manner of thing is it encountered, and, relatedly, in what mode is it encountered? The answer is already prefigured in Grodal's argument that, from the external perspective, the game is "experienced as a "message" from the game producers" (2003, 144), as well as in Möring's assertion that the product of the third-person perspective is "text interpretations" of games, such as Murray's and Bogost's. From the external perspective, the game is encountered in the mode of textuality, as an artifact that is amenable to semiotic engagement on any of the levels upon which a game can be 'read'.

The fact that the double perspectival structure allows for a game to appear to the player as both a world *for her* and a textual artifact is crucial. Perhaps as a counterpoint to a tendency towards rather facile and uncritical applications of the idea of games

transporting the player into a wholly other realm, game studies has tended to resist to the idea of immersion and of the sense of being-in-the-gameworld as being somewhat naïve. Thus – to mention only some examples - Salen and Zimmerman reject the “immersive fallacy” (2004, 450); Peter Bayliss criticizes Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006) for adopting a perspective that “assumes a player who uncritically accepts the depicted gameworld is in some way real or unmediated, and presumes that the primary value of playing a videogame arises from the impression of being transported into the world of the videogame” (2007a, 4); and Paul Martin writes that, “any sense of presence in the game environment is weak and fleeting at best” (2012, 2). The double perspectival structure of ludic engagement presents us with a way to circumvent this difficulty, allowing for the conception of the player’s sense of being-in-the-gameworld as being the primary dimension of ludic experience, but, at the same time, being bracketed and qualified by its simultaneous capture and textualization from the external perspective.

- *Mode of experience.* It follows from the observations that have been made so far that the mode of experience pertaining to each of the two viewpoints is different: that, in fact, they constitute two simultaneous, interlinked but distinct streams of conscious experience. The internal perspective, through the frame of the game as world, provides the player with *gameworld experience* – as I shall discuss in developing a phenomenology of the gameworld in Chapter 3, this implies having experiences of things in the game against the ground of the gameworld as the world in which they are. At the same time, the external perspective grants the player *artifactual experience* of the game – that is, experience of the game as an artifact, a thing against the horizon of the player-world.

- *Order of experience.* According to the understanding reached by this point, then, the internal perspective determines a subjective process whose mode is that of *doing*, while the external perspective, on the other hand, constructs a subject whose disposition is receptive, and whose task can be understood as a reading or an interpretation. As such, it is evident that the internal perspective frames a first-order, direct experience, while the external perspective captures a second-order experience whose object is the first-order experience resulting from the internal perspective.

	<b>Internal perspective</b>	<b>External perspective</b>
<b>Experiential subject</b>	Ludic subject	Implied player
<b>Knowledge</b>	Situated	Omniscient
<b>Object of perception</b>	Game component	Game object (as a whole)
<b>Mode of actuality</b>	Actual as world	Actual as artefact
<b>Frame</b>	Game as world	Game as text
<b>Mode of experience</b>	Gameworld experience	Artifactual experience
<b>Order of experience</b>	First-order	Second-order

**Figure 2.1** The double perspective of ludic engagement

Given the focus of this investigation as a whole, my primary interest in developing this conceptualization of the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement is in how it determines the approach to the ludic subject. As such, I shall now address this point, explaining in more concrete terms the implication of the fact that the interrelation of the two perspectives allows for a relation to the ludic subject that is at the same time subjective and objective.

#### 2.4.4 *The dual perspectival structure and the ludic subject*

I have already attributed the internal perspective to the ludic subject, insofar as it belongs to an entity existing within the ontic domain of the gameworld. From this, it follows that, from the internal perspective, the ludic subject is not itself viewed as an object of perception. To paraphrase Aarseth (2004a, 138), on a point I shall return to at greater length, the gameworld is seen *through* the ludic subject. The player has an experience of the gameworld, perceives the things of the gameworld as meaningful, and can direct her actions in the service of her existential project within the gameworld, because she has taken on the ludic subject-position as her own.

At the same time, however, the player does not entirely ‘disappear’ into the ludic subject-position: she retains her external standpoint as a player engaging with a game artifact, being, in the act of playing, both ludic subject *and* player. From this external perspective, as I have observed, the game can be perceived as a unified textual or artifactual whole, at a remove from the direct, first-person engagement that characterizes the internal perspective. Moreover, an intrinsic part of this whole is the ludic subjectivity the player has enacted through her engagement with the gameworld from the ludic subject-position that determines the internal perspective. In other words, the same ludic subjectivity which constitutes the player’s gameworld-internal subjective standpoint is itself the object of the player’s perception from the external standpoint.

I have already drawn attention to the fact that the formal structure of the figure game brings to the fore this fundamental distinction between the ludic subject and the player, at the same time as both continue to be perceived, by the player, as ‘I’. There is another point to add: it is that, in one way or another, every figure game provides the player with a representation of her own enacted ludic subjectivity. This is the insight that is hinted at in Ryan’s observation that “players are not only agents but also spectators of their own pretended actions” (2006, 190),<sup>23</sup> and in Emma Westecott’s argument that the screen-based mediality of the videogame means that “the player is always audience to her own play act” (2009, 2). As the example of *Adventure* (Crowther and Woods 1976) with which I introduced this study can reveal, this is true even of games with a non-graphical mode of presentation; the same can also be said, for example, of the verbal account of the player’s actions given by the games master in a session of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

This returns the argument to the point I introduced in section 1.3, namely, that there are two senses in which it is possible to speak of ludic subjectivity: firstly, as a subjective standpoint inhabited by the player in relation to the gameworld, a sense encapsulated by the term *ludic subject-position*, and, secondly, as a distinct identity emerging from the player’s engagement with the gameworld through the frame of the ludic

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, as the conceptualization of the ludic action which I have just performed has made clear, to describe such actions as “pretend” is a distortion of their experiential character. With this qualification being made, however, Ryan’s observation remains valid.

subject-position, an identity we can identify as the *ludic subject* proper. In section 1.5, I drew a parallel between these senses of the ludic subject and Dan Zahavi's distinction between the two senses in which the individual subject can be construed – as a minimal or core self, the first-personal bearer of experience,<sup>24</sup> and the “narrative self” as an identity that emerges *a posteriori*, in the individual's second-order contemplation of her own first-order experiences and actions (2008, 8). In this sense, the mechanisms of ludic subjectivity, and the emergence of self-awareness as a ludic subject in the midst of the gameworld, mirror the phenomenal structures of subjectivity and of being-in-the-world.

However, what is particular in the case of ludic engagement, in the specific form of the figure game, is that this mechanism is explicitly foregrounded through the mediation of a presentation of this subject back to the player – and, moreover, a presentation that is caught up as an element of the game as a signifying textual unity. It is precisely thanks to this double perspectival structure, then, that games have the capacity to formally enshrine an aesthetic mechanism of “autoscopy” - a literal viewing of the self (Mishara 2009). It is not just that I, as a player, play out a ludic subject, an ‘I’ in the gameworld bearing experiences and taking actions I identify as ‘mine,’ but that, at the same time, this ludic subjectivity is textualized and presented back to me, causing me to relate aesthetically to my own lived subjectivity within the gameworld (see Fig. 2.2).

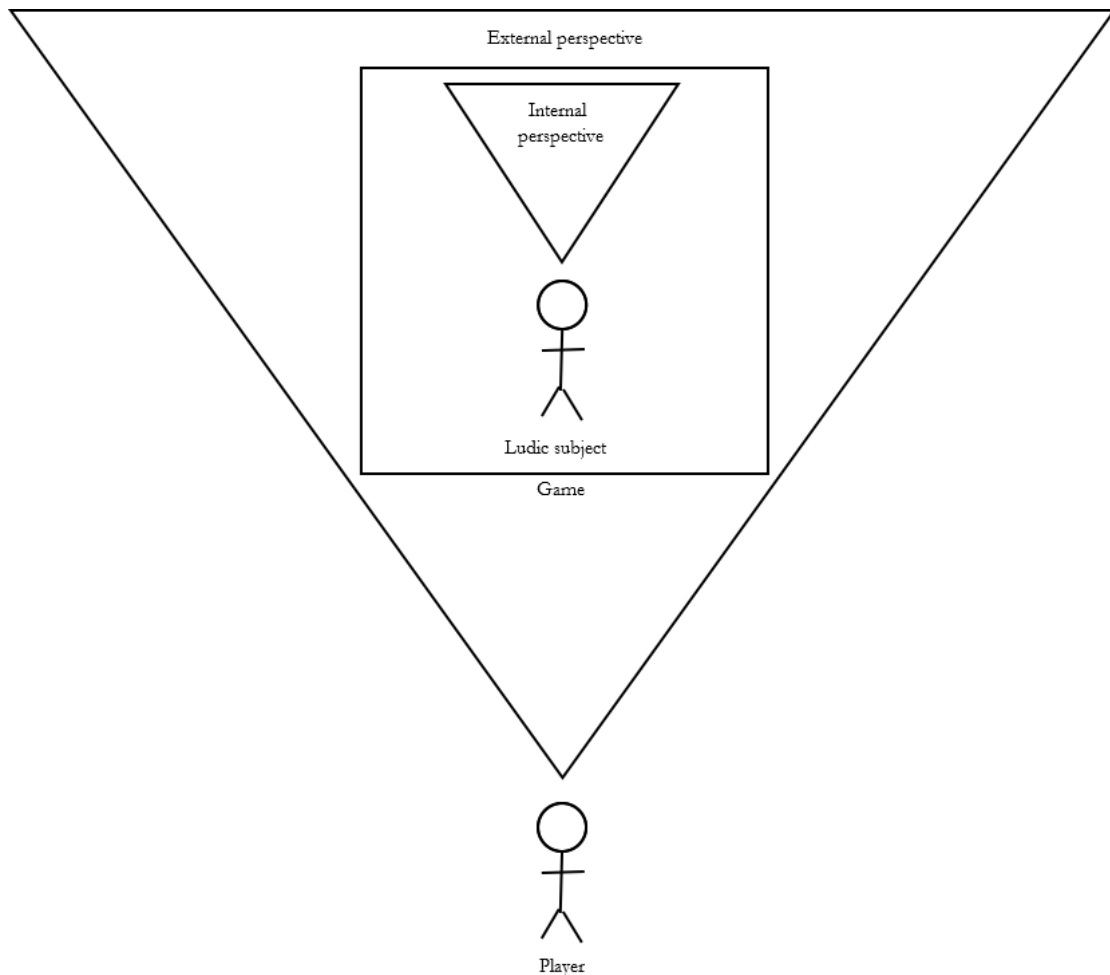
A precedent to this insight can be identified within the field of digital art theory. In developing a poetics of interactive art, Katja Kwastek identifies a dialectic of absorption and aesthetic distance that tellingly reflects the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement outlined in this chapter: the perspective of critical distance, she writes, “is not only possible in the experience of interactive art, but is an essential counterpart to absorption” (2013, 163). Moreover, the conclusion Kwastek reaches on this basis is identical to the point being made here – namely, that “one's own actions become available as an object of reflection” (*ibid.*). The actions performed by the recipient of the interactive art work while absorbed in its mechanisms are inscribed into

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<sup>24</sup> The constitution of the subject in experience, as the first-person ‘I’ to whom the experience pertains, shall be considered in Chapter 4 below.



the aesthetic whole which the same recipient interprets from her position of distance. It is in precisely the same way that the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement results in the possibility for the presentation of the player's own enacted ludic subjectivity as an element of the game's aesthetic unfolding.



**Figure 2.2.** The double perspectival structure of ludic engagement.

## 2.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I began by enumerating the implications that an aesthetic approach bears upon games as objects of study. Four key dimensions of aesthetics as a path towards the art object were isolated as being of special relevance to the investigations to come: that the aesthetic object is a concretization in the recipient's experience resulting from the

encounter with a material object; that the shape of this concretization is determined by the formal specificity of the medium in which the art object operates; that this structure of experience constitutes a formal unity, and invites interpretation as such; that it is related to from a standpoint of disinterested contemplation.

Upon this basis, I then proposed an aesthetic understanding of games founded upon the play-act as aesthetic action, for which two theorizations were tested out. First, the notion that an aesthetic action was differentiated from the general range of actions by virtue of not being directed towards a final purpose was rejected due to its inability to account for ludic actions which are, in fact, geared at achieving an outcome within the game. Instead, an alternative was proposed – that of considering ludic actions as possessing the same teleological structure and qualities of general actions, within the confines of a ludic domain set apart from the player’s everyday lived-world.

While the notion of the play-frame, as suggested by Bateson and Goffman, allowed for an articulation of this basic aesthetic quality of ludic actions, it lacked a framework for speaking of the ontology of the ludic domain, or by extension, of the phenomenology of the player’s experience of it. This necessity of an ontology of the sphere of ludic actions – including the tasks towards which they are oriented, the objects they address, and the horizon against which these appear – led directly to the notion of the *gameworld*, as referring to an ontological domain separate from the player-world within which the ludic significance of the things in play holds as actual.

This led to the observation that a double perspectival structure holds sway over ludic engagement. In engaging with a game, the player is required to take on an experiential standpoint internal to the gameworld. At the same time, the player retains her own standpoint in the player-world, from which the game appears not as an experiential world but as an artifact within the world. Crucially for the purposes of this investigation as a whole, this is the point at which the ludic subject comes into view, as the subjective ‘I’ established for the player within the gameworld that is, both ontologically and experientially, distinct from the ‘I’ of the player’s own identity within the player-world.

I have observed that the games that are the focus of this investigation accentuate this basic phenomenal quality of play in two ways. Firstly, their nature as “games in virtual environments” (Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå 2003, 48; Calleja 2011, 14) provides a ready-made, material distinction between the ludic domain and the player’s actual world. Secondly, the medial structure of the figure game results in a re-presentation of the player’s own enacted ludic subjectivity being presented back to her as an intrinsic element of the game’s textual unfolding, and hence being transformed into an object of aesthetic contemplation.

I have, for analytical purposes, presented the two perceptual standpoints as being entirely distinct. In practice, the distinction is in no way so clear-cut. On a basic level, the two standpoints are united in being both inhabited by the player in the act of engaging with the game. For this reason, on a number of the levels across which I have traced the distinction, there will necessarily be a degree of ‘bleed’ between the two perspectives. This observation is not a liability for the claim that the double perspectival structure is a fundamental quality of ludic experience. On the contrary, it is precisely in this interrelation between the two perspectives that much of the idiosyncratic experiential and aesthetic qualities of games can be identified.

Having made an argument for the necessity of considering games as separate ‘worlds,’ or domains of lived experience, and having traced the implications of this in terms of the double perspectival structure resulting from the player’s simultaneous inhabitation of the gameworld and the player-world, the parameters have now been set for a direct engagement with the fundamental structure of ludic experience. Given the primacy I have already attributed to internal experience of the gameworld, it is this dimension of ludic experience that I shall focus on first; not coincidentally, this is also the dimension of ludic experience that pertains to the ludic subject.





## Chapter Three

### The phenomenology of the gameworld

If the discussion on the aesthetic perspective presented in Chapter 2 can be reduced to a single insight, it is that, in order to understand the shape taken by games as aesthetic objects, it is imperative to investigate their nature in terms of how they are given form in the player's experience. Accordingly, this chapter shall now be dedicated to establishing a conceptual foundation for understanding the structure of player experience of, and in, the gameworld.

This task necessitates an analysis that identifies not only the basic unit of ludic experience, but also the grammar according to which these units combine into experiential unities and, as a result, significant forms, such as that of the 'gameworld'. The approach to player experience I propose to take in this chapter, then, is a radical one, in the sense of being concerned with establishing the basic principles governing ludic experience and underlying higher-level phenomena conceptualized under such labels as immersion, presence, agency, embodiment and incorporation. Shining a spotlight on the fundamental conditions of ludic experience that remain at the level of unexamined assumptions in the latter notions shall allow me, in later chapters, to re-examine these concepts upon a more solid foundation.

The questions I shall tackle, then, are: what is the object of ludic experience? In what manner is this object grasped in consciousness? What is the horizon against which the objects of ludic experience emerge as figures? How are the disparate experiences of distinct objects within the ontological domain of the game united in the form of an experiential world? Who is the subject of experience of the game, as identified as the first-personal pole or 'I' to whom this experience belongs?

In adopting an experiential perspective on games, my epistemological approach is that of "the game as played, as referring to the object of study for game studies from the player's perspective" (Leino 2010, 6). Accordingly, my analysis is heavily indebted to Olli

Tapio Leino's phenomenological account of player experience; however, I shall eventually have to part ways with Leino's project at the point at which he characterizes the player's perspective as a singular *first-person perspective*, which he opposes to the distanced *third-person perspective* of the detached critical observer (2009, 5). Instead, my approach shall be informed by my observation, in section 2.4, that the player simultaneously adopts two distinct subjective perspectives. With an eye to their respective standpoints in relation to the gameworld, I termed these the *internal* and the *external* perspective, and suggested that their duality represents the primary axis of the structure of ludic experience, standing in suspension at every moment of the player's engagement with a game and thereby providing her simultaneously with *gameworld experience* and *artifactual experience*. It is the first of these that is to be the theme of the analysis I am undertaking in the current chapter.

It might be asked what relevance an account of the structure of experience of the gameworld bears upon the investigation of the ludic subject that constitutes this study's primary task. The step, however, is a crucial one, in that the question of subjectivity and that of experience are so closely intertwined as to be, for all intents and purposes, inextricable: it is hard to conceive of a 'subject' except, in one way or another, as the bearer of an experience, and, likewise, an experience without a subject as its bearer is scarcely thinkable. As Dan Zahavi writes, "an understanding of what it means to be a self calls for an examination of the structure of experience, and vice versa" (Zahavi 2007, 5).

Starting upon a consideration of the perception of a thing-in-the-gameworld as the basic unit of ludic experience, I shall draw on the phenomenological notion of the intentional structure of consciousness (Brentano 1973[1874]; Husserl 1973[1900/01]; 2012[1931]), which leads to a conceptualization of experience in which perceiving subject and perceived world are united in the intentional act. This conceptual move will highlight two related paths of analysis in investigating gameworld experience: one leading in the direction of an analysis of the gameworld as a phenomenal world, that is, as it is given structure and meaning in the player's experience, and another which traces a route from gameworld experience to the ludic subject as the first-personal pole of this experience.

In preparation for the turn towards the subject of gameworld experience that this investigation shall trace in later chapters, it is the former path which I shall follow in this chapter. I shall suggest that a phenomenology of the gameworld needs to include three components: the gameworld as a *lifeworld*, the practical world of prereflective experience, the gameworld as a *cosmos*, an ordered sphere of meaning extrapolated on the basis of direct experience, and the gameworld as *earth*, the experiential mark of its contingent materiality. Taken together, these three aspects define the phenomenal structure of the gameworld as an experiential domain, against which, in subsequent chapters, the ludic subject can be thematized as the subject *for whom* the gameworld takes this form in experience.

### 3.1 An intentional structure of ludic experience

In attempting to identify the basic structure of experience of the gameworld, the logical starting-point is that of the basic unit of experience: that is, the single act of perception. The first question that needs to be asked, then, is: what does the player perceive when she engages with a game? Having taken the internal perspective as the focus of the current analysis, the question, put differently, is: what is the object of an act of perception of the gameworld?

On the basis of this perspective, it is evident that the answer cannot be ‘the game’. By way of example, consider a new player of *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) exploring its procedurally-generated landscape. The player does not, during the act of playing, perceive the game of *Minecraft*, in the sense that “*Minecraft*” could be identified as the object grasped by her consciousness - any more than, in my stream of experience of the world, any single act of perception can be identified that has ‘the world’ as its object, rather than one of the things in the world: say, the glass of wine on the table, or the precarious pile of books teetering at the side of my desk.

The reason for this is that my experiences are always already experiences *in* the world, and, as such, take shape against the world as their ground: to have an experience



of “the world”, that is, to form it as the object of a thought, I would need to take a step back from it and perceive it from the outside, which, of course, is impossible except by a transcendental conceptual leap. By the same logic, a subjective standpoint *internal* to the game cannot provide a viewpoint upon the game as a whole, given that it is itself contained within it. I shall again draw a parallel to Wolfgang Iser’s theory of the “moving viewpoint” of the implied reader in literary works, which “travels along *inside* that which it has to apprehend,” and which, as a result, “is, at one and the same time, caught up in and transcended by the object it is intended to apprehend” (1980, 109).

Of course, the double perspectival structure of games means that an external perspective *is*, in fact, enshrined through which ‘the game’ is made available as an object of perception. However, as I have already pointed out, this second-order experience requires first-order experience of the gameworld as its prerequisite, and, as such, it is upon this experiential plane that an investigation into ludic experience must be founded.

### 3.1.1 Perception of things-in-the-gameworld

Although, in section 2.3, I discussed the notion of the a game as representing an ordered unity of play – ordered in terms of spatiotemporal form as well as in the constitution of the system of objects to which it refers – when the player engages with a game, she does not start off by directly encountering the logical layout of an ordered system. However, neither is it accurate to say that what the player consciously experiences is a barrage of audiovisual information delivered through the game’s medial apparatus. Just as in our perception of the actual world, the sphere of perception is prereflectively parcelled out into distinct figures that are *discrete* (emerging as a distinct figure against the undifferentiated ground of perception) and *persistent* (remaining recognizably the same object across the moment-to-moment stream of experience). Perception is “not a passive receptivity [...] but already gives us meaning which is generated through a creative capacity for selection and differentiation” (Coole 1984, 513). As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, “I do not look at a chaos, but at things” (1968, 133). The individual does not first see raw sense data – she is *intuitively* aware of seeing *tree, house, man, car* and so on.

The same is true of the player and her perceptions of the gameworld. Even if she might not, initially, be aware of the ludic significance, or even the basic nature, of any of these objects,<sup>1</sup> she will be conscious of perceptually encountering discrete *things*. Thus, a tree in *Minecraft* can be the object of perceptual focus, as can, in the very next moment, the creeper that emerges from behind it. It is as a set of such distinct objects of perception, rather than as a single, unified entity, that a game appears from the ludic subject-position.

What is framed in each act of perception of the gameworld, then, is a *game component* – an integral element of the game which can be identified, isolated and described as a distinct entity. However, to identify the objects the player perceives as ‘game components’ is to jump the gun. The term already goes beyond the instance of perception of the object – in this case, the *Minecraft*-tree – by attributing to it a significance determined by a top-down frame of reference: namely, the idea of the game as system. Before the object encountered in the player’s experience of the gameworld as a ludic subject can be perceived in its game-systemic significance as a game component, it is, first and foremost, simply that – a thing in the gameworld. What is needed, then, is an approach that allows for an articulation of the structure of the basic experience of a thing-in-the-gameworld, and phenomenology suggests itself as the methodology best suited to this task.

### 3.1.2 *Phenomenology, intentionality, world and subject*

As an epistemological approach to the study of games, the choice of phenomenology is hardly unprecedented. Leino suggests that “looking at games from the player’s perspective can be facilitated by, or perhaps even already implies, a phenomenological orientation towards games” (2010, 95); one can also list Rune Klevjer’s application of the embodied phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty to his studies of avatar-play (2006; 2012),

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<sup>1</sup> Even games whose representations tend towards the abstract – for instance, *Rez* (United Game Artists 2001) or *Antichamber* (Bruce 2013) – usually present the player with a set of clearly recognizable objects; that is, although the player might not even be able to determine precisely *what* a particular object is, she is still able to break the game’s audiovisual presentation down into discrete and persistent objects, rather than remaining at the level of undifferentiated perceptions.

which I shall consider at length in subsequent chapters, and Espen Aarseth's argument for the necessity of considering "the phenomenology of the game object" (2011, 65).

The term 'phenomenology' encapsulates a range of divergent approaches: between Edmund Husserl's transcendental idealist phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, for instance, there are as many radical incompatibilities as points of encounter. What links these disparate approaches under the aegis of a common term is that they all take, as their object of study, the "phenomenon" - the object as construed in experience. *Phenomenology* is "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view" (Smith 2013), a formulation which emphasizes the grounding of phenomenological inquiry in subjectivity.

In this regard, the starting-point of phenomenology as a method is the *intentional* model of consciousness. It should be pointed out that the sense in which the term 'intentionality' is used in phenomenology is different from, and should not be confused with, the notion of 'intention' as it is advanced in the analytic philosophy of action which I drew upon in section 2.2. In its phenomenological sense, *intentionality* is initially put forward in the writings of Franz Brentano, before being taken up as the foundational notion of phenomenology by Husserl. The insight upon which intentionality, as a concept, is founded, is a simple one: every act of consciousness has, as its object, some *thing* which it is about. In Brentano's words:

Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not do so in the same way. In presentation, something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on. (1973[1874], 88)

If I stand in a field and see a tree in front of me, then the tree is the intentional object of my act of perception. Thought cannot but be intentional, in the sense that every act of consciousness must be a consciousness *of* something, that is, have something as its object. A phenomenological analysis of the game as played, then, would proceed in the mode of an interrogation of the way(s) in which the game and its components are intended for the player in the act of playing the game.

It is important to clarify that this focus upon the content of the intentional act does not render phenomenology a purely subjective philosophy. The intentional model of consciousness suggests that it is a basic element of the nature of my subjective being that “I am aware of a world” towards which my being is oriented (Husserl 2012[1931], 51), and defines the subject’s mode of being as a being-in-the world:

I find continually present and standing over against me the one spatio-temporal fact-world to which I myself belong [...] this “fact-world”, as the word already tells us, I find to be *out there*, and also *take it just as it gives itself to me as something that exists out there*. (ibid., 55-6)

Even if the phenomenological approach requires us to bracket the question of the ontological nature of the world,<sup>2</sup> asking instead only how it is constituted in experience, the intentional structure of consciousness not only preserves, but highlights as fundamental the essential connection of the subject to the fact-world in which she experientially finds herself. Paul Ricoeur observes that, for Husserl, “the transcendental subject is not at all outside the world but is, on the contrary, the foundation of the world” (1996, 49). Phenomenology, then, does not isolate “consciousness from its relation to sensible and material phenomena” (Sobchack 1992, 33), which, as much as they are determined by subjective perception, nonetheless relate to (or, to keep to the same parlance, intend towards) their concrete object. As such, though we may bracket any claims as to the objective reality of the world, it remains true to say that “the world is not *in* consciousness but rather is always already extant *for* consciousness that intends towards it” (ibid., 35).

The intentional model of consciousness therefore enshrines not only the mutually determining relation between the intentional object and the subject for which the object is intended – united in the synthetic nature of the intentional act – it also

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Husserl defines the phenomenological method as being dependent upon an *epoché* or “bracketing” (2012[1931], 59) – a setting-aside, not a refutation – of the natural attitude towards things, and a subsequent focus on the experience itself, in all its varying qualities, attributes and modes of givenness. Unlike the radical doubt of the Cartesian *cogito*, however, this is, as Ricoeur notes, “a suspension compatible with certainty” (1996, 88), precisely due to the implication of both world and subject in the intentional act.

serves as a guarantee of both subject and world. An object is intended in every experience; at the same time, “every experience belongs to a subject” (Zahavi 2008, 46). The intentional act, therefore, is fundamentally double-sided: to differentiate its two facets, Husserl coins the terms *noesis* and *noema*. In short, *noesis* refers to the intentional act *as* act of consciousness, while *noema* denotes the object or content of the intentional act (2012[1931], 182-203). Following Jean-François Lyotard:

...we can speak, with Husserl, of an inclusion of the world *in* consciousness, since consciousness is not only the I-pole (or *noesis*) of intentionality, but equally the object-pole (or *noema*) [...] on the one hand, the object is a *Gegenstand*, a phenomenon, leading back to the consciousness to which it appears; while on the other hand, consciousness is consciousness of this phenomenon. (1991, 55)

It is precisely this capacity to thematize the relation of conscious subject to experienced world – via the foregrounding of the intentional structure of consciousness as consciousness *of* – that makes phenomenology the obvious route towards understanding the structure of gameworld experience, and, fundamentally, of the nature of the ludic subject as the bearer of this experience.

### 3.1.3 *The ludic subject-position and the ludic subject*

An intentional understanding of consciousness makes us aware of the object of consciousness in view of the subject for whom it is intended, and for whom, as I shall argue in section 3.4, it exists, as an actuality, in the mode of *facticity* (Sartre 1966[1943], 131). The necessary corollary is that, at the same time, we are also made aware of the subject in relation to the object in its intentional grasp. Husserl emphasizes the nature of the subject (what he terms the ‘Ego’) as a necessary element of the intentional act:

The “being directed towards”, “the being busied with”, “adopting an attitude [towards]”, “undergoing or suffering from”, has this *of necessity* wrapped in its very essence, that it is just something “from the Ego”, or in the reverse direction “to the Ego.” (2012[1913],163)

As Zahavi puts it: “the sensory experience contains two dimensions, namely one of the

*sensing* and one of the *sensed* [...] when we investigate appearing objects, we also disclose ourselves as datives of manifestation, as those to whom objects appear” (2008, 123). It is not enough, then, to ask, *How does the gameworld appear?* It is also necessary to ask, *Who does the gameworld appear to?* Nor is it enough to answer this with, “the player,” given that, as I have argued in section 2.4, the fundamental structure of ludic experience is of a distribution of the player’s subjectivity across two subjective standpoints, resulting in the playing-out of two distinct subjectivities. Since the theme of this current stage of my analysis is the structure of gameworld experience, the subject of the experience in question is the subject to whom a perspective internal to the gameworld has been attributed – that is, to the ludic subject that constitutes the theme of this investigation.

The shape that a phenomenological study of the ludic subject is to take can now be clarified. Such a study shall be concerned with tracing the vectors of intentionality that connect the ludic subject and the gameworld. It shall be sensitive to *which* objects are brought to the fore as distinct figures or objects of perception against the general ground of the gameworld. It shall pay attention to what perspectives the ludic subject-position enshrines upon these objects – and, therefore, what meanings these objects are invested with. Finally, it shall trace these vectors back to their point of origin in the ludic subject-position, identifying the ludic subject as an opening onto the gameworld that, in gathering the gameworld around itself in a particular meaningful form, reveals its own particular character.

### **3.2 The twofold phenomenological structure of subjectivity**

Before this can be accomplished, however, it is crucial to note an additional dimension of complexity to the phenomenological understanding of subjectivity. We have already noted that the relation between subject and the world of experience is a mutually determining one, and that, as a result, “the investigations of self and experience have to be integrated if both are to be understood” (Zahavi 2008, 106). At this point, it is necessary to make the observation that the subject’s phenomenal relation to the world

(and, inseparably, to herself in the world) operates according to a twofold structure. This twofold structure of subjectivity already came into view in section 1.5, when the parameters were being set for a theoretical approach to the question of ludic subjectivity. Now, however, it is time to engage more fully with the nature, and the implications, of this twofold structure of subjectivity. I shall consider the operations of this twofold structure in two directions – in the direction of the subject’s phenomenal relation to the world, and in the direction of her relation to her own subjectivity.

### 3.2.1 *The twofold structure of the subject’s relation to the world*

Husserl identifies a duality in the relation of the subject to the world of experience. The world that is intentionally given “is continually “present” for me, and I myself am a member of it” (2012[1913], 53). It is “*the world in which I find myself and which is also my world-about-me*” (ibid., italics in original). In other words: it is the world of which I exist as a member, as a thing among things, but it is also the perceptual world which extends outwards, organizing itself around my own subjective standpoint as its centre.

Conceiving of the world as my perceptual *world-about-me*, to stick to Husserl’s term, implies adopting a first-personal perspective on the world of experience: I am, before anything else, aware of the world as it exists *for me*, with the sphere of intentional experience extending outwards from my own subjective standpoint at its centre. Thus I experience a thing as near or far, to the left or to the right, big or small, as it relates to the subjective position I inhabit, rather than according to any absolute or objective qualities of the thing itself. And what I see when I direct my attention to an object in the world is not the thing in its objective being, but merely my *experience* of that thing: not a tree, but the view of the tree that is available to me from the point at which I stand, and as it appears in the light of the hour of day in which I happen to be in view of it.

This is what Husserl refers to as the *immanent* character of intentional acts, which describes the fact that “*their intentional objects [...] belong to the same stream of experience as themselves*” (ibid., 71). All we are aware of immanently is the experience of objects – in which both the perceiving and the perceived disappear. At the same time, however, it is

possible, through a reflexive act, to transcend the experience, either in the direction of the perceived object or the perceiving subject. This is not an ‘optional extra,’ but a necessary moment of the phenomenal act that constitutes the means by which direct, present experience is made available to consciousness. As Mikel Dufrenne writes, conscious perception engages in a constant movement “from the lived to the thought, from presence to representation” (1973, 345). A perception can only become one we are conscious of (one that is thought) if it is represented in reflection; at the same time, for an object to be thus re-presented to us, it must first be present to us, in the sense of unmediated, prereflective presence.

This implies a necessary cognitive shift in the form of a transcendence of the first-person perspective in which all experience originates, and the adoption of what can be characterized as a third-person perspective whose reflective distance allows for the possibility of an objective framing of “the world” as a transcendental object of thought – even if this must always be accompanied with the caveat that all such knowledge is the result of a reflective operation, an abstraction on the basis of subjective experience.

### 3.2.2 *The twofold structure of the subject’s relation to herself*

This shift into a third-person perspective also grants an approach to the subject as she appears to herself. In being the ground of the first-person perspective, the perceiving subject is not itself an object of direct experience – Ricoeur writes that the world-about-me, as Husserl conceives it, consists of “everything which in some way *exists for me*, and by its intuitive presence, at the same time *conceals* from me my transcendental and constitutive subjectivity which still functions in this very presence” (1996, 87). In the third-person perspective, however, the subject is, in a sense, objectified, becoming perceptually available to herself. It is no accident that, in the passage quoted above, Husserl defines the world as seen from this third-person perspective as “*the world in which I find myself*”. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “the positing of the object [independently of our perception of it] therefore makes us go beyond the limits of our actual experience,” and this same shift in perspective leads me to “regard my body, which is my point of view



upon the world, as one of the objects of that world” (2002[1945], 81).

This highlights the second avenue by which a twofold structure to phenomenal subjectivity comes into view. Husserl argues that intentional consciousness, in its grasping of the objects of the world towards which its attention is directed, is also aware of the very same grasping: the intentional act of consciousness, “no matter what else it may be intrinsically conscious of, is, at the same time, consciousness of itself” (1969, 273). As such, this is an understanding of consciousness that identifies a twofold structure within every intentional act: “Every experience is ‘consciousness’, and consciousness is consciousness *of*...But every experience is *itself experienced*, and *to that extent* also ‘conscious’” (1991, 91). Or, even more succinctly, “every act is consciousness of something, but there is also consciousness of every act” (ibid., 126).

This is the phenomenological mechanism by which the possibility for self-consciousness – the experience of the self – is established. The duality in the subject’s perspective on the world, in its subjective first-personal givenness and in the objectivity of the detached third-personal act of reflection, is therefore the result of the same twofold structure of the intentional act by which the subject is both the first-personal ground of experience and the object of perception that emerges as part of the intentional act when, in an act of reflection, an intentional act is *itself* taken as the object of a second intentional act (that is, when I reflect about my own thoughts, thereby making my own thinking self the object of my reflective intentional act). This is a point I shall return to in section 8.2.1, in mapping out the phenomenological move between ludic subjectivity as consciousness of the gameworld, and the resulting ludic self as the ‘I’ that is brought into the player’s consciousness as a self-perception.

### 3.2.3 *The twofold structure as applied to games*

This twofold phenomenal structure of subjectivity cannot but find a reflection in an approach to ludic experience. The intentional structure I have used to conceptualize the player’s experience of the game – by which the gameworld and the ludic subject come into view at opposite ends of the vector of intentional experience – already implies a

transcendental leap beyond the pure phenomenal fact of the experience in both directions; as soon as we speak of either the ludic subject or the gameworld as actual entities existing independently of the player's experience, we are already in the third-person perspective.

However, to stop here would be simply to suggest that the normal phenomenological structure of experience applies to the player's experience of the gameworld just as it applies to any other category of experience. While this is undeniably true, it also reveals little about the specific phenomenal character of ludic experience. The claim I wish to make is that, thanks to the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement which I outlined in section 2.4, this general twofold structure of subjective experience is captured by, and enshrined within, the formal structure of the game. It shall be my argument that games enact this twofold structure in a particularly foregrounded manner. Games re-present to the player her own subjective existence in the gameworld, establishing an experiential structure that crystallizes this twofold phenomenal perspective as the governing formal organization of player engagement, thereby not only operating in congruence with the general twofold phenomenal structure I have outlined, but also enshrining this double perspective on the world and the self as a significant aesthetic element.

This, in turn, shall serve as one of the cornerstones of the model I shall propose for the player's subjective engagement with games, insofar as it enables a relation between the player and the ludic subject which I shall define as being simultaneously *subjective* and *objective*. In section 8.2, I shall return to the question of consciousness of the self as it has been tackled in phenomenology, using this as the foundation for an argument that the player's relation to the ludic subject presents us with a foregrounded awareness of precisely this phenomenological mechanism.

First, however, it is necessary to anchor a conceptualization of ludic experience in a rigorously worked-through understanding of direct, first-order experience – that which, within the double perspectival structure, pertains to the internal perspective, and thus to the ludic subject. As the demonstration of the intentional structure of consciousness has

made apparent, such an understanding needs to be the product of two lines of analysis: one investigating the perceiving subject, and the other the perceived world. The first of these – the conceptual analysis of ludic subjectivity – is the overarching theme of this study as a whole, and shall be tackled methodically over the course of the chapters to follow. In order to provide the necessary context for it – by clarifying the opposite pole of intentional experience - I shall, over the remaining sections of this chapter, lay out the multiple interlocking dimensions of the gameworld as a phenomenal world.

### 3.3 The gameworld as lifeworld

Though phenomenology is the study of consciousness, it does not, as I have already observed, frame the conscious subject as a radically isolated Cartesian *cogito*. On the contrary, consciousness is grasped in its engagement with a world it is consciousness *of* – as Ricoeur writes, Husserl’s subject “is not at all outside the world but is, on the contrary, the foundation of the world” (1967, 49). We might even go so far as to reframe phenomenology as the study of the manner in which a perceptual world is established. Husserl explicitly states as much:

Elucidating in their entirety the interwoven [*Ineinander*] achievements of consciousness which lead to the constitution of a possible world – a possible world: this means that what is at issue is the essential form of world in general and not just our factual, actual world – this is the comprehensive task of constitutive phenomenology. (Husserl 1973[1939], 50)

The notion of the ‘world,’ then, is clearly foundational for phenomenology’s grasp of the subject. It is on the foundation of this aspect of Husserl’s thought that Martin Heidegger would go on to define human Being, the particular mode of being that pertains to humanity, as *Dasein* (Being-there), or, even more tellingly, “Being-in-the-world” (2008[1927], 78[H.53]. The mode of existence that pertains to us as sentient beings is characterized by a “*geworfenheit*” (thrownness) into the world (ibid., 174[H.135]): we

cannot choose but be worldly beings, finding ourselves always already, prior to any reflective or critical thought, oriented towards the world we are members of.

### 3.3.1 *World' as the ground of perception*

The world that phenomenology is concerned with, then, is the world as it exists for a subject. However, this still requires us to clarify *what* the world is for a subject: in other words, to identify the formal and experiential structures of 'worldness' as a sphere of intentional consciousness. Husserl offers a clarification we can use as a starting-point: "the World is the totality of objects that can be known through experience (*Erfahrung*), known in terms of orderly theoretical thought on the basis of direct present (*aktueller*) experience" (2012[1931], 10).

This framing reveals a fundamental interrelation of perceived world and perceiving subject, to the extent that one cannot be thought without the other: the world only exists *as* world insofar as it constitutes an experiential unity for a subject, while – given that, for phenomenology, there is no such thing as an empty, or objectless, thought – subjective consciousness can only be thought insofar as it intends the objects of a world. Moreover – as would be rendered more evident by Merleau-Ponty (2002[1945]), and as I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 5 - the subject is not a free-floating consciousness but an embodied one, and it is the body that defines the subject-position around which one's world is perceptually brought into being: "perception is the bodily perspective or situation from which the world is present to us and constituted in an always particular and biased meaning" (Sobchack 1999, 40).

The world, then, is what the subject always finds around herself. It emerges as a synthesis of the subject's individual intentional acts of perception, and subsumes the objects intended by these acts into a spatially and temporally ordered, unified whole (hence Husserl's reference to "orderly theoretical thought" in the above quote), providing the ground by which separate intentional acts can open onto the same, continuous (in both spatial and temporal dimensions) arrangement of objects:

I find myself at all times, and without my ever being able to change this, set in relation to a world which, through its constant changes, remains one and ever the same. It is continually “present” for me, and I myself am a member of it.

(Husserl 2012[1913], 53)

The individual intentional act – which, by its nature, intends one definite object – therefore opens onto the world; but the divide between the object(s) of perception and the perceptual world they constitute is not bridged simply through an aggregation of individual intentional perceptions. It is not the case that the subject first has an intuition relating to an isolated, unworlded object, and then another such intuition, and another, until enough has been intuited to somehow coalesce into a world. On the contrary, from the very start, our experiences are of objects in a world. If I am perceptually aware of the *Minecraft*-tree as it stands before me, I have focused on the tree and isolated it as a discrete object of perception. However, I do not, no matter how focused I am in my intentional gaze, perceive the tree *in isolation*, but always as occupying a particular spatiotemporal location within the *Minecraft*-world. This is not to say that my experience intends the tree and, at the same time, intends the world in which the tree is located as a simultaneous, definite intentional object. Rather, it is an intrinsic aspect of my experience of the tree that I experience it as a thing in the world – Merleau-Ponty terms this the “object-horizon structure” of perception (2002[1945], 79). The subject’s intentional experiences are always already *worldly experiences* – any experience of an object is always an experience of an object-in-the-world, and it is only against the always-already-there ground of the world, as the accretion of prior experiences and knowledge into a broad cognitive field, that an object can emerge to perception as a distinct figure.

### 3.3.2 *World’ as lifeworld*

Having already established the link between individual intuition and world in one direction (by showing how the subject’s intuition of things leads to an intuition of the world), this would appear to also make a case for the reverse: that is, for the idea that intuitions of things are in fact conditioned by their context within the world (or the

specific perspective on the world) as it always already exists for the subject. This is a notion Husserl considers through a modification of the experiential world into the notion of the *Lebenswelt*, or *lifeworld* (Husserl 1970[1936]).

As Zahavi notes, “Husserl’s concept is equivocal, and the precise meaning of the term depends on the context” (2003, 129). At points it seems to refer simply to the first-personal world of direct intentional experience that we have already identified; in this sense, *lifeworld* refers to the world of lived experience, the sphere of perception and of existential praxis within which the subject’s being takes place as a being-in-the-world. At a base level, then, *lifeworld* refers to the *world as lived*, the horizon against which all things gain their meaning within the practices of a lived existence. In experiential terms, this is the primary dimension of ‘worldness,’ in that it refers precisely to the world as it appears as the ground for all experience from what Husserl terms the “natural standpoint” of everyday life (2012[1931], 51). The framing of the gameworld as a lifeworld for the player, then, refers to this basic experiential and existential sense of ‘world,’ which involves the inextricable intermeshing of subject and world that characterizes the phenomenal understanding of consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty writes, the subject, conceived as a being-in-the-world:

...constructs or constitutes this world itself [...] since the transactions between the subject and the things round about it are possible only provided that the subject first of all causes them to exist for itself, actually arranges them about itself. (2002[1945], 431)

It is for this reason that the investigation of the ‘world’ in the phenomenal sense is the necessary first step in arriving at the ‘being’ that has ‘in-the-world’ as its character. As such, the investigation into the game as a lifeworld shall prove inseparable from the investigations into ludic subjectivity that shall take place in later chapters.

However, Husserl also adds a crucial dimension that modifies our understanding of the lifeworld through highlighting its social and historical dimensions (1970[1936], 108-109). This enrichment of the concept accounts for the fact that our subjective understanding of the world is not a product of ‘pure’ intentional experiences (if such a

thing were even thinkable), but is instead shaped by our situatedness – the reference I am making, with this term, to Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of *situation* (1966[1943, 619] is intentional, and will be picked up on in section 5.3.3. The way in which we perceive things – even what things we perceive – is determined by the particular and biased perspective formed by our previous experience, as well as by the social conventions and the historical *episteme* within which we exist.

A mundane example can illustrate the point. I perceive a knife, intuitively and unreflectively, *as* a knife – I do not first have a sensory perception of an object with a certain shape, etc., and then, in reflection, attribute a purpose to it and therefore classify it under the concept of ‘knife,’ but rather intuit it immediately as a knife. However, even such an unremarkable intuition is only possible because ‘knife’ is something for which my lifeworld provides me with a ready concept, placing it in various kinds of relation to other defined things in the world (a relation of shared membership of the ontological category ‘cutlery’ with forks, spoons, etc.; a functional relation to an object such as bread, which it is used to slice, etc.) and thereby locating it within the fabric of the lifeworld.

All of this indicates that, as much as the lifeworld constitutes the prereflective world of lived, first-person experience encountered *out there*, direct, present intentional experience cannot be divorced from the systems of knowledge that give it shape. This requires us to look at another sense of ‘world’ that emerges from a phenomenological investigation of the concept: that is, the ordered, logical system I shall term the *cosmos*.

### 3.4 The gameworld as *cosmos*

It is vital to stress the point that, as the “prescientific world of experience” (Zahavi 2003, 125), the lifeworld is not itself available as an object of thought. It is not an ordered, theoretical abstraction, nor even a distinct perceptual whole around which borders can be drawn. As mapped out by the praxis of prereflective existence, it remains not an intuition, but the background that gives shape and context to our intuitions.

At the same time, it is certainly possible for me, for instance, to think to myself, “What a wonderful world” – which implies an intentional act which intends the world (as object) for me, as a distinct thing which has the quality of being wonderful. This is already enough to reveal the fact that the world can, itself, become the object of a reflective act, thereby being granted shape, form and quality. It also hints at the necessary shift into a reflexive, third-person perspective that implies a detachment from the first-personal stream of lived experience – a point I have already discussed in considering the twofold structure of subjective experience. In short, what I am judging here as “wonderful” is my *experience* of the world, from which, in making it the object of a reflexive intentional act, I am detached.

But an objective grasp of the world does not stop at merely attributing this or that quality to it. Rather, what it represents is the possibility to move into the register of ontology. Taken to the extreme, it results in the positing of a *cosmos* – which, traced to its ancient Greek root as *κόσμος*, refers to “a complete, integrated system of phenomena governed by some coherent scheme of rules” (Nash 1987, 8).

Such is the shape taken by the ‘world’ if it is represented as an object of thought, that is, as the object of an intentional act in itself, rather than as the ground for the perception of a thing-in-the-world. How can such an intentional representation of the ‘world’ be achieved? In order to answer this question, I shall return to a point of Husserl’s which I have already drawn attention to – namely, that the world emerges as a distinct figure only through “orderly theoretical thought on the basis of direct present (*aktueller*) experience” (2012[1931], 10). Direct, first-personal experience of the world, bearing the intentional structure I have laid out in the analysis of the perception of the thing-in-the-world, is primary: the world as *cosmos*, as an ordered, meaningful sphere, can only be given to the subject by means of “orderly theoretical thought” working on the raw material of direct, first-order experience of the world. *Cosmos*, then, emerges in a transcendental leap from the experiential lifeworld in which it is rooted.



### 3.4.1 *Cosmology as an ontology*

The *cosmos* is a closed set – a complete, bounded arrangement of constituent entities. Moreover, these entities – and the relations between them – are governed by a unifying principle of order or *logos*.<sup>3</sup> Such, for instance, is the world as it is framed by science, where, at the limit point, everything can eventually be reduced to an explication in the language of physics. Such is also – to stick to a philosophical register – the ‘world’ as understood as a conceptual entity within analytic philosophy, where the notion of *cosmos* comes to the fore (Lewis 1986).

A cosmic representation of the world – that of science as much as that of religion or myth – has little to do with the world of lived experience, claiming to describe a more fundamental order of reality. However, it is in the nature of the *cosmos* to shape the lifeworld against which it sets itself. As Zahavi notes, “science is founded on the lifeworld, and will sink down into the ground it is standing on [...] theoretical assumptions are assimilated into daily praxis, becoming part of the lifeworld” (2003, 130). If my scientific knowledge has led me to include bacteria and other germs within my cosmic understanding of the world, for example, I am likely to be suspicious of the water of a clear mountain spring I encounter while walking, even if it appears perfectly clean and no germs are given to me in direct intentional experience. In such a case, the nature of my direct, first-order intentional experience of the spring water – as ‘potentially dangerous’ rather than ‘clean and safe’ – would have been shaped by my cosmic understanding of the world.

This suggests a more complicated perspective on the relation between lifeworld and *cosmos*: it is not simply a case of the lifeworld being represented as *cosmos*, but, at the same time, *cosmos* is what shapes the experience of the lifeworld: “in order to conceive an object one must rely on a previously constructed ‘world of thought’” (Merleau-Ponty

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<sup>3</sup> It should not escape attention that this notion of *cosmos* aligns with the understanding of the artwork under the “representative regime of art” as defined by Rancière (2009). In section 2.1.3, I made the observation that, under this regime, the artwork is both the product and expression of a *logos* that serves as its organizing principle. A cosmic understanding of world and of the artwork, then, are closely linked, as shall become more evident when we move on to a consideration of the *heterocosm*, or the world of the artwork.

2002[1945], 158). I have addressed the lifeworld as primary, and the point needs to be stressed: in constituting *that which is immediately available to direct intuition*, the lifeworld is the world *for us*, the world we encounter as ‘world’. At the same time, at the moment when a reflective distance is taken from our first-person experience of the world and a *cosmos* established in order to explain that world of experience, this *cosmos* sinks back into, and becomes inextricable from, our lifeworld as experienced.

‘World,’ then, is revealed in its essential paradox. It encompasses both the closure and totality of the ordered system and the openness of the indefinite ground, both *cosmos* and *lifeworld*. More accurately, it is what emerges in between the two: both the existential sphere mapped out through the prereflective praxis of being-in-the world *and* the formally ordered sphere of transcendental reflection. Cosmos and lifeworld are, in fact, interlinked, and should be thought of in unison, two sides of the same coin.

#### 3.4.2 *The interpretation of the gameworld*

If direct experience of the gameworld, as resulting from the player’s existential praxis as a ludic subject within it, coalesces into the form of the lifeworld, and if, following the phenomenal mechanisms I have just outlined, it is by an interpretative movement founded upon this direct experience that a cosmology can be arrived at, then the next task that presents itself is that of accounting for the operations of such an interpretative movement in relation to the player’s lived experience of the gameworld. In other words: by what process does the player’s subjective experiential engagement of the gameworld lead her to form transcendental, objective knowledge of the gameworld?

In the development of the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement in section 2.4, it became apparent that the move between the internal and the external perspective implied, on one of its levels, precisely such a shift between a worldly perspective on the game (a perspective we have now concretized into the notion of the game as lifeworld) and an artifactual perspective according to which the game is understood as a bounded object with a defined structure and formal properties – one, moreover, that can be approached textually. Torben Grodal’s distinction between the

perspective of the “game as an experiential route” and that of the “game as a map or system” (2003, 144) is particularly indicative here: the move between the two is accomplished through the player’s drive towards mastery, in the sense of total knowledge obtained through play.

As such, tracing the move toward a cosmic understanding of the gameworld requires a theory built around Espen Aarseth’s observation of a “real-time hermeneutics” at work in games, consisting of “analysis practiced as performance, with direct feedback from the system” (2003, 5). This has been the starting-point for a number of approaches towards a hermeneutics of games (Arjoranta 2011; Karhulahti 2012). The most rigorous development of the idea, however, can be found in Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron’s proposal of a heuristic “magic cycle” of ludic engagement (2009, 113). The development of the model starts with the observation that, at a radical level, ludic engagement can be understood as a feedback loop, a notion they trace across a number of earlier writings (Crawford 2003; Heaton 2006; Cook 2007). In short: the player perceives the game’s audiovisual output and, on this basis, builds a mental model of the inner workings of the game; acting upon this model, she then provides her input to the game, which, in turn, generates new audiovisual output, which gives her more information about the game, which allows her to improve her mental model and provide better input, and so on.

Arsenault and Perron frame the magic cycle as consisting of three interlocking heuristic spirals. The first, and primary spiral is that of *gameplay*: this relates to knowledge of the game system itself (2009, 115-117). Second, the *narrative* spiral describes the player’s piecing-together of information regarding the game’s diegetic (or, to retain the term I have been using, heterocosmic) dimension. Finally, the *hermeneutic spiral* refers to the player’s efforts to interpret an overall thematic significance to the experience of the game – it is telling that the example Arsenault and Perron provide is the same reading of *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984) by Janet Murray (1998, 144) that, as I noted in section 2.4, was also discussed by Markku Eskelinen (2001) and Sebastian Möring (2013, 229).

The hermeneutic spiral, describing, as it does, a textual mode of engagement, relates to the artifactual dimension of ludic experience associated with the external perspective, and, as such, I shall not tackle it at this juncture of the investigation. The first two spirals, on the other hand, are embedded in gameworld experience – as Möring notes, they describe “a kind of existential hermeneutic which is concerned with being in and coping with a world in a Heideggerean sense,” and which, as a result, “does not make the process of playing its object but *is* the process of playing the game” (ibid., 305). Two directions in which gameworld experience can open onto a cosmic understanding are thereby revealed in the gameplay and narrative spirals – firstly, in the direction of the understanding of the gameworld as operating according to an underlying game system, and, secondly, in the framing of the gameworld as a window onto a heterocosm or represented textual world. I shall not cover these in detail – each could be the basis of an investigation of much greater scope than the current one. However, given that both of these are essential to understanding not only ludic experience, but also, as a consequence, the ludic subject, I shall present a brief summary of how the player’s lived experience of the gameworld is interpreted into, and, in turn, is shaped by, these two cosmological frames.

### 3.4.3 *The gameworld and the game-system*

The notion of games as systems represents arguably the dominant line of thought in discussing the ontology of games within game studies. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argued that “all games can be understood as systems” (2004, 50), with *system* being defined as “a set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole” (ibid, 55). A distinct analytical paradigm has emerged within game studies that takes up Salen and Zimmerman’s suggestion and adopts a perspective according to which, as Miguel Sicart observes, “formal [game] analysis is understood as descriptions of game components that can be discerned from others by means of their unique characteristics and properties”

(2008) – a representative, but by no means exhaustive, list would include Zagal et al. 2005; Consalvo and Dutton 2006; Bogost 2006;<sup>4</sup> and Järvinen 2008.<sup>5</sup>

While these game-ontological approaches present us with a way of conceptualizing the gameworld as an ordered system, they do not account for the cognitive processes by which direct gameworld experience can open onto such an understanding. The gameworld is not intended in the player's direct consciousness of it in the form of such a system. As noted in section 3.1.1 above, the perception of the thing-in-the-gameworld is the basic unit of gameworld experience which any phenomenological account must take as its starting-point. Extending such a phenomenology in the direction of a cosmic understanding of the game-as-system requires an answer to the question of how the player takes the leap from a cognition of the thing-in-the-gameworld, such as the *Minecraft*-tree and the *Minecraft*-creeper, to a conception of these things as components of an overarching game system.

I shall proceed by way of an example. As her first night in *Minecraft* falls, a novice player might see a creature approaching to which she cannot yet give the name 'creeper'. Given the fact that the player always brings a ready-made set of preconceptions and expectations to bear upon her experience of a new game, she is likely, at first sight, to make a set of assumptions regarding this entity. The zombielike appearance of this strange creature – again, drawing on the player's pre-existing familiarity with the genre of zombie fiction in general, and the appropriation of this generic iconography by

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<sup>4</sup> I must justify the inclusion of Bogost's theory within a roll-call of systemic approaches to game analysis when it is in fact explicitly positioned as an alternative (and a corrective) to such approaches. In contrast to existing perspectives that subsume the individual components – or "units", in Bogost's term – to the operations of an overarching system, Bogost argues that our perspective should be bottom-up rather than top-down: "unit operations are modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (2006, 3). However, the extent to which this constitutes a break with the systems-theoretical approach to game ontology is perhaps overstated, and seems to imply more of a shift in focus than a radical ontological overhaul: there seems to be little to separate Bogost's description of the text as a set of discrete units from Salen and Zimmerman's framing of the game system as being composed of "a set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole" (2004, 55).

<sup>5</sup> In the form of "proceduralism," the game-ontological approach has also encroached onto what Arsenault and Perron would identify as the domain of the hermeneutic cycle, insofar as the approach of proceduralism which takes the game-ontological understanding as its ground frames the systemic ontology of games "not just as an ontological marker of computer games, but as the *specific* way in which computer games build discourses of ethical, political, social and aesthetic value" (Sicart 2010).

videogames in particular (Backe and Aarseth 2013) – is likely to mark its belonging to the category of entities in the gameworld that can be grouped under the label ‘enemy’.

According to her expectations of how ‘enemies,’ as a general category of game components, function in games, the player thereby supposes that this creature poses a threat, but also that it can be fought and destroyed. More specifically, applying the paradigm of ‘zombie’ nuances this preconception, suggesting what kind of an ‘enemy’ this entity is going to be in terms of its patterns of behaviour – which appears to be corroborated by the player’s observation of its slow movement and relentless, straight-line march towards her.

Having just crafted herself a basic wooden sword, the player might decide to test out these hypotheses by running up to the creature and attacking it with her sword. Here, the player will find some of her preconceptions confirmed: for instance, she perceives, on the basis of visual feedback that, again, she is able to interpret in the context of her pre-existing knowledge of videogame conventions (the strange creature flashes red for a brief span of time after being hit), that her sword-swings are causing damage to the strange creature. At the same time, she might be surprised to find that other expectations are not met: namely, that the creature, initially, does not appear to retaliate. In the next moment, then, something happens for which the player’s preconceptions did not prepare her: namely, the strange creature explodes, catching the playable figure in its blast radius and resulting in a great deal of damage being dealt.

The player might be lucky enough to survive the encounter, albeit with a severely depleted health bar. Following the structure of the heuristic feedback loop of Arsenault and Perron’s gameplay spiral, it can be said that the player’s action – that of engaging the creeper in melee combat – has resulted in extremely negative feedback; nonetheless, this feedback is instructive. On the basis of this encounter, the player redraws her conception of the creeper as a game component – that is, of the role it plays within the game system. Retaining its categorization as an ‘enemy,’ her understanding of the creeper-as-game-component will include the fact that it detonates if in close proximity to the player, that, as a result, it is best avoided or engaged with ranged attacks, and so on.

Of course, to make a point which might sound obvious, but which is nonetheless crucial, game-systemic interpretation can only happen against the background of the player's preconception that what she is seeing is in fact governed by an underlying game system. I shall give an example from *Protens* (Key and Kanaga 2013). While wandering the landscapes of *Protens*' gameworld, the player will encounter a variety of creatures: flocks of chicken-like birds, gatherings of crabs, and so on. At this point, the player, expecting some form of consequence to these creatures as game components – perhaps granting a collectible item or some other form of reward if caught, or, at the very least, giving some visual feedback to being interacted with – the player is likely to attempt to interact with these creatures. She might, for example, try walking up to them, chasing them, or standing in their proximity. Eventually, however, she will be forced to conclude that the creatures are of no relevance to the game system of *Protens*. However, the expectation that the creatures *should* afford some kind of interaction – that there should be some game mechanic related to them, or that they should have some form of significance in the game system – is not something that is suggested by the creatures themselves, in their phenomenal appearance as things-in-the-gameworld, but is the result of the presumption that there *is* in fact a game system, and that all the objects and entities encountered in the game should be members of this system, subsumed to its logic.

The notion of the 'game component,' then, accounts not only for the shape that the thing-in-the-gameworld is given when direct, first-order experience of it is worked upon through the interpretative frame of the game-as-system, but also, in the opposite direction, for the way in which this cosmic understanding is recaptured within the gameworld-as-lifeworld. To return to the *Minecraft* example, once the player has, based upon her direct experience of one or more creepers, interpreted a particular game-systemic understanding of the creeper, she is likely, upon encountering more creepers in her further engagement with the game – in Arsenault and Perron's parlance, in further iterations of the heuristic gameplay spiral - to frame her perceptions through her understanding of this game component, and to shape her behaviour towards it accordingly.

At the same time, there is also a danger attendant upon the attempt at incorporating the notion of the game as system into a phenomenology of the gameworld – this is what might be termed the *representational fallacy*. By this understanding, the gameworld comes to be taken merely as a surface representation to be ‘read through’ in order to arrive at a glimpse of the underlying system. A link can be made between this position and Jesper Juul’s argument that the game’s representational dimension (what Juul calls, problematically, its “fiction”)<sup>6</sup> plays the role of making the game system comprehensible to the player (2005, 163). Kristine Jørgensen makes a similar point when she says the gameworld is:

...the interface between the player and the game system and for this reason is also a representative of the game system [...] The gameworld integrates the abstract game rules into an environment where they may be contextualized spatially, and it allows the player to think about the game in terms of a rule system. (2013, 57)

However, such a Platonism of the gameworld is not compatible with an epistemological focus on the game as played. At the basis of the player’s experience of the gameworld *as* world is the fact that the things of the gameworld appear to her precisely *as* things with which she shares a world. Since it is never the game system *itself* which is framed as the intentional object of the player’s act of perception, it is only on the basis of a second-order, transcendental deduction on the basis of lived experience of the gameworld that such a game-systemic understanding can be posited. As such, given that it is the first-order perception of the game-as-lifeworld that constitutes the primary dimension of the player’s experience, the cosmology of the game-system can only form part of a phenomenology of the gameworld in a way which does not frame it as superseding first-order experience of the gameworld, but, rather, allows it to be reincorporated into the lived experience of the gameworld upon which it was, in the first place, established.

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<sup>6</sup> Recall here the point made in section 1.5 – and also raised by Aarseth (2014a) that it is a mistake to equate a game’s representational dimension with fictionality, when it can equally be used for documentary or otherwise non-fictional representation.



Such an understanding is also what allows for the linking of multiple cosmic frames of reference in the common denominator of the player's gameworld experience. The player's intuition of the *Minecraft* creeper will, as I have noted, inevitably be shaped by her understanding of it as a game component operating within the logic of a game system; but, since it is the perception of the orc as a worldly entity that remains primary, this perception can also admit to other significations. As such, it is time to move to the other cosmic frame through which the gameworld can be interpreted – that of the game as a heterocosm.

#### 3.4.4 *The notion of the heterocosm*

The link between the notion of *cosmos* as an ordered, formal sphere, and that of the textual heterocosm is a crucial one. Marie-Laure Ryan suggests that for the “semantic domain” of a text to cohere into a world, it needs to be perceived precisely in the form a *cosmos* (2001a, 91). Christopher Nash has noted the extent to which conventional, mimetic poetics in the Aristotelian tradition depend upon precisely such a notion of the textual world as a *cosmos* (1987, 8).

It is this understanding which defines the notion of the *heterocosm*. The idea was first introduced in the writings of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, where it referred to situations in which the artist's act of “secondary creation” veered away from representation of the “primary world” and towards the construction of a markedly different new world (1954[1735]). Later critics, particularly in the field of literary theory, have extended its usage to refer to any textually-established ‘second nature’, no matter what truth-claim it makes or refuses to make in relation to the actual world of experience (Abrams 1971a; Ruthven 1984; Doležel 1998; Ryan 1991; 2001a).<sup>7</sup>

Theorizations of the textual heterocosm have emphasized its *cosmic* character – that is, in the words of the Earl of Shaftesbury, the fact that the world of the text “forms

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<sup>7</sup> Here, we can trace a line back to Cicero's claim that, through the imposition of work upon the world, “by means of our hands we essay to create as it were a second world within the world of nature” (1933, II.60, 271) – and indeed an alternative term for the same phenomenon within literary criticism is “secondary world” (Tolkien 1964; Auden 1968). I choose to privilege the term *heterocosm* over this alternative because it avoids the subordinating ontological hierarchy implicit in the usage of the word “secondary”.

a whole, coherent and proportioned in itself' (1773, I, 207). Even more explicitly, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe suggested that the artwork "creates a little world of its own, in which all proceeds according to fixed laws, which must be judged by its own laws, felt according to its own spirit" (1845, 122).<sup>8</sup> Just like the game system, then, the heterocosm, contained as it is within the text by which it is upheld, is met with the expectation that its disparate elements cohere into a meaningful whole according to the conventionalized rules of narrative, representation and form,<sup>9</sup> and that the heterocosm constitutes a comprehensible unity for the recipient of the artwork.

As a basic point, it is in the nature of the heterocosm that it is a *textual* world, and, as such, it is "accessed through semiotic channels" (Doležel 1998, 20). Upon this foundation, attempts at setting up ontologies for textual worlds, such as that proposed by Thomas Pavel (1986), have expressed the position that such worlds can be understood as being constituted of a set of textual propositions. The reader's understanding of, for instance, the heterocosm of Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (2011[1983]) is generated through the gradual accumulation of factual propositions about that world. For example:

1. Alice Drablow lived in Eel Marsh House.
2. Eel Marsh House stands at the end of Nine Lives Causeway.
3. Nine Lives Causeway is only usable at low tide.

...and so on. It should be immediately evident that calling such an accumulation of textual propositions a 'world' implies some form of major cognitive – not to mention

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<sup>8</sup> In this light, Kristine Jørgensen's assertion that gameworlds cannot be equated to the worlds established by narrative texts because the former "follow the logics of specific game mechanics" rather than accurately representing the physical laws we recognize as pertaining to the actual world (2013, 60) comes to seem particularly dubious.

<sup>9</sup> This is of course not to say that this expectation cannot be frustrated by works that refuse to adhere to this understanding of the coherent heterocosm. Nash has highlighted a tradition of what he terms "anticosmic" literature, typified by the works of Samuel Beckett and Alain Robbe-Grillet, which pointedly refuse to engage in the establishment of a coherent textual domain (1987, 98). An interesting project for future work would be that of attempting to identify games operating in a similar anticosmic mode, that is, breaking down the expectation of an ordered *cosmos* they themselves establish. One might be tempted to think, for instance, of sequences in games such as *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment 2001), *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights 2002) or *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady Studios 2009) that are specifically coded as 'hallucinations' (incidentally a point which I shall return to in section 7.2.8, in establishing 'character perspective' as a dimension of the ludic subject-position as the perspective the player is granted upon the gameworld), and in which the order of the game's *cosmos* is temporarily suspended.

ontological - leap. *The Woman in Black* tells us nothing about its world outside of precisely three geographical loci – the manor house Monk’s Piece (its precise location is never specified), London and the market town of Crythin Gifford. Even these locations are hardly presented in minute and complete detail. As a world, then, the heterocosm is ontologically limited - both in the sense of occupying restricted bounds, and of not being mapped, even within these narrow confines, in maximal detail. This makes textual worlds, to quote Umberto Eco, “‘small worlds’ which bracket most of our competence of the actual world and allow us to concentrate on a finite, enclosed world, very similar to ours but ontologically poorer” (1994, 85).

However, it is in the nature of the heterocosmic work to establish a fundamental distinction between its own textuality and the heterocosm upon which it throws open a window. As Ryan writes:

...the text is apprehended as a window on something that exists in time and space well beyond the window frame. To speak of a textual world means to draw a distinction between a realm of language, made of names, definite descriptions, sentences and propositions, and an extralinguistic realm of characters, objects, facts and states of affairs serving as referents to the linguistic expressions. (2001a, 91)

In the reception of the work, the heterocosm extends beyond the limited view the work provides: the landscape goes on beyond the frame of a painting, things happen in between the chapters of a novel, and so on. The recipient is always an active interpreter of the heterocosm: to make the world of *The Woman in Black* appear *as* a world on the basis of the scant information presented above, the reader needs to fill in the gaps, by drawing on her knowledge of the real world, as well as of the cultural and generic contexts within which the work locates itself (Ryan 1991, 54) – in the case of *The Woman in Black*, the Edwardian ghost story. This requirement that the recipient fill in the gaps resulting from the nature of the text as a “mixture of determinacy and indeterminacy” (Iser 1980, 24) renders the heterocosm a particularly foregrounded example of Roman

Ingarden's point regarding the status of the aesthetic object as a "concretization" of the artwork in the mind of the recipient (1985, 93).

Ryan frames this concretized heterocosm, in its reception, as having four dimensions: "connected set of objects and individuals; habitable environment; reasonably intelligible totality for external observers; field of activity for its members" (2001a, 91). The first of these dimensions, *connected set of objects and individuals*, can be taken to relate to the ontology of the heterocosm insofar as it delineates it as consisting of a defined set of existents. The second and fourth dimensions, meanwhile, draw upon a phenomenological perspective in explaining the senses in which this set of existents can be perceived as a 'world' from an internal perspective. Finally, the third dimension describes the cosmic character of the heterocosm when perceived from an external perspective, that is, in the mode of textuality.

Aarseth draws a connection between such conceptualizations of the textual heterocosm and the worlds established by games, arguing that "games and stories seem to share a number of elements, namely a world, its agents, objects and events" (2012, 2). Just like the interpretation of gameworld experience into a cosmic understanding of the game-as-system, then, achieving a heterocosmic viewpoint upon the gameworld is the result of attaching a specific domain of significance to the things encountered in gameworld experience, taking each experience as a proposition regarding a represented world and filling in the gaps as required in order to concretize a heterocosmic domain.

An important observation to be made is that, although both 'game as system' and 'game as heterocosm' are ordered *cosmoi* that take root in direct experience of the gameworld, the terms are in no way coterminous. One way of framing the distinction between the heterocosmic and the game-systemic senses of the gameworld has been to think of the two as inherently separate, albeit potentially overlapping, spaces. In this vein, Juul argues that "a video game may project a world and the game may be played in only a part of this fictional world" (2005, 163). Aarseth writes that "a game can contain *two types of space, the ludic and the extra-ludic*, the arena of gameplay, and the surrounding non-

playable space” (2012, 3). Jørgensen, similarly, argues that “the fictional world of a game must always be considered larger than the gameworld” (2013, 69).<sup>10</sup>

In all these cases, the picture that is painted is one of a central core of ludic space surrounded by an indeterminate fringe of ‘merely’ represented space, with the separation and organization of the two being entirely a matter of spatiality. The paradigmatic structure of such a bifurcated model of the ludic space would follow the lines of, for example, a 2D platform game such as *Super Mario World* (Nintendo 1990), where the single, two-dimensional plane of gameplay is shadowed by multiple parallax-scrolling layers of background scenery that give the represented heterocosm (but *not* the virtual environment) an implied three-dimensionality.

However, such a rigid spatial distinction is untenable: the ‘merely’ represented can infuse the virtual at every level. Aarseth observes of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Gray Matter 2001) that the gameworld includes both doors that can be opened and walked through (in other words, that are modelled as elements of the game system), and doors that are only textures on the wall (that is, in a manner of speaking, only pictures of doors) (2007a, 3). While this might appear to be a small detail, it is in fact indicative of a fundamental ontological duality of the gameworld: once we start noticing such ‘merely’ represented elements in the gameworld, and using an analytical razor to sever them from the properly virtual, it is hard to know when to stop, or upon what level of granularity to operate. The door that opens, for example, is virtual, or to use another phrase Aarseth employs, “simulated” (ibid.), but the wood-grain texture on it (and, by extension, the door’s ‘woodenness’) is only represented – meaning that the door will be just as impervious to explosives as the concrete wall surrounding it. Moreover, though only the first door can be considered part of the game system, the doors have equal ontological status within the heterocosm.

Instead of attempting to draw boundaries, then, it is more accurate to consider ‘game as system’ and ‘game as heterocosm’ as superimposed ontological frames. Through

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<sup>10</sup> I shall again make the observation that it is more accurate in this situation to speak of ‘representation’ rather than ‘fiction.’

the frame ‘game as system,’ one door is figured as an actual entity, while the other recedes into the background; through the frame ‘game as heterocosm,’ both are actual doors, one unlocked, one locked. It is upon such a conceptualization of the relation between the two that they can be integrated on the level of direct lived experience of the gameworld.

#### 3.4.5 *Integrating the systemic and the heterocosmic framings of the gameworld*

Contrary to the possibility of such an integration, game scholarship has tended to portray the two framings of the gameworld as standing in opposition. This has been evident as early in the history of the field as Thomas W. Malone’s distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* fantasy in computer games (1980, 56), as well as Gary Alan Fine’s suggestion that the tabletop role-playing activity could alternately be keyed through a “gaming frame” or a “fantasy frame” (1983, 205).

The problem with such an argument is that it succumbs, again, to a representational fallacy. Just as the understanding of the game as system that is relevant to ludic experience is not one in which the perceived thing-in-the-gameworld becomes transparent in the direction of the game component it represents, the heterocosmic frame should not be brought to bear upon gameworld experience in a way that renders it a mere prop in a game of make-believe (Walton 1990).

In other words, the opposition of game system to ludic heterocosm is one which occurs at the level of second-order experience. However, to return to the plane of first-order experience of the gameworld, which is that upon which this investigation is taking place, is to find that these two dimensions are not as experientially distinct as this conceptualization would suggest. Writing in the context of an analysis of *Resident Evil Code: Veronica X* (Capcom 2003), Susana Pajares Tosca argues:

Once the game starts, we work at two levels [...] Our mind is busy with the plot level and the action level at the same time. The first one, that we experience on the fly, can be narrated afterwards (it is *tellable*) and makes sense as a story

(complete with character motivation and feelings); the second is about solving action problems. (2003b, 211)

Crucially, she adds, “when we say that both levels are “active” in our minds at the same time, we don’t mean that they are as clearly separated as here” (ibid.). A different way of stating this would be to say that, in the internal perspective – from the point-of-view of the ludic subject – the game system and the heterocosm both shape, and are experientially united in, the gameworld as lifeworld.

As an example, consider the fact that, at higher difficulty levels, a number of missions in *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass Studios 1998) place a restriction upon the player: that of not murdering any civilian witnesses, or, in some cases, that of not murdering anyone at all, and using only non-lethal takedown methods. The significance of this in terms of the game system is clear: as an artificial restriction upon the affordances available to the player, it adheres to the understanding that the imposition of “less efficient means” is one of the essential characteristics of games (Suits 1990, 54-55). It would be easier for the player to complete the mission by using lethal force – say, using an arrow to kill a witness before they can raise the alarm, or bring out a sword when cornered by a guard. Restricting these options increases the challenge by forcing the player to use more difficult methods of achieving her goal: for instance, instead of killing the witness with an arrow, she might have to time a series of dashes between shadowy alcoves just as the witness looks the other way in order to escape unnoticed.

And yet, this explanation of the events in question, without the support of the heterocosmic frame, is inadequate. To state the obvious: even the basic distinction between lethal and non-lethal methods of incapacitating a non-player character represents a departure from purely ludic signification. For the term ‘murder’ to even be comprehensible in this context, it is necessary to maintain the pretense that this game component before us is a representation of a human individual in a represented world, and that certain ludic actions performed upon this game component in order to change its state represent murder while others - such as using a blackjack to deliver a blow to the back of the head - represent ‘mere’ non-lethal violence.

It is amply clear that ‘game as system’ and ‘game as heterocosm’ are not to be understood as alternatives, but as complementary interpretative frames that can be brought to bear upon the player’s gameworld experience. Both imply a second-order artifactual framing of this experience and, as such, a stepping-back into the external perspective; however, at the same time, both also bleed back into, and determine, the form the game takes as a lifeworld for the player, which remains the primary dimension of ludic experience. While choosing which sniper rifle to equip during a mission in *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007), a player might decide on the Naginata rather than the Equalizer, on the basis that, while the Equalizer has a higher damage rating, the Naginata’s higher accuracy rating makes it more effective in use. For the same mission, the player might have opted to choose Liara as one of her two squad mates out of the range of possible party members, taking this decision purely on the basis that she likes Liara as a character and enjoys her company. In analytical terms, the first decision can be said to be taken through the frame of the game as system, while the second is taken through the frame of the game as heterocosm. In practice, however, both are decisions taken on the experiential plane of the game-as-lifeworld. On this plane, ludic and extra-ludic considerations intertwine within the network of significations and motivations that give shape and meaning to the existential sphere to which the player relates from the standpoint of the ludic subject-position.

Lisbeth Klastrup writes that games:

...conjure up a fictional universe that we take as a reference point for the understanding of our actions within the world (killing a dragon is interpreted as the act of ‘killing a dragon’, not as the continuous clicking of the mouse on some darkly-coloured pixels). Hence, what we do as avatars is not interpreted as events with real-world “value” or reference, on the contrary, our actions are interpreted as meaningful within the given universe which, during the act of playing, serves as the actual world reference to us. (2003, 102)

As Rune Klevjer notes, the suggestion here is that “it is not the actions that *project* a fictional world (through interpretation), but it is rather the fictional actual world that



makes our actions meaningful in the first place” (2006, 71). I would argue with the use of the notion of ‘fiction,’ which, as I have pointed out, is not a necessary complement of the heterocosm, and which also risks distorting the fundamental insight that is to be gained here. In Chapter 2 I made the point that a ludic action is, first and foremost, an action in the general sense, or, to put it differently, a ‘real’ action pertaining to a ‘real’ sphere of action. It is only thanks to the top-down demarcation of this sphere as an ontic domain in its own right that the ludic action is keyed as ludic, and as thereby having an aesthetic or representational, rather than practical, significance. This is the structure that both of the cosmic frames I have outlined – the game as system and the game as heterocosm – fit into, *contra* the representational fallacy operating in the direction of either frame. Just as the understanding of the game as system is not something to be extracted from the player’s experience like a seed from a husk as the ‘true meaning’ of a game, it is not the case that the player brackets her actual experience of the gameworld as a means of supporting a heterocosmic reference – as a prop in a game of make-believe. At the fundamental level of ludic experience, which is that of direct gameworld experience, both frames serve to structure the lifeworld, as a sphere of experience and of action, constituting the domain of the game, granting specific meanings to what the player perceives and to what she does.

### **3.5 The game as ‘earth’**

I have discussed the lifeworld as the world as it is given in direct, first-personal experience: it is, in fact, characterized precisely as the world as constituted *as* a world for the subject, that within which my being is a being-in-the-world. I have also considered the *cosmos* as referring to a representation of the world as an ordered system, born, in a transcendental movement, out of a reflective operation upon the initial experience of the lifeworld – while allowing for the fact that, as soon as it is established, the cosmos then comes, in turn, to colour and shape the lifeworld.

There is, however, a third sense of ‘world’ that phenomenology brings to our attention, one which shadows the lifeworld and acts as its foundation just as the ordered system of the cosmos is superimposed upon it. Recall how, in the discussion on the lifeworld, the point was made that it does not constitute an aggregate of pure, unconditioned intuitions, but is itself already the product of an (unconscious) process of worldmaking. It already presents some form of order, and is already a figure emerging against a ground: which leaves us with the question, what is the nature of this ground?

### 3.5.1 *Husserl and the limits of the perceptual field*

That there is a necessary coefficient of the unknown and the occluded to any act of worldmaking in the phenomenological sense was something that Husserl understood. He argues that “what is actually perceived [...] is partly pervaded, partly girt about with a *dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality*” (2012[1931], 52). This is apparent in two directions, as is made evident in Husserl’s usage of both ‘depth’ and ‘fringe’. To start with the latter: let us take the simple intentional act of perception of a mundane object, say, a teaspoon. In focusing our attention on the teaspoon, the saucer on which it rests, if we are aware of it at all, is relegated to background in our perception. Should I shift my intentional focus to the saucer in order to perceive it – and hence bring it into my lifeworld – the surface of the table on which the saucer rests still remains at the border of my perceptions: should I then focus on the table, the tiles of the floor, the surrounding café tables, and the rest of the scene will continue to provide an indeterminate ground that sets off the clarity of this intentional perception. Thus, though the horizon can be pierced, to some degree, by “the illuminating focus of attention”, the sense of that which remains stubbornly at the bounds of perception, shadowing but excluded from intentional consciousness and the lifeworld, remains: “the misty horizon that can never be completely outlined remains necessarily there” (ibid.).

The second dimension in which this is true is even more radical. In grasping the object at hand and saying, “This is a teaspoon,” one specific quality – its adherence to the idea of a spoon, its *teaspoonness* – is brought to the fore, and its place in the lifeworld is

determined by the relations this quality positions it in with regards to other objects: the teaspoon belongs to the same ontological category as the knife in the earlier example, it can be picked up and used to stir coffee, etc. At the same time, any other qualities of the object itself, such as its metallic texture, its weight or its reflective quality, are obscured. At the risk of oversimplification, one can say that what remains concealed is the *materiality* of what is perceived, in the sense of the sheer, undeniable actuality which grants it an independence and an ontic status which, going beyond our experience of it as an element of the world-for-us, makes it intrinsically ungraspable in thought.

What is being spoken of here is an intrinsic dimension of worldness in the phenomenal sense – as such, what is at stake is still a dimension of experience, not a supposition regarding what might lie beyond it: there is no Kantian positing of an unknowable domain of noumenal things-in-themselves ‘beyond’ their phenomenal appearance. Instead, this dimension of worldness, just like the cosmic aspect of the world, is one that exists in a constant relation to the lifeworld as the primary domain of experience.

### 3.5.2 *Heidegger and the opposition of ‘world’ to ‘earth’*

The clearest philosophical elaboration of this aspect of worldness can be found in Heidegger’s distinction between what he terms “world” and “earth”. Here, “world” is used – very similarly to Husserl’s later development of the notion of the lifeworld – to describe the meaningful sphere that constitutes the subject’s existential *locus*, the ‘there’ in the “Being-there” (*Dasein*) that is the essential character of human existence. As such, it stands in explicit contrast to the “earth” – the material substrate which is the ground against which the world emerges as a meaningful figure, but which by its continuing existence threatens the stability of the world:

The world grounds itself on the earth and the earth juts through the world [...]

The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to raise the earth completely [into perception]. As self-opening, the world cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into

itself and keep it there. (Heidegger 2004[1936], 174)

In Heidegger's terms, then, the world is not the totality of objects that actually exist, but the totality of what has been brought forth into "unconcealment" (ibid., 161), that is, a configuration of only those objects, and, again, only those aspects and attributes of those objects, which are revealed through the practices of *Dasein*'s existential project. The world, then, is the ordered sphere that is constantly in the process of being brought forth by consciousness out of the undefined ground of the earth, a humble, tightly fenced-in circle of consciousness against a horizon of the unconscious (literally, that which we are not conscious of). So much so, in fact, that consciousness can be understood precisely as this activity of constantly establishing and maintaining its own world, through the bringing of things into conscious perception (or, in Heidegger's term, unconcealment). But this lived (hence experienced) world – though it is what the subject's being is oriented towards, that which is directly 'grasped' in intentional consciousness – continues to be shadowed by the sense of what remains unconcealed, and must, therefore, exist in an ongoing dialectical relation with the 'earth,' which is only "perceived and presented as that which is essentially undisclosable" (ibid., 172).

Finally, it is no accident that the language Heidegger uses to speak of this concealed primordially is that of hard materiality: earth and rock. What this aspect of 'world' recognizes is the sheer basic fact of an encounter between the conscious subject and a material realm that stands apart from her, as Other: an encounter across a chasm which intentional consciousness struggles to bridge, in a gesture which sets the foundation for the lifeworld.

### 3.5.3 *The difficulty of materiality in games*

The introduction of the phenomenological notion of the 'earth' as a shadow underpinning the lifeworld and the ordered cosmos therefore leads to a foregrounding of the question of materiality in relation to the gameworld. Keeping in mind that this investigation's prevailing epistemological perspective remains that of the game as played, it is crucial that materiality is considered only in the manner in which it is intended in the

player's experience: any other perspective would be irrelevant in terms of an engagement with the phenomenal character of the gameworld.

Of course, in a way it seems strange to attribute great significance to the material dimension of the ludic domain. I have already remarked, in Chapter 2, upon Eugen Fink's distinction between the "piece of material and wire" that the doll is in material terms and the child it constitutes from a perspective internal to the play-world (2012[1958], II). Taken to its logical conclusion, this idea takes the form of Juul's argument that an understanding of games as "a rule-based formal system [...] does not tie games to any specific medium, and games are therefore *transmedial*" (Juul 2005, 6-7).

Leino, however, makes the case that materiality plays a pivotal role in the player's experience of the videogame, and transmediality arguments, which might be valid for other categories of games, do not hold here. The reason for this is that while with – for instance – chess there is an external, codified frame of reference to which a given material manifestation can be compared, there is, in most cases, no such pre-existing conceptual object against which the accuracy of a videogame component as a technologically material object can be judged: as a result, it is the object itself that must act as its own yardstick. Leino's example serves to highlight this point:

...no matter what I think about an NPC [non-player character] in [*Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010)], the NPC will remain on my screen as an NPC attending to NPC business, traceable down to materiality; pixels on the screen, memory register allocations, current fluctuations on the motherboard, quarks, strings, *etc.*, [...] To explain an NPC as the NPC, there is neither place nor need for "rules" in between process and materiality: both process and materiality are firmly rooted in data. There is no "material" NPC separate from the NPC-in-the-process-of-play like there is the red piece of plastic separate from a hotel in *Monopoly* [...] materiality and process are weaved together so tight that from the player's perspective they are inseparable as the run-time behaviour of the software. (2012)

The conclusion Leino arrives at is echoed by Graeme Kirkpatrick, who similarly argues that videogames should be understood “in light of their properties as plastic objects that are physically manipulated” (2011, 17). However, in opposition to Leino and Kirkpatrick, I shall stress an observation made by Arsenault and Perron:

When [...] the gamer finds out that an enemy in *Quake* (Id Software 1996) will always appear from the left, he still only witnesses the repetitive result of the computer’s response to his action. He does not, per se, discover the game’s algorithm which remains encoded, hidden and multifaceted. (2009, 110)

In short, “the gamer never has access to the game’s algorithm under the surface” (ibid., 123). Leino is correct to say that, in the absence of an external frame of reference, the game component is defined by the *complete set of observable properties* it possesses as an intentional object. However, he goes on to state, as we have seen, that “from the player’s perspective they [the observed properties of the game component] are inseparable as the run-time behaviour of the software” (2012). Clearly, there remains a chasm between the complete set of observable properties of a game object and the computational materiality underpinning these properties – requiring, in Husserlian terms, a transcendental leap from the player’s immanent intentional experience to an ontological claim. In taking this leap, then, Leino unwittingly leaves behind the perspective of the game as played.

#### 3.5.4 *The actuality of the game component and facticity*

In disentangling the phenomenal game component from its materiality – computational or otherwise – one should not make the mistake of turning it into an entirely subjective construction. The danger is that of succumbing to “ludic solipsism” (Leino 2010, 81) – that is, to the idea that, unfettered from any material constraints, play becomes a freewheeling, unbounded mental activity, taking as its raw material pliant conceptual objects that, having no existence outside the player’s consciousness, maintain no intersubjective verifiability.

Ludic solipsism, however, is far from the essential character of play. Even if Fink dissociates the child that the doll stands for in the play-world from the material object

representing the child, he also notes that “the play-world is not suspended in a mere realm of thought; it always has a real setting [...] it necessarily requires real things in order to have a foothold in them” (2012[1958], II). The things of the gameworld are possessed of *actuality*, which identifies them, not as mental objects, but as objects to be encountered *out there* amongst the things in the world. In this way, Fink argues, “playing is always a confrontation with beings” (ibid.). Recall the point made in section 2.1.1 that, although the object of aesthetic contemplation is to be identified with the concretization in the mind of the recipient, the foundation for this concretization remains the encounter with an actual object: precisely the same is true of the phenomenal game object.

Since it is the notion of *actuality* that has now revealed itself in its centrality, I shall pause upon the significance of the term. The notion of *actuality* I am drawing on here is the indexical definition outlined by David Lewis, which I have already discussed in section 2.4: briefly, for something to be *actual* means for it to exist *in fact*, but the determination of this actuality depends on the intending subject *for whom* a thing is actual, and the worldly standpoint this subject inhabits: something is actual if it exists *in the world from which I speak* (1973, 69).<sup>11</sup>

A thing-in-the-gameworld is actual from the perspective of the game as played: another way of saying this is that the ludic subject-position is that which, through granting the player an experiential standpoint internal to the gameworld, renders these gameworld as an ontic domain actual for her, and allows her to relate to it directly. The *Minecraft*-tree represents an actual affordance; the *Minecraft*-creeper constitutes an actual danger. The actuality of the game component, then, is a direct coefficient of the ludic subject-position.

For this reason, if we are to speak of a foundational materiality of the gameworld, it needs to be a purely *ludic materiality* that we have in mind, as a concept that refers to the pure fact of the actuality of the game component in all of the aspects and properties (and *in only* those of its aspects and properties) which impact upon the player’s existential

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of the indexical definition of actuality is taken up by Ryan in her examination of the mechanism of subjective “recentering” in relation to textual worlds (2001, 103). I shall return to this point in Chapter 4.

praxis as a ludic subject. In the case of games in virtual environments, a computational materiality underwrites every detail and property of every component of the game system – not to mention keeping a total and infallible record of every action undertaken by these components and change in state which might result in any of them, or in the game system as a whole, as a result of these actions. This is Leino’s point when he writes that “the game artefact [...] has the ability to change its material properties as a consequence of my actions” (2010, 129). It is also the reason why Aarseth stresses the ontological reality of game objects and actions, falling back on Philip K. Dick’s definition of ‘reality’ as “that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away” (Aarseth 2007a, 1). While playing *Minecraft*, I cannot argue over how much redstone I have in my inventory – at least, no more than I can argue over how much money I have in my wallet. Any time I wish, I can check my inventory, and if I only find two units of redstone in my inventory, it is no use my insisting on believing there should be twenty – the game is still only going to let me actually use two.

To understand the phenomenological implications of this, let us recall that Husserl characterizes the world as that set of things which are “*for me simply there* [...] whether or not I pay them special attention” (2012[1913], 51), gathered in consciousness into a “fact-world” which “I find continually present and standing over against me” (ibid., 55). I have already shown how Leino uses this undeniability as the justification to laminate the phenomenal game component to its computational materiality, arguing that there are no grounds for insisting on a distinction between the two. However, as I argued, this approach faces the problem of being divorced from the player’s perspective.

The notion of ludic materiality, conversely, provides us with an understanding of the thing-in-the-gameworld that links its ontological nature directly to the player’s ludic subjectivity, in a relation of mutual determination: the actuality of the game component emerges only in relation to the ludic subject, which, in turn, is only determined in relation to the set of actual game components. Following Sartre’s existential phenomenology, this can be conceptualized as the *facticity* of the gameworld as a contingent actuality constituting the ludic subject’s *situation* (1966[1943], 131), thereby laying the ground for



the formation of the gameworld as a meaningful world of subjective experience. It is here that we begin to grasp the nature of the *ludic subject* as the subjective being – the *being-for-itself*, in Sartre’s term (ibid., 120)<sup>12</sup> that emerges in relation to the facticity established for it by the system of game components, and that, through the intentional experience and existential praxis rendered possible by this factual situation, gathers these components around itself in the form of a meaningful world. A consideration of the actuality of the ludic materiality of the game as object has therefore led us inexorably to a consideration of the individual subject for whom this material actuality constitutes a facticity and an existential situation: it is, in fact, precisely this facticity that establishes the conditions by which the ludic subject can exist as a subject.

### 3.6 Conclusions

Following on from the identification, in the previous chapter, of the dual perspectival structure of ludic experience, the aim of this chapter has been that of fleshing out the notion of the internal perspective as the experience of the game as a world. I began by taking the player’s perception of a thing-in-the-gameworld as the fundamental unit of ludic experience. According to an intentional understanding of consciousness, this perception was revealed to be open in two directions: in its reference to a perceiving subject and to the world which is the domain of the subject’s experience.

Upon this foundation, the notion of ‘world’ as it is articulated in phenomenology was outlined into three distinct senses, in order to set up a framework upon which to develop a notion of the gameworld as an experiential world for the player. First, and most fundamentally, ‘world’ was considered in the sense of a *lifeworld*, the prereflective world which in which we always already are, which is the ground of all perception and which represents the basic sphere of experience against which an existential praxis can be played out.

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<sup>12</sup> Sartre’s fundamental ontological distinction between *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*, as well as the notion of facticity, will be discussed at greater length in section 5.2.1.

Second, the notion of *cosmos* was introduced to account for the idea of the world as an ordered schema of phenomena – an understanding which is the result of a second-order reflective operation upon direct experience of the lifeworld. I argued that the two cosmic frames available to the player are those of the game as system and of the game as heterocosm. Both are rooted in lived experience of the gameworld, and constitute complementary frames of interpretation. Crucially, while both can only be grasped through a second-order reflective turn upon direct experience of the gameworld – and, as such, are associated with the external perspective – the resulting interpretations will sink back into the player’s experience of the gameworld, shaping it into new forms.

Finally, Heidegger’s notion of ‘earth’ was used to conceptualize the continuing presence of the material contingency upon which any notion of the world is founded, but which resists inclusion within the order of a ‘world.’ This contingency was taken up as the support for the actuality of the things in the gameworld, manifesting in the form of a ludic materiality which is taken up in the player’s experience as the factual situation against which her efforts gain meaning.

At the basis of all of these phenomenological senses of ‘world,’ however, is the presupposition that all of them relate to the world *in which* the experiential subject is. The phenomenal world is a lived world, encountered in the mode of being-in. In the next chapter, I shall therefore turn to an examination of precisely this sense of being-in-the-gameworld. In demonstrating the importance that this phenomenal character of gameworld experience has been granted, I shall follow a path through the notions of *focalization, immersion, presence, agency* and *recentering* as they have been articulated in the game studies discourse, thereby paving the way by which, in Chapter 6, I shall be able to deploy a phenomenology of the body in order to consider the playable figure as the ontic anchoring for the ludic subject within the gameworld.



## Chapter Four

### The sense of being-in-the-gameworld

By this point in the investigation, the idea of the ‘gameworld’ has been unfolded into its multiple senses as it emerges in the player’s experience. In Chapter 3, I discussed the ludic materiality of the game insofar as it represents a factual situation for the player, thereby providing the foundation upon which an experiential world can be established. I also surveyed the hermeneutic mechanisms by which first-hand perception of the gameworld in this first-personal experiential sense is transcended in the understanding of the game as an ordered *cosmos* – as computational system and as represented, textual heterocosm – which, in turn, sink back into, and shapes, the lived gameworld. Crucially, all of this has been framed through an awareness of the complex, dual perspective inhabited by the player in relation to the gameworld, which is consequently grasped both as a lifeworld gathered around an internal perspective, and as an ordered, textual whole from an external perspective.

This chapter is now poised to pick up the argument at a crucial juncture. It is the aim of this study to attempt to understand the nature of the entity within the gameworld that the player identifies as ‘I’ within the gameworld, and to map out the relationship between this ‘I’ in the gameworld and the ‘I’ outside it – or, in the terms we have since established, between the *ludic subject* and the *implied player*, as formal elements of the game’s aesthetic structure. Already, in Chapter 2, we began to glimpse a clearer idea of this in-game ‘I’. The internal perspective that establishes the phenomenal conditions making it possible for the player to experience the game as an experiential world is dependent upon the player’s taking a perspectival standpoint *within* the gameworld. This standpoint – which I have termed the *ludic subject-position* – is not simply a geometric point defining the player’s co-ordinates within the game space, although it is also that; as I shall argue in Chapter 6, it is to be understood in a wider sense, as formally enshrining the

attitudes and relations the player is to adopt towards the gameworld. Furthermore, the ludic subject-position implies the entity I have termed the ludic subject, a subjective interiority played out in the course of the player's engagement with the gameworld from the point-of-view of the ludic subject-position. It is the 'I' that emerges as the first-personal pole around which the accretion of the player's experiences of the gameworld can be bestowed with the unity of a subjective identity.

Against the background of the formal structure of ludic experience and the multi-dimensional understanding of the gameworld which have been developed in earlier chapters, this chapter is poised to begin the approach to the ludic subject through a consideration of the fundamental sense of being-in-the-gameworld that is the precondition for ludic experience to take the form of experience of a lived world. The question that shall be addressed here, then, is: *What does it mean for the player to 'be' experientially in the gameworld?* It should be stressed that, up to this stage, the investigation is still operating on the level of phenomenology: what is at stake here is not yet the ontology of the player's being within the gameworld, but rather her *experience* of being in the gameworld.

I shall approach this question by means of an engagement with a set of interrelated terms that have been used to conceptualize this dimension of player experience. Opening with some remarks on the question of perspective and point-of-view in heterocosmic representation, I shall pause upon the notion of *focalization*, tracing its origin and deployment in the field of literary theory (Genette 1980; Bal 1980; Margolin 2009), before highlighting its application to the discussion of perspective in games (Neitzel 2002; Nitsche 2005; Arjoranta 2013). From here, I shall move on to a consideration of the terms *immersion* (Murray 1998; Ryan 2001a; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Thon 2008), *presence* (Lombard and Ditton 1997; McMahan 2003) and *telepresence* (Minsky 1980; Steuer 1992; Taylor 2003). Following Gordon Calleja (2011), I shall argue these terms overlap to a great degree and, despite granting significant insights into what it means for the player to be in the gameworld, ultimately prove unsatisfactory for the purpose of conceptualizing this experiential structure. I shall then consider the notions of

*agency* (Murray 1998; Mateas and Stern 2005; Wardrip-Fruin et al 2009) and *recentering* (Murray 2001), which, from separate directions, will reveal the necessary foundation of the sense of being-in-the-gameworld in the player's ontic inhabitation of the domain of the gameworld. This will then allow me, in Chapter 5, to move on to the next stage of the investigation, in which, through the theoretical frame of embodied phenomenology, I shall examine the role of the playable figure in the establishment of ludic subjectivity.

#### 4.1 Subjectivity, perspective and the heterocosm

In a number of crucial ways, the ludic subject-position, as a formal construct, builds on aesthetic structures related to the construction of subjectivity and the determination of perspective deployed in non-ludic heterocosmic works. Of course, this should not be surprising – videogames, as cultural objects, draw on the techniques and formal structures of other media, even to the extent that it might be better to conceive of them as “integrated crossmedia packages” that incorporate film, text, music and visual art as well as games (Aarseth 2012, 2). In this regard, it is helpful to contextualize a theory of the ludic subject-position as a perspective upon the gameworld within a wider view of the matter of perspective as it pertains to heterocosmic representation.

##### 4.1.1 *A noetic mode of presentation*

Inevitably, a heterocosmic work in whatever medium not only establishes its textual domain, but also enshrines a specific perspective (or set of perspectives) upon it – it is, after all, impossible to think of a world that is represented from *no* perspective. This is true even of works that adopt the approach of “illusionism” (Belsey 1997[1985], 664), which describes the work that attempts to conceal its own perspectival stance.

Conversely, other heterocosmic works embrace the capacity to present, not simply representations of objects, but representations of perceptions of objects - put differently, of associating perceived textual objects with a perceiving textual subject, united in the representation of the intentional perception. As Carl Friedrich Graumann notes, “the

‘subject-object relationship’ merges into the perspective way of representation” (cited in Iser 1980, 38).

Though the terms most often used to discuss this phenomenon – terms like *perspective*, *point of view* or *focalization* – employ a visual metaphor, the first point to make is that, in Vivian Sobchack’s words, “the mathematical term *point of view* must be broadened and grounded – literally and empirically *incorporated* and *lived* as a “situation of being”” (1992, 81). We might, to frame this discussion within the phenomenological method guiding this study, speak instead of a *noetic* mode of heterocosmic presentation, to suggest an understanding of the signified being not the objects and events constituting the heterocosm, but these objects and events as intended within the *noesis* or intentional acts appertaining to a conscious heterocosmic subject.

Broadly speaking – and bracketing the cases where the perspective that is established is one that occupies a standpoint external to the heterocosm – there are two strategies that can be adopted in this regard. The first approach is for a perspective to be established which is attributed to the recipient of the work, while the second strategy is for the heterocosmic work to recapture the perspective of its representation within the structures of the represented *cosmos* itself, by attributing it to one or more of the individuals inhabiting the heterocosmic domain. Both of these, in a sense, invite the recipient into the heterocosm; either by granting her her own viewpoint upon it, essentially making her an honorary member of the heterocosm, or by inviting her to share that of a heterocosmic individual.

The distinction between these two approaches is not as clear-cut as it may appear, and they might, in fact, be best understood as two sides of the same coin, either of which might be emphasized in a given work. The establishment of a heterocosmic perspective that the recipient is invited to adopt requires the attribution, on some level, of an ontological status to the bearer of the experience within the heterocosm. Conversely, a perspective associated with a heterocosmic individual distinct from the recipient – that is, with a character – will nonetheless be a perspective through which the recipient gains access to the heterocosm.

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to offer an exhaustive engagement with either the history or the theory of perspective in the various medialities of heterocosmic presentation. As such, I am not aiming for a comprehensive survey, but only highlighting a set of insights against which the specific character of the sense of being-in-the-gameworld can be compared and contrasted. With this aim in mind, I shall briefly consider three forms of heterocosmic subject-positioning, each of which will be contextualized by means of a relevant example, and each of which will reveal an insight that will shed light on the formal mechanisms underpinning ludic subject-positioning. Firstly, a reflection on perspectival presentation in painting, framed through the case of Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas* (1656), will serve to illustrate how the formal establishment of a phenomenal standpoint for the viewer to inhabit in relation to the heterocosm simultaneously sets up a heterocosmic subject that is distinct from the viewer. Secondly, an engagement with the notion of *focalization* in literary theory will highlight the possibility of representing the phenomenal consciousness of a character within the heterocosm – this will be contextualized by means of a passage from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Finally, I shall pause upon the cinematic convention of the subjective point-of-view shot, which shall serve to bring into focus the tension between the perspective of the heterocosmic subject internal to the represented world and that of the viewer perceiving the mediated representation of this perception.

#### 4.1.2 *Painting and the viewer's perspective*

Oliver Grau argues that, in addition to its representative function, an image also has a second meaning: a “constitution of presence” which establishes “the quality of apparently being present in the images” (2003, 14). This is a point Marie-Laure Ryan expands upon with specific reference to the geometric techniques of perspective:

...projection opens up a depth that assigns spatial coordinates – the center of projection, or physical point of view – to the body of the spectator. Perspective painting immerses a virtual body in an environment that stretches in imagination far beyond the confines of the canvas. From its spatial point of view the



embodied gaze of the spectator experiences the depicted objects as virtually present, though the flat surface of the painting erects an invisible wall that prevents physical interaction. (2001a, 3)

Perspectival representation thereby establishes a phenomenal structure which implicates the viewer as a presence within the perceptual field it establishes:

In a perspective scheme the eye is the point toward which all the objective lines converge. Thus the perceptive field refers to a center objectively defined by that reference and located *in the very field* which is oriented around it. Only we do not *see* this center as the structure of the perceptive field considered; *we are the center*. Thus the order of the objects in the world perpetually refers to us the image of an object which on principle can not be an object *for us* since it is what we have to be. (Sartre 1966[1943], 419)

In the Western art canon, Diego Velázquez' painting *Las Meninas* (see Fig 4.1) represents perhaps one of the most striking – and one of the most thoroughly examined – examples of this form of subject-positioning: standing in front of it, the viewer finds herself interpellated, her presence acknowledged, wherever she looks. Firstly, a number of the figures in the courtly scene depicted in the painting – Velázquez himself, in self-portrait, and the Infanta Margarita, the princess whose figure constitutes the focal point around which the elements of the composition are arranged – gaze outwards, their lines of sight converging at the point occupied by the viewer in front of the picture. In his gloss on the painting, Michel Foucault writes:

From the eyes of the painter to what he is observing there runs a compelling line that [...] runs through the picture and emerges from its surface to join the place from which we see the painter observing us; this dotted line reaches out to us ineluctably, and links us to the representation of the picture. (1970, 4)

Nor is this the end of *Las Meninas*' interpellation of its viewer. A mirror hangs on the chamber's far wall, prominently located at the precise centre of the painting. Not only does the mirror establish yet another “compelling tracer line, joining the reflection to that which it is reflecting” (ibid., 10) – it does this in a particular way. The image the viewer

sees reflected in the mirror is not her own – rather, the mirror throws back to the viewer an image of two individuals: King Philip IV and Mariana of Austria. What this establishes, Foucault argues, is a reciprocity of perceived scene and perceiving subject:

The face reflected in the mirror is also the face that is contemplating it; what all the figures in the picture are looking at are the two figures to whose eyes they too present a scene to be observed. (ibid., 14)



**Figure 4.1:** *Las Meninas* (Diego Velázquez, 1656, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid)

The position in which the viewer is placed is not only one of visual perspective determined by the intersection of geometric lines. It is also a position that interpellates a very particular subject at its *locus*, one who stands as a model to Velázquez-in-the-painting and as a parent to the infanta. The viewer is aware that this subject is herself, but that it is

also *not* herself: that it is, in fact, the king, and that it is in his position that she stands, and through his eyes that she sees the scene.

Here, the line between the two strategies of the heterocosmic perspective that I outlined above is blurred. Though it is the viewer herself who is placed in a geometric relation to the heterocosmic space of the painting thanks to the establishment of a perspectival standpoint in purely visual terms, this standpoint is also identified as belonging to a heterocosmic individual distinct from the viewer. As a consequence, it is not only a matter of the viewer being granted a presence within the heterocosmic domain – or, in Sartre’s terms, that the viewer’s body becomes the perceptual centre around which the heterocosm is gathered as a world – but also, at the same time, that the viewer identifies this perspective, which is her own, with a heterocosmic individual, and, hence, as *not* her own, even if she inhabits it in the act of perceiving the represented milieu.

#### 4.1.3 *Focalization in literature*

That the matter of perspective or subject-positioning is similarly inherent to literary narrative is clear: “the sentences of a text are always situated within the perspective they constitute” (Iser 1980, 114). The literary notion of point of view becomes concrete in opposition to that of point of narration, to which it is often erroneously linked. To prise the two apart, Henry James introduced the notion of the “reflector” to refer to the character who is the one who *sees* (1972[1908], 247), not the ‘speaker’ of a first-person narration but the object of a third-person narrative whose perspective the reader is made privy to.

This distinction between “who sees?” and “who speaks?” in the literary text is more systematically developed in the work of Gérard Genette through the notion of *focalization* – a neologism coined in response to a perceived need for a better term than “point of view” or “perspective,” primarily in order to avoid the “too specifically visual connotations” of these terms (1980, 189).<sup>1</sup> As Genette understands it, focalization

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<sup>1</sup> Along the same lines, Genette also argues that it is more accurate to phrase the question as “Who perceives?” rather than “Who sees?” (1988,64). It is, of course, debatable how far

primarily refers to a “restriction of field” (ibid.) in terms of what information is made available to the reader and what remains, so to speak, unseen. It occurs in three fundamental modes: *non-* or *zero focalization*, in which the narrating voice grants the reader more information than is available from the perspective of the protagonist, as is typical of the “omniscient narrator” of the classic realist novel; *internal focalization*, in which the information presented to the reader is filtered through the consciousness of the protagonist; and *external focalization*, in which “the hero performs in front of us without our ever being allowed to know his thoughts or feelings” (ibid., 189-190).

It is what Genette terms internal focalization that is most relevant to the purposes of this investigation. In this regard, it is pertinent to note Genette’s observation regarding the difficulty of locating a ‘pure’ internal focalization: “the very principle of this narrative mode implies in all strictness that the focal character never be described or even referred to from the outside, and that his thoughts or perceptions never be analyzed objectively by the narrator” (Genette 1980, 192). As such, the only theoretically unadulterated examples of internal focalization are those which can broadly be characterized as “internal monologue” – whether this is established thanks to the protagonist being the *autodiegetic* (ibid., 245) narrator of their own story, as in *Jane Eyre*, or through the deployment of a stream-of-consciousness technique as mediated through a heterodiegetic narrator external to the textual heterocosm, as in the interlocking internally focalized perspectives of Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (2011[1931]).

That focalization can be understood in phenomenological terms is hinted at by Uri Margolin (2009, 47). A starting-point in unpacking the implications of such an understanding can be identified in Mieke Bal’s distinction between the *focalizer* (who is perceiving?) and the *focalized* (who/what is perceived?) (1985, 102-110). In cases of internal focalization, each linguistic proposition that constitutes the narrative sequence contains both a focalizer/intending subject (the character whose perspective is presented) and a focalized/intended object (the thing, person or event framed through

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‘focalization,’ as a term, is any less dependent upon a visual metaphor. Besides, Genette himself often resorts to using “point of view” interchangeably with “focalization” (1980, 190; 191; 194)

this perspective). Margolin goes even further in expanding the notion of focalization into a determinate structure, identifying five linked constituent elements:

(1) the story-world state or event focalized; (2) the focalizing agent and its make-up; (3) the activity of perceiving and processing this object-focalization as *nomen actionis*; (4) the product of this activity, that is, the resultant take or vision and (5) the textualization of all of the above, which is the only thing directly accessible to the reader and not requiring his imaginative reconstruction. (2009, 42)

Rendered in phenomenal terms, these can be characterized as (1) the intentional object (what is perceived); (2) the intending subject (who is perceiving); (3) the intentional act (act of consciousness) or *noesis*; (4) the intentional content or *noema* (the object as it appears within the act of consciousness); (5) the representation of the act of perception in a textualized form in which it can become the object of an intentional act of perception on the reader's part. Consider, by way of example, this passage from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*:

There was a candle burning just outside, and on the matting in the gallery. I was surprised at this circumstance: but still more was I amazed to perceive the air quite dim, as if filled with smoke: and, while looking to the right hand and left, to find whence these blue wreaths issued, I became further aware of a strong smell of burning. (Brontë 1985[1847], 179)

The passage presents a sequence of clearly-defined intentional acts, each linked to the next through signposted shifts of attention: upon looking out of her room, Jane first notices the burning candle; then, she is struck by a dimness in the air; she intends the dimness as 'smoke'; finally, she senses a smell of burning. Clearly, these are acts of perception that belong, proprioceptively, to a perceiving consciousness; they can therefore be taken to point, simultaneously, both towards what is experienced and towards the experiencing character. The prepositions in the passage – *outside, to the right hand and left* – define the perceived objects in relation to Jane's subjective standpoint (*outside* the room in which she stands, *to the right* and *left* of the point she occupies).

Moreover, in Husserlian terms, we learn not only the matter of these intentional acts, but

also their quality, that is, not only *what* is intended but also *how* it is intended: the perception of the burning candle strikes Jane with surprise, and that of the dimness of the air with amazement.

#### 4.1.4 *Focalization and games*

It is pertinent to draw a parenthesis here and note here that the notion of *focalization* has already been applied to game analysis; however, theoretical development in this direction has presented a number of conceptual difficulties. Britta Neitzel draws on Genette's distinction between "Who sees?" and "Who speaks?" to ground a distinction between the formal ludic structures she terms, respectively, *point of view* and *point of action* (2002). In brief – I shall have occasion to return to Neitzel's suggestions in Chapter 7, when I shall more fully develop the formal structures constituting the ludic subject-position – Neitzel uses 'point of view' in a strictly spatio-visual sense, specifically in terms of the relation of this viewpoint to the playable figure; 'point of action,' meanwhile, "describes the position from which action can be taken" upon the gameworld (*ibid.*).

While this is, in its own right, a useful distinction that has been taken up and developed by later theorists (for instance, Thon 2009), its founding on Genette's narratological model misinterprets the notion of focalization. Neitzel argues that "Who speaks?" finds no direct equivalent in most games – hence the observation above regarding games not being a diegetic medium – and that, as such, "to adopt this for the analysis of computer games the question must be reformulated as "Who acts?"" (2002), with the answer being found in the concept of point of action. Meanwhile, Genette's "Who sees?" can be unproblematically translated to visual perspective, and, hence, to point of view.

However, for Genette the answer to the question "Who sees?" is the focalizing character, as a member of the textual world, while the answer to the question, "Who speaks?" is the narrator, as an element of the text's presentation of its heterocosm. In other words, "Who sees?" – which Genette pointedly dissociates from the visuality introduced by the metaphor of seeing – is a question relating to an internal subject-

position through which the heterocosm is experienced, while “Who speaks?”, in addressing the telling of this subjective perspective, relates to the discourse of presentation. In the case of videogames, it is the screen-based audiovisual mediality that functions as the mode of presentation, and the ludic subject established through the player’s active engagement with the gameworld that constitutes the ludic subject-position in relation to the gameworld. To equate, as Neitzel does, the focalizer with the camera, and the narrator with the playable figure, is therefore to turn Genette’s model upside-down, and to confuse focalization as heterocosmic perspective with the discursive strategies of textual presentation.

Michael Nitsche’s proposal for a theory of focalization in videogames is initially founded on a reading of *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 1996), specifically focusing on its usage of a free-roaming third-person camera perspective. On the heterocosmic level, this perspective is identified as belonging to Lakitu, a tiny creature following Mario around on a floating cloud and recording his adventures with a camera. In Nitsche’s argument, Lakitu comes to stand, metonymically, for the typical detached perspective of the third-person adventure game as an external focalizer of the protagonist’s actions. Like Neitzel, then, Nitsche initially adopts an understanding of focalization that equates it to visual perspective – a problematic literalization of the question, “Who sees?” However, Nitsche then goes on to consider cases such as *American McGee’s Alice* (Rogue Entertainment 2000) and the dream sequences in *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment 2001), in which, though a similar third-person perspective is deployed, the ludic heterocosm depicted is evidently a manifestation of the protagonist’s subjective mental state. In these cases, Nitsche suggests, “as part of the overall game setting the focalization is very much *internal*” (2005). It is unclear whether, by “game setting,” Nitsche is referring to the represented heterocosm, the experienced gameworld or the game system; moreover, it is even less clear how focalization – a formal structure of presentation – can be part of any of these.

These difficulties in Nitsche’s treatment of focalization arise from a fundamental misinterpretation that is similar to Neitzel’s. In its literary usage, focalization is

distinguished from narration, and the focalizer from the narrator: in Prince's terms, the narrator "is an element of *discourse* and not *story* (of the narrating and not the narrated) whereas focalization is an element of the latter" (2001, 46). In this light, it is clearly a mistake to equate the camera – evidently an element of presentation rather than of what is presented – with the focalizer. In all of Nitsche's examples, it is the protagonist and player-character – Mario no less than Max or Alice – that, in serving as the ludic subject, acts as the focalizer, the possessor of the experiences constituting the scenes of the game.

Applying Genette's tripartite taxonomy of focalization to games, Jonne Arjoranta argues that it is external focalization that "is typical in video games: the story is told from the perspective of a central protagonist, but [...] without access to character consciousness" (2013, 6). Games' capacity for internal focalization, he writes, is limited, and mostly achieved through non-ludic means such as "spoken internal dialogue" (presumably Arjoranta has in mind examples such as *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass 1998) and *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment 2001)) or the presentation of character action in cutscenes. In a game such as *Half-Life* (Valve 1998), the protagonist does not speak, and the only actions we perceive are the ones the player performs: ergo, Arjoranta argues, there is no basis upon which his internal consciousness can be inferred.

This approach mostly avoids Nitsche's error of equating focalization with visual perspective. However, it is problematic in another direction. During the course of the argument, Arjoranta switches indiscriminately between speaking of player-characters as focalizers (as when he speaks of "the perspective of a central protagonist") or as focalized (as when he says the character is "portrayed on screen"). Admittedly, this is also a difficulty with Genette's original development of focalization, as Bal has demonstrated (1985, 101). It is also true that a subject/object duality within the playable figure - as both perceiving (ludic) subject and perceived in-game object – is, as I shall argue in Chapter 6, essential to its aesthetic and phenomenal nature. However, the confusion resulting from leaving this distinction unthematized inevitably prevents Arjoranta from developing his observations into a coherent model of perspective in relation to player-characters.



Interestingly, however, Arjoranta then concludes by arguing that games have access to a mode of focalization that is not available to non-ergodic media: this *embodied focalization*, as he terms it, “places the player in control of the actions of a character [...] and places the physical perspective inside the body of the character,” essentially locating the player in the position of the focalizer (ibid., 9). This insight is not taken any further, but what is described here is something akin to the idea of the ludic subject-position itself, as shall become more apparent in Chapter 7.

#### 4.1.5 *The filmic subject and the viewer*

So far, I have considered mechanisms of subject-positioning in painting and literature. It is arguably in cinema, however, that one finds the most pointed manifestation of the phenomenal relation between the perceiving subject in the heterocosm and the perceiving viewer outside it. In one of the earliest instances of proto-film-theory, Hugo Münsterberg writes, “*the photoplay tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion*” (1999[1916], 402, italics in original). In the light of the current investigation, this statement invites a phenomenological study of the cinema, taking the images of the medium not as direct representations of objects in the (heterocosmic) world, but as representations of *phenomena*, that is, of the intentional acts of a perceiving subject.

Edward Branigan explains this through applying the theory of focalization to cinema, using the term to refer to “a character neither speaking (narrating, reporting, communicating) nor acting (focusing, focused by), but rather actually experiencing something through seeing or hearing it” (1992, 101). He distinguishes between external focalization – which refers simply to a given character’s visual or aural awareness (or lack of awareness) of narrative events, and internal focalization, which refers to the character’s experiences as filtered through their subjective perspective (ibid., 103).

The most extreme form of what Branigan would identify as cinematic internal focalization is the first-person subjective shot that literally adopts the character’s optical

perspective upon the filmic heterocosm. In this regard, Genette gives Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947) – filmed almost entirely in the first-person perspective of its protagonist, the private eye Philip Marlowe – as the example *par excellence* of what internal focalization would mean in the cinema (Genette 1980, 193ff.).

However, much as the cinematic subjective image might purport to align the viewer's intentional consciousness with that of the perceiving character – as *Lady in the Lake* promised to, with a tagline on its original poster reading “YOU and Robert Montgomery solve a murder mystery together!”<sup>2</sup> – it actually does no such thing. The core of the problem, as Jean Mitry observes, is that “the impressions called subjective are *given* to me, just like all the others [...] the camera conducts me, guides me; it communicates to me impressions that were not born from me” (1965, 67).<sup>3</sup> Or, as Sobchack puts it:

Although we, as spectators, may be sympathetic to cinematic perception and, indeed, may intentionally parallel the film's and/or character's bodily position and perceptual bias as it intends towards and inhabits a world, we physically and materially occupy our *own* bodies and space. The perception whose intentional interest we share belongs always to *another* perceiving and embodied subject, no matter how introceptively it is visibly presented as visual for us. (1992, 234)

To illustrate this point, I shall consider a shot from *Maniac* (Khalfoun 2012), which, along with *Lady in the Lake*, is one of the rare feature-length films that sustains the first-person subjective perspective for virtually its entire duration. In this first-person subjective shot (see Fig 4.2), Frank (Elijah Wood) is looking at the kitsch dolphin ornament he has found in Lucie (Megan Duffy)'s bathroom, immediately following the scene in which he murders her.

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<sup>2</sup> The prefiguration of the second-person address common in early videogames, which I commented on in the introduction, should not go unnoticed.

<sup>3</sup> “Les impressions dites subjectives me sont *données*, tout comme le reste [...] la caméra me conduit, me guide; elle me communique des impressions qui ne sont pas nées de moi.”



**Figure 4.2:** *Maniac* (Khalfoun 2012)

The ornament is placed dead centre in the frame, and is the point of optical focus. However, the viewer might not even notice the ornament at all: her attention might be drawn to the reflection of Frank's face in the side-mirror glimpsed in the top right corner of the frame. This is, after all, one of the earliest glimpses of the protagonist in a film that has, up to this point, not left his first-person perspective. This reveals two things: first, it confirms the claim that, in the noetic mode of presentation, it is the perceiving subject, rather than the perceived object, that is the *terminus* of representation. Secondly, it also makes apparent the detachment of the viewer's phenomenal standpoint from that of the cinematic perceiving subject. From the centrality of its framing, as well as the angle of Frank's gaze in the mirror, the viewer can tell that it is the ornament that has him transfixed: perhaps it is making him reflect on the life he has just taken. He is paying no attention whatsoever to his own reflection, whereas the viewer is likely to be entirely focused on it, trying to gain an insight into how the murder has emotionally affected Frank. In this instance, though the viewer is ostensibly sharing in his subjective perspective, Frank and the viewer therefore perform entirely different noetic acts that intend different objects: in fact, Frank's act of perception, far from being shared by the viewer, is translated into the object of the viewer's own, separate act of perception. Sobchack's observation regarding *Lady in the Lake*, that "the film is intent not only upon seeing *as* Marlowe sees but also upon *seeing* Marlowe *introceptively seeing*" (1992, 241), is just

as relevant here.

What is revealed in this shot, then, is the productive tension between the two subjective perspectives that the cinematic form establishes: on the one hand, Frank's perceptual standpoint as a character within the heterocosm, and, on the other hand, the viewer's perceptual standpoint which intends Frank's perception as its object.

#### *4.1.6 Heterocosmic subject-positioning and ludic subject-positioning*

These cursory glances in the direction of painting, literature and film have highlighted the various techniques by which, firstly, the presentation of the textual heterocosm is structured according to a subjective perspective internal to the heterocosm; secondly, this subjective perspective is foreground as belonging to a heterocosmic individual; and, thirdly, the operations of this internal subjective perspective are captured by means of a mediating discourse operating from an external perspective that marks the perceptions being represented as belonging to a subject distinct both from the recipient and the discourse of presentation.

This would appear to be very similar to the double perspectival structure I have identified as pertaining to ludic engagement, by which the player inhabits both an internal perspective within the gameworld from which direct first-person experience of the gameworld as world is intended (the ludic subject-position), and an external perspective on the game as textual artefact (the implied player position), which also frames, in a second-order movement of self-reflexivity, the first-order intentional acts pertaining to the ludic subject-position.

This is not surprising: given that, as I argued in section 3.4.4, the gameworld can be framed as a ludic heterocosm, then one of the crucial dimensions of the ludic subject-position is precisely its status as a heterocosmic perspective. In this regard, it is inevitable that the ludic subject-position will operate according to formal structures that, in many ways, echo those at work in other modes of heterocosmic presentation. At the same time, any comparison between ludic subject-positioning and the modes of heterocosmic perspective I have outlined can only be taken so far. Beyond a certain point, the

instructive comparison will have to be qualified with the observation of a revealing contrast. Thus, when Alexander Galloway makes the case that a line can be drawn between the cinematic first-person subjective shot and the visual language of the first-person shooter (FPS) game genre, going so far as to argue that FPS games are “the visual progeny of subjective camera techniques in the cinema” (2006, 57), he is careful to point out that the player is located in a different relation to the represented subjective perspective. Galloway’s suggestion is that this is due to the “*fully rendered, actionable space*” that lies behind what he terms *gamic vision* (ibid., 63). Similarly, Grant Tavinor writes that “videogames expand on this representation of a *perceiving self* within the fictional world, also allowing the subject to act” (2009, 70) – a point which invokes the matter of *agency*, a topic I shall address in section 4.4 below.

Taking a step further, one can say that the difference rests, not simply on the modelling of a virtual space, nor even on the player’s being given the capacity to act within this space, but rather on what results from these conditions: namely, that, as I have already argued in Chapter 3, the game comes to constitute the phenomenal world of experience *in which* the player finds herself and that makes up the world that is actual from her subjective standpoint. It is clear, then, that, as much as games are capable of drawing on the representational techniques of literary narrative, painting and film in their constructions of subjective perspective, it is the establishment, for the player, of this basic sense of being-in-the-gameworld, with all its phenomenological and ontological implications, that is the defining quality of ludic subject-positioning. As such, though we can certainly take up Bob Rehak’s suggestion that “games, as a cultural form, are produced and consumed in phenomenological accord with preexisting technologies of representation” (2003, 104), it is only with an awareness that the deployment of the techniques we have outlined is inevitably recontextualized in the service of constructing and enforcing the ludic subject-position and its attendant sense of being-in-the-gameworld.

## 4.2 Immersion, presence and telepresence

It is an established commonplace that the experience games provide can accurately be described as granting the player a sense of inhabiting another world. That, after all, is the implication in the opening lines of *Adventure* (Crowther and Woods 1976) with which I introduced this study: despite all appearances to the contrary, these lines insist, you, the player, are not sitting at home in front of your computer, but “standing at the end of the road before a small brick building”; moreover, the heterocosmic entity standing at the end of the road is not an Other whose subjective perspective the player is invited to share, but, rather, is to be taken as “you” – that is, from the player’s perspective, as “I”.

Of course, it is much too simple to state that the player simply exchanges one experiential world for another and finds oneself entirely absorbed by the gameworld: as I noted in section 2.4, the sense of being-in-the-gameworld, pertaining as it does to the internal perspective of ludic engagement, is itself ‘bracketed’ through being framed in the external perspective. Nonetheless, that such a sense exists, and that it is a foundational element of the player’s experience, is clear, and should serve as the baseline of our investigation: witness, for instance, the games journalist Kieron Gillen’s influential New Games Journalism manifesto, a call for a more subjective idiom of games criticism which argued that, in emphasizing the player’s experience, it was the role of games critics to be “Travel Journalists to Imaginary places” (2004).

### 4.2.1 *The experience of immersion*

The notion of *immersion* – a term which invokes the metaphorical image of diving into, and being enveloped by, a foreign body – is one of the ideas most commonly employed to explain this sense of experiencing the gameworld internally, as another world within which one is made present. As Gordon Calleja has observed (2011, 18), the application of the term to games follows a long tradition of its being used to describe the reception of non-ergodic media. Grau, for instance, makes extensive use of the term to refer to the effect of virtual art (2003, 13-18). So conventionalized is its usage, in fact, that, as Ryan

points out, it has solidified into a dead metaphor – statements like, “I was lost in a book” are made unthinkingly, and reveal a commonplace usage of the term that does not do justice to the complexities of the experiential phenomenon being addressed (2001a, 93).

Ryan argues that, within the Western critical tradition, immersion has repeatedly been identified in opposition to a standpoint of critical distance in terms of the possible attitudes structuring the recipient’s engagement with the text (ibid., 9-14). In the mode of immersion, the argument goes, the recipient effaces the textuality of the work in order to engage with the heterocosm through an illusion of non-mediation; thus, immersion has been characterized as a naïve, passive and uncritical mode of reception.<sup>4</sup> Ryan counters this prejudice, arguing that immersion does not entail the forfeiting of one’s critical apparatus, but, rather, “requires an active engagement with the text” (ibid., 15).

Many usages of the term in relation to the player’s engagement with games rely, in perhaps too uncritical a fashion, on precisely this general understanding. Tracing the usage of the term in relation to “games of simulation,” Jon Peterson – highlighting how pivotal the notion has been throughout the tradition of games in virtual environments – defines *immersion* as the “experience of surrendering oneself to an imaginary game environment” (2012, 15) and as “the state in which the player experiences the game in a vivid, impactful manner comparable to real environments” (ibid., 375). Within the field of game studies, the term finds its defining usage in the work of Janet Murray,<sup>5</sup> who describes it as “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus” (1998, 98). She explains the process explicitly as one of transportation

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that these two alternative perspectives on the text recall – and, in fact, can be equated with – the internal and the external perspectives upon the game outlined in section 2.4 should not go unremarked. What is emphasized, again, is this adherence of the double perspectival structure of games to the modes of heterocosmic presentation and engagement they adopt and modify.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that Murray was the first to employ the term to speak about videogames. Brenda Laurel, for instance, also spoke about the role played by “sensory immersion” (1991, 21) in what she terms virtual “representational worlds”; but she does not thematize the notion to the extent that Murray does. The term had also been used extensively within the virtual reality (VR) literature of the 1990s – as a representative example, we can take Pimentel and Teixeira’s definition of VR as an “interactive, immersive experience generated by a computer” (1993, 11).

between one world or experiential domain and another: “we enjoy the movement out of our familiar world” and the subsequent sense of “being in a new place” (ibid., 98-99).

Immersion, then, refers not to any property of the game object or any of its components, but to the phenomenal experience of *being-in-the-gameworld* which I have taken as my theme at this stage of the investigation. The question that needs to be asked, then, is whether the term is of use in expanding our understanding of this phenomenon.

#### 4.2.2 *The problems with immersion*

Any attempt at deploying the notion of immersion within a conceptual arsenal, however, will hit a stumbling-block, which is that, as Calleja has argued (2011, 17-34), the term has been weakened through being used in an indiscriminate fashion. Here, I shall defer to Calleja’s comprehensive engagement with the term, and, rather than retracing his arguments in full, I shall limit myself here to pointing out the two primary conceptual difficulties facing the concept of immersion as it has been used: I shall term these *medial* and *phenomenal* indeterminacy.

*i) Medial indeterminacy.* After presenting her concept of immersion in relation to videogames, Murray goes on to argue that immersion is not a sensation specific to engaging with videogames, or even with virtual environments – a film viewer, or a music listener, can receive an equally powerful sensation of immersion through a focusing of attention that matches her perceptual field to the confines of the screen, or to the play of sounds that envelops her. However, as became apparent in section 4.1, the sense in which I, as a player, feel myself to be present in the land of Hyrule when playing *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (Nintendo 1991) is not at all the same as the sense in which I, as a film viewer, might have the sensation of, say, being on the neon-lit streets of a futuristic Los Angeles while watching *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) in a cinema theatre. As Calleja argues, “immersion in ergodic and immersion in non-ergodic media are simply not the same thing” (2011, 33) – if ‘immersion’ labels a concept that applies equally well to games, cinema and even recorded music, then it can tell us very little about the specificities of games.



ii) *Phenomenal indeterminacy*. The primary difficulty Calleja identifies with immersion, however, is that at least two entirely separate cognitive mechanisms have grown conflated within the same term (ibid., 26-27). He distinguishes the two senses of the term as it has been applied to games as *immersion as absorption* and *immersion as transportation*. *Immersion as transportation* accounts for the sense in which, following Murray and Ryan, we have been using the term: that is, “the idea of being present in another place” (ibid., 27). *Immersion as absorption*, on the other hand, refers to the sensation of being entirely caught up in an activity that demands one’s full concentration and cognitive engagement. By this understanding, *immersion* can be used to describe the mode in which the player engages with games – such as *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984) – that are not immersive in the sense of transportation. It is in this sense that Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä argue that *immersion* is founded on “challenge” as much as on sensory reception of the gameworld (2005, 8). Similarly, Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy write that “the quality of immersion or engagement within the game world may account for the ways in which a sense of time or physical discomfort may recede as the player’s skill develops” (2006, 8): a phrasing which reveals the proximity (one can almost say the overlap) between this second understanding of immersion and notions such as *engagement* or *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), a parallel Jan-Noël Thon makes explicit in his discussion of what he terms “ludic immersion” (2008, 37).<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, as Calleja writes, “the terms might be the same, but the experiential phenomenon they are investigating is not” (2011, 32). The perceptual modes referred to by *transportation* and *absorption* refer to entirely separate qualities of experience that are both, in their distinct ways, key to understanding player experience. Calleja makes the point that what ultimately separates the two is that, in the case of *absorption*, “the player remains in conceptual rather than inhabited space” (ibid., 28). It is for this reason that “the *absorption* sense of *immersion* jettisons a history of application in the context of virtual environments” (ibid., 27).

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<sup>6</sup> As an interesting aside, we might pause for a moment and reflect on the fact that many of these metaphorically-motivated concepts – certainly *immersion*, *absorption* and *flow* – draw from the same source domain, invoking imagery of water and human being’s negotiations with it.

#### 4.2.3 *Presence (or telepresence)*

In this light, Alison McMahan's statement that "immersion has become an excessively vague, all-inclusive concept" (2003, 67) and that a new term is therefore required, would seem hard to disagree with. As an alternative, McMahan suggests the notion of *presence*. As a formalized concept, presence owes its origin to Marvin Minsky's coining of the term *telepresence* in 1980, to refer to the sense of inhabiting a space from which one is physically removed that results from remotely operating machinery (Minsky 1980). In the literature on VR, Jonathan Steuer defined the term as "*the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium*" (1992, 76), differentiating it from 'normal' presence, which describes "the *natural* perception of an environment" (ibid.). Thomas Sheridan (1992) further distinguished between *telepresence* and *virtual presence*, that is, presence in virtual environments, but this (not insignificant) distinction was soon largely dropped: as Calleja notes, "later, articles in presence theory dropped "telepresence" altogether and used "presence" to refer to experiences in both virtual and actual environments" (2011, 19). It is even the case that *telepresence* has been used specifically to refer to engagement in virtual environments: Laurie Taylor, for instance, writes that "the telepresent state is based on existing in multiple conceptual spatial domains," and that the notion is thereby key to understanding player experience of being-in-the-gameworld (2003). Similarly, Peter Bayliss (2007) makes a case for the continued distinction between *presence* and *telepresence*, arguing that the latter term is a better fit for the aesthetic mechanism at work in games in virtual environments.

The distinction between *presence* and *telepresence* is therefore rather hazy – moreover, that between *presence* itself and the notion of immersion against which it has been defined is no clearer. For her definition of the concept, McMahan draws primarily on the work of Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton, who themselves define *presence* as "the artificial sense that a user has in a virtual environment that the environment is unmediated" (Lombard and Ditton 1997, 9). This understanding of presence, resting, as Lombard and Ditton stress, on "the perceptual illusion of non-mediation" (ibid.), brings

the notion of *presence* into close proximity with the idea of *immediacy*, the supposed disappearance or complete transparency of the medium of presentation and the subsequent impression of that which is presented as being “really there” – witness, for instance, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s suggestion of the notion of *transparent immediacy* (1999, 23).<sup>7</sup>

Far from offering a distinct conceptual alternative to *immersion*, *presence* seems to cover very similar ground. We might even say that “immersion and presence do not actually fall very far from each other, and are in fact often used as synonyms” (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005, 4). Such is the case, for example, when Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska write that “games create for the player an impression of virtual presence within the gamescape, a mediated sense of spatial immersion within the on-screen world” (2003, 108). Not only do Lombard and Ditton list ‘transportation’ as one of the key aspects of the sensation of presence, as it was for immersion, but immersion *itself* is listed as one of the constitutive factors of presence. McMahan follows the same path, listing “the degree of immersiveness generated by the interface” (2003, 72) as one of the factors that contribute to a sense of presence. *Immersion* and *presence* continue to circle the same aesthetic structure and to bleed into each other.

#### 4.2.4 *Immersion reconsidered?*

It might appear that the only possible conclusion is that the notion of immersion can only take this investigation so far. This is certainly the position Calleja takes, suggesting that “any treatment of the experientially complex phenomenon of presence in virtual environments must first consider the structure of its key prerequisite: involvement”

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<sup>7</sup>The framing of videogames through the notion of immediacy is questionable, especially given the extent to which many videogames foregrounded their formal, generic and stylistic codes of representation, whether these are adopted from other media or endemic to videogames: a game such as *Jet Set Radio* (Smilebit 2000), whose cel-shaded graphics reference comics and hand-drawn animations and interlace these influences with an aestheticized foregrounding of its ludic interface elements, is a perfect example of this. Crucially, however, this does not in any way mean that *Jet Set Radio* does not generate a sense of being-there for its player. This sense, then, appears not to be as tightly linked to a ‘transparent’ mode of representation as it has been made out to be. I shall return to this point in section 8.3.

(2011, 34). Despite the evident problems with immersion as a working concept, and despite the undoubted usefulness of the seven-dimensional player involvement model Calleja goes on to develop, his stance here is problematic. The multi-dimensional model of involvement Calleja suggests appears to more adequately describe, to use his own terms, the player's sense of absorption rather than transportation. As such, in proposing *involvement* as an alternative to *immersion*, Calleja seems to fall into the same trap he identifies – that of conflating the senses of immersion as absorption and as transportation.

Before discarding the concept out of hand, it might serve us well to reconsider the term in order to unpack the assumptions it conceals regarding the player's engagement with the gameworld. The key insights into the nature of the player's sense of being-in-the-gameworld that we can extract from the notion of *immersion* – both as expressed in Murray's admittedly under-theorized usage of the term, and in the theoretical work that has followed in its wake – can be summarized in two points that I shall take as the first steps towards achieving a concrete understanding of the structure of the ludic subject-position: a sensory engagement with the gameworld as world, and a capacity to take action upon the objects of the gameworld. In another indication of the congruence between the discourse of immersion and that of presence and telepresence, it bears pointing out that these two criteria into which Murray's understanding of immersion can be broken down are perfectly aligned with the two criteria determining telepresence as theorized by Steuer – *vividness*, which “refers to the ability of a technology to provide a sensorially rich mediated environment” and *interactivity*, which “refers to the degree to which users of a medium can influence the form or content of the mediated environment” (1992, 80). I shall look at each of these two criteria in turn below, using, in order to overcome the limitations of the term *immersion*, the respective terms *recentering* and *agency*, and aiming to demonstrate that the aspects of being-in-the-gameworld the two terms describe both directly imply the presence of the ludic subject.

### 4.3 Recentering

I have already noted that, for Murray, immersion is defined as the takeover of one's "whole perceptual apparatus" by sensory intuitions that relate to the gameworld. In this, Murray echoes Brenda Laurel's discussion of "sensory immersion" (1991, 21), and is in turn followed by Ermi and Mäyrä's listing of "sensory immersion" as one of the key dimensions of the phenomenon (2005, 7). As simple a formulation as this may seem, a consideration of its implications reveals a number of difficulties. These are, in order: the tendency towards technological determinism, the untenability of the claim to total sensory immersion, and the lack of an engagement with the phenomenal structure of sensory experience.

#### 4.3.1 *The conceptual difficulties with sensory immersion*

The first difficulty we encounter if we adopt the sensory understanding of immersion is that it paves the way for the tendency towards "technological determinism" that Calleja identifies as being inherent to discussions of immersion (2011, 33), which suggests a relation of direct proportionality between the degree of immersion and the fidelity of representation achieved by the technological apparatus of the medium. Steuer's discussion of the criterion of *vividness* in VR is indicative here – the degree of vividness is theorized as depending on sensory breadth (the number of senses engaged) and depth (the resolution of each sensory channel) (1992, 81). Murray herself cautions against this misinterpretation of the sensory dimension of immersion in her later writing (2012, 101), but it is to this conclusion that the notion, unless properly qualified, would lead.

The argument for technological determinism (that *higher technological fidelity* leads to greater *immersion*) cannot remain so simple once the unspoken middle term in the equation – the matter of *realism* of representation – is brought to the fore. A look at the history of the term *realism* in representational art – whether in the visual arts, literature, drama or cinema – reveals a vexed, shifting term, whose meaning changes with the fashions and conventions of the cultural milieu within which it is uttered (Auerbach

1953). For this reason, associating fidelity of representation with realism and realism with a sense of immersion is untenable: neither of these connections holds, the first because realism is a matter of convention and not of fidelity, the second because realism remains a function of mediation rather than immediacy, albeit one that enacts a conventionalized effacement of its own process of representation.

The other problems underlying the notion of sensory immersion are even more fundamental. One which is brought to the fore in Murray's definition can be identified in the suggestion that *immersion* depends on the takeover by the game of the player's "whole perceptual apparatus"- in other words, entirely obscuring the player's awareness of, and engagement with, the actual world in which she is present as a player. That this is the logical end point of an unexamined notion of sensory immersion is also evident in Steuer's assertion that "it is possible that we will some day have systems capable of passing a "perceptual Turing test"," thanks to "media systems whose representations are perceptually indistinguishable from their real-world counterparts" (1992, 84) – moreover, it is precisely this impetus towards the all-encompassing simulacrum that drives the tradition Grau (2003) identifies under the name of virtual art.

This is what Salen and Zimmerman rightly critique as the "immersive fallacy" (2004, 450), and it is open to criticism from a number of directions. At the risk of stating the obvious, if applied to existing games and game medialities, the claim is demonstrably false. In almost any imaginable physical situation of engagement with a game, the game will only occupy a portion of the player's perceptual field: the borders of the screen remain visible at all times, and, even if the player is entirely focused on the sensory *datum* of the screen, this must inevitably be perceived as a figure against the ground of the player's physical situation. In this matter, we can adopt, *mutatis mutandis*, Sobchack's observation regarding the cinema:

Materially embodied, particularly situated, and informed by an intending consciousness that has its own "projects" in the world, I am never so vacuous as to be completely "in-formed" by even the most insinuating or overwhelming film. (1992, 24)

No matter how little it may be the object of intentional focus, the darkened living room continues to constitute the background to the player's experience of the game. Even in cases of engagement with a game by means of VR technology, which would appear better positioned to actuate a takeover of the player's entire perceptual apparatus, the player is still privy to bodily sensations (cold, hunger, uncomfortable itches, etc.) that intend phenomena which cannot be attributed to the domain of the gameworld. These are not difficulties waiting to be overcome by Steuer's putative future media systems as they gain in the breadth and depth of their representative capacity, but symptoms of the fundamental fact that immersion – or (tele)presence – understood thus is not possible so long as, as the film viewer or game player receiving these sensory intuitions, I retain my subjective cognitive standpoint *as* a viewer or a player in my world, thereby integrating these intuitions against the wider horizon of my intuition of my world as a whole.

This should not be taken to mean that to speak of immersion at all – or, at least, to speak of the sense of being-in-the-gameworld that the term 'immersion' addresses – is to speak in error. Instead, it should serve to recall the discussion in section 2.4 regarding the dual structure of the player's perspectival situatedness towards the game, according to which the player engages with the game both from the internal perspective resulting from a subjective standpoint located within the gameworld, and, simultaneously, from an external perspective upon the game as a discrete, textual artefact. Thus, while the external perspective gives the lie to any notion of 'total' immersion in the gameworld, what it frames in the form of first-order experience from the internal perspective is, in fact – thanks to the establishment of a standpoint internal to the gameworld – phenomenologically characterized by the sense of being-in-the-gameworld that can be termed 'immersion'. Ludic experience is a much more complicated, multi-layered affair than any notion of total immersion can account for, involving multiple levels of engagement and awareness and overlapping framings of the status of the gameworld and of the player's existence both within and outside it.

The final problem with the notion of sensory immersion relates back to the investigation into the phenomenology of gameworld experience in Chapter 3. As the

*datum* of intentional perception, sensory experience implies not only *that which is given*, but also the perceiving subject *to whom it is given*, and, finally, the *manner in which it is given*. To treat the sensory dimension of immersion simply as a matter of what is presented on screen and through the speakers – besides being the starting-point for the slide into technological determinism – is therefore not sufficient. Before this audiovisual data can be understood in terms of the sensory experiences it constitutes, it is necessary to couch it in terms of the relation between it and the subject for whom it is to be given as an experience. This crucial question is one that the notion of immersion does not tackle.

#### 4.3.2 *The notion of recentering*

Is it possible to avoid these issues while extracting a useful conceptual kernel from the sensory understanding of immersion? I would argue that the way to do so is to understand the player's sensory engagement with the gameworld in more strictly phenomenological terms. This is not such a leap to take: Ryan writes that “the phenomenological idea of consciousness as a sense of being-in-the-world – or, in this case, a simulated world – is at the core of the theory and poetics of immersion” (2001a, 14). The key to understanding immersion as a phenomenal structure, Ryan argues, is the aesthetic mechanism she terms *recentering*. Ryan founds the notion on an engagement with David Lewis' development of an indexical definition of actuality, which I have already drawn on in section 2.4, and which refers to the idea that “‘actual’ is indexical, like ‘I’ or ‘here’, or ‘now’: it depends for its reference on the circumstance of the utterance, to wit the world where the utterance is located” (Lewis 1973, 69). Or, in Ryan's words, “‘to be actual’ means: ‘to exist in the world from which I speak’” (1991, 18). By this understanding, the heterocosmic work:

...is characterized by an open gesture of recentering, through which an APW [*actual possible world*] is placed at the center of the conceptual universe. This APW becomes the world of reference. (ibid., 26)

In Lewis' original formulation, the indexical definition of actuality is a conceptual tool to be deployed in operations of modal logic: it is what allows a statement such as, “Had



Hamlet married Ophelia, they would have lived happily ever after” (Pavel 1986, 34) to make sense. Imagining a possible world in which Hamlet marries Ophelia as a modal offshoot of the textual actual world in which Hamlet’s rejection of Ophelia drives her to madness and death is only rendered possible on the basis of the fact that, “for the duration of our immersion in a work of fiction, the realm of possibilities is [...] recentered around the sphere which the narrator presents as an actual world” (Ryan 1991, 22).

Ryan, however, extends the idea of recentering by means of a “space travel” metaphor (recalling, of course, the figuration of immersion as transportation, which we have already discussed), taking the idea of “the world from which I speak” in its full perceptual and subjective implications. Recentering, then, is an aesthetic process by which “consciousness relocates itself to another world and, taking advantage of the indexical definition of actuality, reorganizes the entire universe of being around this virtual reality” (2001, 103). What is implied in the concept of recentering is the idea of the recipient of the work – for Ryan, the reader, and for our current purposes, the player – being conscious of the heterocosm from a subjective standpoint internal to it. From this internal subject-position, the external view of the text as a unified artefact is suspended; instead, vectors of intentionality can be drawn connecting the recipient of the work as perceiving subject to the entities of the heterocosm, and it is by virtue of this intentional connection that the work can, in the recipient’s experience, come to be constituted as a lifeworld, that is, a world in the sense of an experiential dimension.

This is not uncharted territory: I am merely restating what I have already noted when, in attempting to pin down the meaning of the term ‘gameworld’, the ludic subject-position came to the fore as the necessary corollary of the sense of the game as an experiential domain. Moreover, it also aligns with the discussion of the intentional structure of consciousness in section 3.1. Recall that this understanding is founded upon an essential inseparability of perceiving subject and perceived world: as Edmund Husserl wrote, the world is brought forth into consciousness as “*my world-about-me*”, as an experiential structure that exists *for me*, organized around my subjective standpoint within

it, and, inseparably, becoming also “*the world in which I find myself*”, that is, the world against which I can come into view as a subject (2012[1913], 53).

#### 4.3.3 *Recentring and the ludic subject*

The idea of immersion as sensory engagement, then, needs to be reformulated to account for the structure of subjective recentring. It is too simple to say that receiving sensory impressions relating to the gameworld gives the player the sense of being-in-the-gameworld; such a statement tells us something about *what* is seen, but nothing about *who* it is seen by, and, hence, nothing about the nature of the seeing. In order to describe the experiential structure of being-in-the-gameworld, then, we must flesh out Ryan’s notion of recentring by considering the manner in which acts of perception, by which sensory intuition is given to the perceiver, are determined bilaterally, containing within them reference both to the object and subject of perception.

To illustrate this point, I shall return to the example I used in Chapter 3 to portray the perception of a game component as the minimal unit of experience in the gameworld: the perception of a tree in *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011). In this case, it is simple to say that the *Minecraft*-tree is the object of the player’s intentional act of perception, and, as such, constitutes the act’s noematic content. However, it is not enough to say that the *Minecraft*-tree is the content of the act of perception (its “intentional matter,” to use another of Husserl’s phrases). As Husserl writes, the matter of an intentional act is:

*...that element in an act which first gives it reference to an object, and reference so wholly definite that it not merely fixes the object meant in a general way, but also the precise way in which it is meant.* (1973[1900], 589, italics in original)

In other words, the matter of a particular act is not simply the object that is intended, but also *the specific manner* in which it is intended. Let us imagine that the tree is of a new kind that the player has never seen; conversely, let us imagine that the very same tree is of a kind the player has already encountered hundreds of examples of. Or, alternatively, we might posit a situation in which the player is desperate for wood in order to complete a crafting project, and, being in a tree-scarce mesa biome, this same tree is the only tree in

sight. We can keep going: we can think of a situation where the player glimpses the tree in the distance, or, alternatively, a situation where the player emerges from a cave right in the tree's shadow and perceives it looming overhead.

In all these cases, the tree, as object intended for the player, is one and the same; however, in each of these cases, we encounter a different intentional act bearing a different matter. In the first case, the matter of the act of perception is the *tree-as-novum*, striking in its novelty as a new element that needs to be added to the player's understanding of the gameworld. In the second case, the tree is intended as a manifestation of a familiar category, and is, in fact, unlikely to hold the player's attention long. In the third case, it is the *tree-as-standing-reserve*,<sup>8</sup> as a repository of wood that can be put towards a desired purpose. In the fourth and fifth cases, the focus is on the tree's visual qualities, but seen through divergent framings: in one case, as distant, small, visible perhaps only as a dark shape against the horizon, and, in the other case, as large, close, presenting to perception details such as the textures of its bark and foliage, as well as the precise number of wood-blocks of which it is constituted.

Dan Zahavi observes that "different act-matters can very well intend the same object" (2003, 24). Moreover, it is immediately evident that the manner in which the intentional object is constructed as the matter of a particular act is determined in the encounter between the intending subject and the intended object. In none of these cases does the tree, as intentional object, manifest any change in its materiality or the form of its presentation. Rather, what changes is the context the perceiving subject brings to it: as the matter of the player's intentional act, it is given shape and texture according to how it is figured in the light of the player's experience (or lack of it), of her goal-oriented projects of play, of her embodied position at a point she identifies as 'here': in short, according to the parameters of her ludic subject-position.

It is not even enough to say that the gameworld is given from such and such a

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<sup>8</sup> Here, I am invoking a term proposed by Martin Heidegger to refer to the way in which industrial technology enframes the world (2004[1956]). This is a term I shall bring to bear upon a more detailed engagement with *Minecraft* as an example of ludic subject-positioning in section 7.3, and, a such, I shall not linger on the term at this point.

perspective. The establishment of an intentional mode of consciousness by which the gameworld is intended for the player as *the world in which she is* (and the objects in the gameworld, as the objects in her intentional grasp, being perceived as the constituents of this world) is inseparable from the establishment of a ludic subjectivity which is brought into view along with the gameworld – indeed, which is an irreducible constituent element of the gameworld insofar as it represents the centre and organizing principle of the gameworld as an ordered, meaningful form.

The recentering of consciousness to a position from which the textual heterocosm – in our case, the gameworld – is perceived as actual, as we have seen, amounts to the establishment of a subject-position around which the world is organized *as* a meaningful world. Moreover, this subject-position cannot be understood simply as an empty ‘position,’ a set of co-ordinates marking a clearing into which the player can step. At this position, indicated by all the ways in which every perception of the gameworld is determined by it – and, in what Jean-Paul Sartre calls a “reflux” (1966[1943], 429) refers back to it, as the example of the *Minecraft*-tree has demonstrated – a figure emerges, an entity possessing an ontic existence within the gameworld, that is, an existence within the domain of the gameworld as an entity of the same ontological status as the entities taken as the things-in-the-world. As such, an understanding of the player’s being-in-the-gameworld needs to take into account the being that the player is in the gameworld.

This being is the ludic subject, the subjectivity that is played out in the course of the player’s engagement with the gameworld from the perspective of the ludic subject-position. In the games under consideration in this study, the ludic subject is ontically manifested in the form of the playable figure under the player’s direct control – a liminal entity that is upheld by the game system, and is hence granted the status of a member of the set of objects constituting the gameworld, but that is identified by the player as ‘I’ and is taken up as the standpoint around which an embodied ludic subjectivity is gathered.

## 4.4 Agency

If the first criterion that could be distilled from the discourse of immersion is that of a sensory engagement with the gameworld, the second is that the sense of immersion in games is dependent upon *the capacity to take action upon the objects of the gameworld*. Though, as we have seen, Murray extends the concept of immersion to cover engagement with non-ergodic as well as ergodic works, she writes that, in the case of games, the player experiences “immersion as a participatory activity,” enjoying the capacity “to do the things that the new environment makes possible” (1997, 99) – and, moreover, that this is the factor which is specific to the immersive operations of games.

### 4.4.1 Immersion and the capacity of taking action

To illustrate this criterion, Murray draws a comparison between the player’s sense of immersion in *Star Trek The Next Generation: Interactive Technical Manual* (Simon & Schuster Interactive 1994), a CD-ROM-based “virtual tour” of the starship *Enterprise* from the titular TV series, and *Star Trek The Next Generation: A Final Unity* (Spectrum Holobyte 1995), a point-and-click adventure game. Murray contends that, despite the former offering a far superior sensory presentation of the starship *Enterprise* and the objects within it, it is the latter that generates the greater sense of immersion. This, she argues, is because it allows the player to make use of the objects she encounters in order to achieve her goals: “it is the experience of using the objects and seeing them work as they are supposed to in our hands that creates the feeling of being a part of the *Star Trek* world” (1997, 112).

Again, Murray’s formulation here echoes Steuer’s discussion of telepresence. In addition to vividness, Steuer stipulates *interactivity* as a criterion for telepresence, defining it as “*the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time*” (1992, 84). Inherent to both Murray’s and Steuer’s definition, then, is the importance of feedback from the gameworld, a point identified as central by Calleja, who points out the fact that, unlike other forms of heterocosmic engagement,

“game environments afford extranoetic habitation by recognizing and reacting to the presence of the player” (2011, 29).

Calleja’s elaboration highlights two implications for the nature of the player’s being-in-the-gameworld. Firstly, setting the capacity to take action upon the gameworld as a criterion for immersion establishes a direct link between immersion and the notion of *agency*, a link Murray herself stresses, writing that “*agency and immersion are mutually reinforcing*” (2012, 102). The second, related implication is revealed by Calleja’s point that this sense of agency is dependent upon an “extranoetic habitation” of the gameworld that sets ludic immersion apart from the mode(s) of immersion at work in non-ergodic media. Calleja frames this extranoetic status – what I have been calling the ontic status – granted to the player in terms of the demonstrable results of the player’s actions upon the objects of the gameworld, but, recalling the centrality that philosophy of action grants to the intention behind the action (Anscombe 1979[1957]; Davidson 1980), it is clear that we can extend this insight, tracing these lines of action backwards from the perceived results in the gameworld to the point of origin at which all these intentional vectors intersect, and thereby bringing us back, once again, to the centrality of the ludic subject.

This continues to point to the fact that the relation between the player and the figure is central to understanding the player’s being-in-the-gameworld. It is the player’s capacity to identify an entity that forms part of the gameworld as ‘I’ that establishes the conditions for her to achieve a sense of habitation, of being perceptually located within the gameworld – even if, as I shall go on to argue, this identification is only one aspect of a more complex network of relations between the player and the figure.

In order to advance further, then, we need to move beyond immersion and presence, to look at concepts that make explicit the implication the two terms contain: that the sense of being-in-the-gameworld we are grasping at is dependent upon the player’s existence as, in some sense, *a being* in the gameworld. First, however, I shall consider the usage of the term *agency* in game studies, in order to consider what it can add to our understanding of being-in-the-gameworld.

#### 4.4.2 *Theorizations of agency*

As applied to videogames, *agency* is already present as a crystallized concept in the work of Brenda Laurel, who defines it simply as “the power to take action” (1991, 117). Laurel does not explicitly link the concept to the term *immersion*, but she does, crucially, argue that “*agency* is a key component of first-person experience” (ibid.,116). Murray takes it further, explicitly linking agency to immersion as one of the primary aesthetic functions defining the interactive medium. Later writers follow in her footsteps in linking the two – King and Krzywinska, for example, write that “a sense of agency in the game-world [...] can be a major source of impressions of embodied presence” (2003, 118).<sup>9</sup>

In a formulation that encapsulates and expands upon Laurel’s, Murray defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (1997, 126). Putting aside the problematic usage of the term “satisfying” – too equivocal and subjective a value judgment to serve as a useful definitional criterion – this definition can be broken down into two constituent parts. First, Murray’s understanding makes agency dependent on the capacity for “meaningful action.” This is a vague term, requiring us to define the context against which an action is judged to be “meaningful.” The latter half of the definition also proposes a second criterion for agency: that perceptible results are attached to the player’s actions.

After this initial working-out of the concept of agency, Murray’s chapter purportedly on the topic deviates into other considerations. As Noah Wardrip-Fruin et al point out, “agency itself remains an enticing, underdeveloped concept” in Murray’s application, with the implications latent in her definition remaining largely unexplored (2009, 2). It is necessary to look elsewhere for a more fully-developed theorization of agency in games.

Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern (2005) develop a theory of agency by linking the notion to that of affordances. In its original formulation in the work of the psychologist James J. Gibson, *affordance* refers to an “action possibility” that an object

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<sup>9</sup> The prefiguration, in this quote, of the notion of embodiment – which shall prove central to our consideration of the ludic subject, and shall be taken up as a theme in Chapter 5 – should not be overlooked.

grants an agent (1977), and is therefore established by means of a congruence between the properties of the object and the capabilities of the agent. Furthermore, an affordance is also dependent on being visible: if it does not announce itself to the agent as a possibility, it can hardly be considered an affordance at all (Norman 2013[1988]).

Mateas and Stern's deployment of the concept of affordances to explicate player agency is founded on a distinction between *formal affordances* and *material affordances*. The latter is the easiest to explain: *material affordances* are the mechanical, game-systemic possibilities for action available to the player: that is, the complete set of game actions systemically available to the player at any given point. *Formal affordances* require more explanation. The use of the term 'formal' follows on from Mateas and Stern's adoption of Aristotelian poetics, as filtered through Laurel's earlier deployment of Aristotle. For Aristotle, the *formal cause* refers to the overarching thematic or structural patterns that motivate lower-order elements (1992[350BC], II, 2). Thus, the requirements of plot structure might be the formal cause for a character behaving in a particular way in the final scene of a tragedy.<sup>10</sup> As Mateas and Stern paint it, formal causation in traditional drama rests on "the authorial view of the play" (2005, 3).<sup>11</sup> This inferred authorial intention remains present in interactive drama, in the form, Mateas and Stern argue, of top-down plot structures that provide the player with an idea of the role and actions she is expected to perform in the gameworld: "the understanding of the formal causation from the level of plot to character [...] helps the player to have an understanding of what to do, that is, why they should take action within the story world at all" (2005, 4). However, there is an additional layer of complication: in Mateas and Stern's words, "the player's intentions become a new source of formal causation" (ibid.) that must be

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<sup>10</sup> This is, of course, a simplified depiction of Aristotle's poetics. However, a more detailed engagement is beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>11</sup> Mateas and Stern's formulation here appears to subscribe to the "intentional fallacy" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1987[1946]) that interprets texts according to the assumed authorial intentions they answer. The problems with such an approach are far too numerous to go into here; it is enough to mention the obvious fact that, as recipients of texts, we never have objective access to the author's intentions, and can, at best, only form an educated guess at these intentions through a hermeneutic engagement with the text – which, of course, reinforces the primacy of "the text itself" over any unfounded extrapolations as to authorial intent. However, for the purposes of the argument here, we can give Mateas and Stern the benefit of the doubt on this point, and understand this formulation as referring to the inferred formal, thematic and structural patterns that the recipient can read into a text.



integrated into the overarching structures of formal causation of the work. In effect, by his definition, these two strands of formal causation are already linked: the player's intentions are, after all, shaped by the expectations instilled by the plot. When acting, in other words, the player is only taking up the suggestions of the plot.

What is the link, then, between formal and material affordances? Mateas argues: Players will experience agency when there is a balance between the material and formal constraints. When the actions motivated by the formal constraints (affordances) via dramatic probability in the plot are commensurate with the material constraints (affordances) made available from the levels of spectacle, pattern, language and thought, then players will experience agency. (ibid.)

In other words: when what the player *wants to* do (established by means of the dramatic role or position within which the player is located in the interactive drama) matches what the player *can* do (as determined by the game system) a feeling of agency is established. Building on, and clarifying, this definition of agency, Wardrip-Fruin et al. define it as “a phenomenon, involving both the game and the player, that occurs when the actions players desire are among those they can take *as supported by an underlying computational model*” (2009, 7, italics in original). By this definition, the sensation of agency in games is the result of “interacting with a system that suggests possibilities through a representation of a fictional world and the presentation of a set of materials for action” (ibid.), and the sensation is upheld if the possibilities that are suggested to the players match up to the possibilities afforded by the mechanics of the system.

A crucial observation to be made regarding this conception of agency comes into view once one considers the implications of understanding agency as emerging as a result of “both the game and the player” being subject to “*an underlying computational model*”. There are questionable distinctions being made here: insofar as the player, as implied player, is a necessary element in a game's formal structure, it makes little sense to distinguish between the game and the player. It makes even less sense to make a distinction between the game and the “*underlying computational model*” – if this is not, intrinsically, part of the game as the ontological guarantee of its actuality, then what is it?

Perhaps, though, what we should understand by the term ‘game’ here is the set of entities and objects of the gameworld that are distinct from, and that stand against, the ludic subject-position – the “in-itself” standing against the “for-itself,” to use Sartre’s terminology. Putting aside the inadequacy of ‘game’ as a term in this construction, such an understanding would grant the formulation a stronger phenomenological and existential meaning, insofar as it hints at a relational structure between the player (as *agent* or subject) and the world towards which her subjectivity is oriented.

#### 4.4.3 *Agency and the ludic subject*

This formulation, then, strengthens the link between a player’s *agency* and her sense of *being-in-the-gameworld*, and we might be tempted to say that the relation now emerges more fully as a fundamentally reciprocal one. It is not only the case, as Murray argued through the analysis of *A Final Unity*, that immersion (understood as a sense of being-there) depends upon a sense of agency. The reverse also appears to be true: a sense of agency, we might say, depends upon the player’s being-in-the-gameworld.

The argument is a tempting one, but it is fundamentally mistaken. Not only does it establish a closed loop (agency is the cause of immersion, and immersion is the cause of agency) with no point of entry, but it also makes the mistake of confusing two senses of ‘being-in-the-gameworld’. I have argued that *immersion* refers to the *sensation* of being-in-the-gameworld: it is this sensation that a feeling of agency contributes towards. On the other hand, the sense of ‘being-in-the-gameworld’ that acts as a condition for player agency is an ontic one. In other words, it refers to the fact of the player’s being made present as an entity within the domain of the gameworld.

To think in concrete terms, I shall consider an example. In *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980), the player’s agency is determined by the entity in which the player is made present in the gameworld, which, in this case, happens to be the bright yellow, wide-mouthed disc that gives the game its name. *Pac-Man* represents a particularly interesting test case for the study of agency, due to the fact that all the factors the player has to weigh in her relation to the gameworld are condensed into a single mechanical choice. The only

available input is a four-directional movement command. Since Pac-Man exists in a state of constant, automatic forward motion, agency is limited to making a directional choice whenever this forward motion brings Pac-Man to a fork in the path, or of reversing direction while travelling along a given path. Each choice is made as a response to a complex set of interrelating motivations, being determined not only by the spatial structure of the gameworld but also by the constantly changing spatial relations between Pac-Man and the other entities populating it.

The relation between the player and these entities – and, as a result, the motivation for making one choice over another – is determined by the particularities of the player-entity. The maze that the player finds herself in is full of ‘pac-dots’ that Pac-Man automatically consumes if he coincides with their spatial coordinates. Since the objective of the game is to consume all the pac-dots in a given level, at every crossroads the player will make the directional choice that will lead Pac-Man towards any remaining pac-dots. At the same time, Pac-Man is vulnerable to being consumed himself if his path is crossed by one of the four ghosts – as such, avoiding the ghosts might take precedence over reaching any remaining pac-dots in the player’s process of decision-making.

The final factor determining the player’s choice of path is the presence of four ‘powerpills’ in the corners of the map; consuming one of these has the effect of reversing the paths of the four ghosts on the map, and of temporarily giving these ghosts the property of being edible in the same way as the pac-dots are (that is, being consumed if their spatial coordinates coincide with Pac-Man’s). An experienced player will not necessarily guide Pac-Man to consume the powerpills at the earliest available opportunity, but might choose to delay their consumption to the most advantageous moment. Effectively, this results in a second conscious choice – and hence, a further instance of agency – encountered by the player in the course of a game of *Pac-Man*: the choice of when to consume a powerpill.

The example of *Pac-Man* demonstrates, firstly, that, on a basic ontological level, agency is only possible at all thanks to the presence of an entity belonging to the gameworld that acts as a manifestation of the player and allows her to encounter the

other entities in the gameworld at their own level. Secondly, it also becomes apparent that the specific contours of player agency in a given game are a direct result of the particular nature of the ludic subjectivity she takes on – which, in the case of figure games, is determined by the nature of the playable figure. It is, as such, impossible to think of player agency in the abstract without thinking of how it is determined by the playable figure.

#### 4.5 Conclusions

Wherever the analysis has turned in considering the player's sense of being subjectively located within the gameworld, it has come face-to-face with the same implication: that this sense of being-in-the-gameworld needs to be established upon an ontological foundation. Interrogating this sense of being-in-the-gameworld, variously termed *immersion* or *presence*, revealed its dependence upon a phenomenal mechanism of *recentering*, which requires the establishment of a ludic subject-position for the player to adopt within the gameworld. This is the standpoint of the internal perspective, which allows the gameworld to be experientially available to the player as the world that is actual for her. An elaboration of the idea of recentering by means of a bringing-to-bear upon it of the intentional model of consciousness led to a shift in emphasis in the direction of the subject of experience of the gameworld: an experience of the gameworld as actual, that is, as the world in which one is, implies, as its necessary corollary, an existence, on an ontological level, as a subject within the domain of the gameworld.

Next, as a component of the sense of being-in-the-gameworld, the capacity to act upon the gameworld was considered under the name of *agency*. Again, a survey of the theorizations of gameworld agency revealed the dependence of this sensation upon the ontic existence the player is granted as a ludic subject within the gameworld. The adoption of the ludic subject-position therefore implies, and depends upon, the granting of an ontic status to the player, a manifestation in the form of an entity belonging to the gameworld and the ludic heterocosm.

My investigation shall now proceed from a consideration of the sense of being-in-the-gameworld to a direct engagement with *the being that the player is* in the gameworld – that is, with the *playable figure* as the form of the player’s ontic existence in the domain of the gameworld. Chapter 5 shall be dedicated to an analysis of the implications of the figure for our understanding of how the player comes to feel a sense of presence in the gameworld, drawing on the notions of *embodiment*, as it has been articulated within the game studies discourse (Taylor 2002; Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007a; 2007b;; Gee 2008; Leino 2010; Calleja 2011; Gazzard 2011a; 2011b; Norgård 2011), and *incorporation*, as defined by Calleja (2011), and linking this to a phenomenology of the embodied subject as it emerges in the work of Sartre (1966[1943]) and Merleau-Ponty (2002[1945]; 1968). This shall then serve as the springboard towards a consideration, in Chapter 6, of the multiple aspects of the relation between the player and the figure.





## Chapter Five

### Embodiment in the gameworld

Over the course of the investigation to this point, I have approached the ludic subject tangentially, by means of a focus on the gameworld as the experiential domain towards which it grants the player a subjective standpoint. Such a circuitous route was imposed upon the analysis by the phenomenal nature of subjectivity – which, as I pointed out in the unfolding of the intentional model of consciousness in section 3.1, cannot be thought of in isolation, but only in relation to its world.

However, having laid out the multiple dimensions of the gameworld as a phenomenal domain, and having explored the player’s sense of being-in-the-gameworld, the next step is to engage directly with the ludic subject itself. Moreover, the findings of the previous stage of the investigation have also marked out the avenue by which we can gain entry to the network of formal and experiential structures constituting the ludic subject. Moving beyond the ideas of immersion and presence, which, due to a number of conceptual difficulties, proved inadequate for the purpose of theorizing the sense of being-in-the-gameworld, I expanded upon the notions of recentering and of agency to demonstrate how the insights they revealed pointed to the realization that it is impossible to consider the phenomenal dimension of being-in-the-gameworld independently of its ontic dimension.

This chapter shall take up the task of theorizing what it means for the player to *be* in the gameworld as *a being* in the gameworld. Even if it shall not be taken up as the direct theme of investigation in the current chapter, it becomes opportune, then, to finally bring back into the frame the playable figure – the entity which, in Chapter 1, was first encountered in the form of the “you” addressed in *Adventure* (Crowther and Woods 1976), and which is here revealed as the vehicle for the ludic subjectivity that the player is granted in the gameworld to be an *embodied* subjectivity. As a caveat, I should note that much of the critical work I shall be quoting in this chapter uses either the term ‘avatar’ or



‘character’ to refer to what I have been calling the playable figure. I justified my terminological choice in section 1.2, arguing that the terms ‘avatar’ and ‘character’ refer to aspects of an entity whose ontology and role in the phenomenal structure of ludic engagement is more complex than either can capture. I shall expand on this in Chapter 6, where the playable figure in its own right shall come to the fore of my analysis; however, during the course of this chapter, where quoted sources make reference to the “avatar” or the “character” as the locus of embodiment, I shall – while keeping this caution in mind – go along with the term used in the source material.

In section 1.3, when I earmarked the ‘figure game’ as this investigation’s domain of study, I defined this broad genre by the twin criteria of the establishment of a ludic heterocosm and the player’s assumption of a subjective position within this heterocosm in the form of an entity taken up as ‘I’. I also claimed that these two criteria, taken in unison, result in a sense of being-in-the-gameworld that constitutes arguably the genre’s defining aesthetic quality. What I shall undertake in this chapter, then, is the grounding of the sense of being-in-the-gameworld in an embodiment in the form of the playable figure.

I shall begin by considering the notions of the *point of action* (Neitzel 2002; Thon 2009), the *locus of manipulation* (Zagal et al. 2005; Bayliss 2007a) and the *Game Ego* (Wilhelmsson 2008), arriving at the conclusion that, though useful insights can be gleaned from each of these concepts, none is satisfactory to address the nature of the being that the player is in the gameworld.

This shall lead me to a survey of the applications of the notion of *embodiment* within the discourse of game studies (Taylor 2002; Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007a; 2007b;; Gee 2008; Leino 2010; Calleja 2011; Gazzard 2011a; 2011b; Norgård 2011), finally arriving at Gordon Calleja’s notion of *incorporation* (2011, 169). This shall serve to underline the necessity of wedding an analysis of subjective gameworld experience – and of ludic subjectivity – to an investigation of the playable figure, the ontic entity that the player *is* in the gameworld, combining the two in a study of the anchoring of ludic subjectivity in an engagement with the playable figure.

In order to arrive at rigorous conceptualization of what, in experiential terms, is entailed in the notion of embodiment, I shall then trace the development of a phenomenology of the body through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre (1966[1943]) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002[1945]; 1968), distilling from this a set of salient observations regarding the nature of embodied being-in-the-world that can serve as a framework to scaffold a phenomenological approach to the playable figure. In this way, the ground will have been cleared for Chapter 6 to offer a direct engagement with the ontology and phenomenology of the playable figure, culminating in a mapping-out of the multiple dimensions of the relation between the figure and the player.

### **5.1 Point of action, locus of manipulation, Game Ego**

Before engaging directly with the notion of the playable figure, in its various dimensions and configurations, as the being that the player *is* in the gameworld, I shall consider a number of alternative conceptualizations of the player's subjective anchoring in the gameworld as an ontic domain. The concepts I shall consider here are those of *point of action* (Neitzel 2002; Thon 2009), *locus of manipulation* (Zagal et al. 2005; Bayliss 2007a) and *Game Ego* (Wilhelmsson 2008). The sequence I have chosen to tackle them in is one that traces a movement of increasing corporeality in the entity addressed by the concept. 'Point of action' relates the player's presence in the gameworld to a disembodied point of being. 'Locus of manipulation' does the same, though in this case this point of being is more closely attached to a playable figure. 'Game Ego' appears to move closer to the idea of a bodily presence in the gameworld, but it stops short, as I shall demonstrate, of providing a solid concept for the ontic or phenomenal character such a presence would take. As such, each of these concepts – though, individually, they fail to answer to the task set forth in the introduction to this chapter – shall serve as a stepping-stone on the way to a reflection on the idea of the player's embodiment in the gameworld, which I shall undertake in the subsequent sections of the chapter.

### 5.1.1 Point of action

The term “point of action” is one that has already come up in the course of this investigation. In section 4.1.4, I noted that the term was proposed by Britta Neitzel to “describe the position from which action can be taken” by the player upon the gameworld (2002). Neitzel argues for a typology of points of action organized around the intersection of three variable qualities. Thus, a point of action can be *intradiegetic* or *extradiegetic*,<sup>1</sup> depending on whether or not the point of action is rendered as an entity within the heterocosmic dimension of the game (as is the case with games featuring a playable figure, but also, Neitzel argues, of a game like *Civilization II* (MicroProse 1996), where the player’s active presence in control of a complete society is motivated by the heterocosmic figure of the ruler she is ostensibly playing). The point of action can also be *concentric* – that is, focused entirely on one location within the gameworld – or *ex-centric*, when action can be “executed at multiple locations in the virtual world,” as in the case of a strategy game or a team sport game.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the point of action can be *direct* or *indirect*: if player input is translated immediately into action, we are dealing with the former, while, if there is a layer of abstraction, it is the latter.

Taking up the concept of point of action, Jan-Noël Thon examines Neitzel’s model, concluding that a simpler, one-dimensional model is sufficient to explain different structures of the point of action. Accordingly, he distinguishes between *subjective*, *semi-subjective* and *objective* points of action. In games with a subjective point of action, “the action position of the player coincides with the player’s avatar” (2009, 290), with the player having direct control of the playable figure. When a semi-subjective point of action is present, “the interaction with the game world is connected to an avatar, but the player also has to interact with the game space” (ibid.). Finally, an objective point of

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, Neitzel is here drawing on Gérard Genette’s narratological terminology, and, as I observed in section 4.1.4, Neitzel’s adoption of Genette’s models is highly problematic. This needs to be borne in mind, particularly in terms of how it undermines the structure of Neitzel’s distinction between point of view and point of action; however, for the sake of argument, this conceptual difficulty can be bracketed in considering the notion of point of action in its own right.

<sup>2</sup> Neitzel’s formulation here can be equated with the distinction made in section 1.3 between a *distributed* and a *transcendent* ludic subject.

action obtains when “the interaction with the game world is not connected to a single avatar” (ibid.).

The playable figure would therefore represent a particular configuration of the point of action. In Neitzel’s classification, the point of action associated with a playable figure is, by definition, intradiegetic (in that the playable figure cannot but be granted status within the ludic heterocosm) and concentric (in that the playable figure constitutes the single point in which the player’s capacity for action is concentrated). It can, however, be both direct (as it is, to stick to Neitzel’s example, in *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996)) and indirect (as it is in *Diablo* (Blizzard 1996), where the player’s commands to the playable figure are communicated via the cursor).

There are useful distinctions being made here, but, taken as a whole, Neitzel’s classification presents us with a number of difficulties. Firstly, there are some localized points of contention with the distinctions being made in the classification. If an ex-centric point of action describes a situation in which the player can act upon “multiple locations in the virtual world,” for instance, it is hard to see how this can still be considered in the light of a singular *point* of action or “position from which action can be taken” – both terms which imply a fixed standpoint which the idea of an ex-centric point of action undermines. Moreover, it is hard to conceive of what an entirely extradiegetic point of action would look like. If the results of the actions have heterocosmic relevance – that is, are manifested as events within the spatiotemporal order of the ludic heterocosm – then there must clearly be an agent implied by these actions, even if this agent is not visible except in her actions. Unlike *SimCity*’s mayor or *Civilization II*’s faction leaders, for example, *FTL: Faster than Light* (Subset Games 2012) does not give an identity to the ‘point of action’ from which the player controls the crew and systems of a spaceship fighting its way across the galaxy. Nonetheless, the actions the player performs are actual within the heterocosm: the crew *is* being given orders; energy *is* being diverted from the engine to the shields. These qualify as events within the ludic heterocosm, rearranging its existents into new states: to say that the point of action from which they originate is extradiegetic is to suggest that the line of intentionality connecting the action

and the result crosses the ontological boundary marking out the heterocosm as an ordered, discrete domain. This would, effectively, erase its status as a heterocosm entirely, thereby breaking down the intra/extradiegetic distinction Neitzel draws.

More fundamental than such specific stumbling blocks with the classification, however, is the fact that, in its blanket application to every possible form of player engagement, the notion of point of action is made to cover so many different configurations that it is divested of any specific meaning. The ex-centric, indirect point of action of *FTL* and the concentric, direct point of action of *Tomb Raider* represent such radically divergent modes of relating to the gameworld, with so little in common, that to refer to both of these as ‘point of action’ reduces the term to the level of a vague umbrella notion, not specific enough to be deployed in any concrete analytical situation.

#### 5.1.2 *Locus of manipulation*

An alternative term referring to what is arguably a very similar concept is *locus of manipulation*. The notion is first proposed within the Game Ontology Project developed by Zagal et al. (2005, 9). In this attempt at developing “a game ontology that identifies the important structural elements of games and the relationships between them” (ibid., 2), “locus of manipulation” forms one of the entries under the top-level category of Interface and the sub-category Input Methods. In this original proposal, no direct definition of the term is forthcoming. It is only specified that the locus of manipulation can be determined as *single entity* or *multiple entity*, and, as such, it is easy to surmise that the concept has a significant overlap with the *concentric/ex-centric* dimension of Neitzel’s typology of point of action.

Since then, the term has been adopted by Peter Bayliss in his analysis of the relation between the player and the playable figure. He uses the term to refer to “the in-game position of the player's ability to assert control over the game-world, whether this is a visible character, an implied avatar, or a graphical user interface cursor” (2007a, 1). It would initially appear, then, that Bayliss is introducing the concept in order to make an analytically indispensable distinction between it and the playable figure. Discussing the

nature of the locus of manipulation in this sense might, for instance, provide us with an excellent critical tool for describing the difference between what Klevjer, echoing Neitzel, terms *direct* and *indirect* manipulation (2006, 118) – that is, between the player’s relation to the playable figure in platform games such as *Super Mario World* (Nintendo 1991), where the locus of manipulation is coterminous with the playable figure, and the one in point-and-click adventure games such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990), where, although there is a playable figure, the locus of manipulation is detached from it, occupying the location of the cursor that the player can move around the screen independently of the movements of the figure.<sup>3</sup>

However, it rapidly becomes apparent that Bayliss is, in fact, making no such distinction: he does not consider the locus of manipulation an abstract ‘point’ (as of course is implied in the term *locus*) that can attach itself firmly to a single game component, or move between different components, or not be identified with a game component at all. Instead, Bayliss still firmly identifies the locus of manipulation with the figure over which the player is given control – this is specified directly when he argues that “the terms avatar and character are often used interchangeably to describe the player’s locus of manipulation” (ibid.). The only reason the term ‘locus of manipulation’ is introduced at all, opting against using the more established terms *avatar* or *character*, is as a convenient neutral term: “establishing a meaningful difference between what the terms *avatar* and *character* refer to” necessitates “a third term that refers to both” (ibid.). I agree with Bayliss on the requirement for such a neutral term, which is why I have continued to use the term ‘playable figure’ rather than privilege either ‘avatar’ or ‘character’. However, using the term ‘locus of manipulation’ for this purpose erases the useful analytical distinction between playable figure and locus of manipulation, and proves untenable when faced examples of games – such as the aforementioned *The Secret of Monkey Island* – where the playable figure as concrete existent and the locus of manipulation as implied formal structure do not overlap.

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<sup>3</sup> In his 2012 paper “Enter the Avatar: The Phenomenology of Prosthetic Telepresence in Computer Games,” Klevjer appears to shift terminology for this distinction, referring instead to *tangible* and *symbolic* interaction. It is in these terms that I shall return to this distinction in section 6.3.1.

### 5.1.3 *Game Ego*

A final term to consider is Ulf Wilhelmsson's proposal of the notion of a "Game Ego," which he defines as "a bodily based function that enacts a point of being within the game environment through a tactile motor/kinaesthetic link" (2008, 61). Like the notions of point of action and locus of manipulation, the Game Ego is aimed at addressing the fact that "the player does not only see and hear but is enacting a point of being" (ibid.). What sets the notion of the Game Ego, as defined here, apart from the two earlier concepts is that it is not conceived of as an abstracted point, but as relating to an actual existent in the gameworld – as Wilhelmsson writes, "the Game Ego provides presence within the game environment" (ibid., 68).

For this reason, this definition would seem to give the notion a narrower, more focused reference than either *point of action* or *locus of manipulation*, in that it appears to refer exclusively to a subjective investment in the form of a playable figure. However, the examples Wilhelmsson chooses reveal that the concept is intended to have a wider reference, somewhat contradicting its definition. *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1986), for example, would not seem to fit the criteria, in that there is no singular "point of being" to which the lines of the player's agency can be traced back. Much less can we speak of a "bodily based function" here. In spite of this, Wilhelmsson argues, "there is still a Game Ego function within this environment that allows control in the audiovisual field of the game player" (ibid., 63). Meanwhile, it would seem that the prescription of a necessary "tactile motor/kinaesthetic link" between player and Game Ego would preclude discussions of interactive fiction on this front; and yet, Wilhelmsson extends the concept to the playable figure encountered in such games, even if here "the Game Ego is only manifest through words and the process of typing and the player will need to imagine him or her self within the environment as the agent performing the actions" (ibid.). Wilhelmsson's concept, then, lacks the rigour and specificity required to offer a cogent definition of the entity that the player is in the gameworld, and its role in structuring ludic subjectivity.

## 5.2 Embodiment and games

A more satisfying account can be arrived at by considering the application of the notion of embodiment to the analysis of being-in-the-gameworld. There is no shortage of critical work in game studies that, directly or otherwise, addresses the question of embodiment – a representative, but by no means exhaustive, list could include Taylor 2002; Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007a; 2007b; Gee 2008; Leino 2010; Calleja 2011; Gazzard 2011a; 2011b; Norgård 2011.

It is pertinent to note, however, that no single understanding of ‘embodiment’ emerges when taking this body of work as a whole: any deployment of the notion of embodiment to the study of games needs to be accompanied by a qualification regarding what sense the term is being used in. Accordingly, I shall begin by presenting the development of the idea of the playable figure or avatar as a ‘virtual body’ for the player in the gameworld, which finds its culmination in Rune Klevjer’s theory of the avatar (2006; 2012). I shall then contrast this to the other dominant usage of the notion of embodiment in game studies – that which focuses on the player’s own physical body and the role it plays in shaping gameplay. Finally, Calleja’s notion of *incorporation* (2011, 169) shall be used to cement the link between embodiment and the sense of being-in-the-gameworld, thereby establishing the starting-point for my own development of a theory of the embodied ludic subject in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

### 5.2.1 A “virtual body”

T.L. Taylor writes that, “users do not simply roam through the [game] space as “mind”, but find themselves grounded in the *practice* of the body, and thus in the world” (2002, 42). The possession of a body is what makes it possible for the player to encounter the gameworld in the mode of being-in:

...presence enacts itself as an *embodied* activity. It is through a performance of the body, in this case via the avatar, that one is rooted in the virtual environment.

There is a material thing (albeit a digital one) that finds itself located in a space



and moves through it, engaging in some way with objects and with others it encounters. (ibid., 44)

In a similar vein, Torben Grodal's 2003 essay "Stories for Eye, Ear and Muscles: Video Games, Media and Embodied Experiences" starts with the seemingly straightforward assertion that "video games and other types of interactive virtual reality are simulations of basic modes of real-life experiences" (2003, 129): a statement which hides the radical assumption that the player's experience of the gameworld is, at least in some senses, analogous to her experience of her actual world, and, consequently, that the player's being-in-the-gameworld operates according to the same (or analogous) structures that shape her being-in-the-world as an embodied being.

It is on this basis that Bernard Perron argues that what sets the videogame apart from the cinematic modes of heterocosmic subject-positioning I covered in section 4.1.5 is that the game performs "an operation which returns a virtual body to the viewer, now transformed into a gamer" (2009, 121), when compared to the purely audiovisual subjectivity of the film viewer. The result of this, Perron continues, is that the player's experience of the gameworld is entirely reframed, opening not only onto the representation of bodily existence and perception, but onto that experience itself, as it manifests in the form of movement within the gameworld:

Since the exploration of that world is not under the total control of an obliging assistant wheeling and flowing the gamer around through the time and space of the fictional world as in film but depends upon the movement of the player character, the narrative architecture of videogames needs to be gone through – what the expression "walkthrough" refers to. The audiovision of the gamer is transformed into a walk, a run, a flight. (ibid., 131)

This allows us to expand upon the remarks made by Alexander Galloway and Grant Tavinor regarding the difference between the subjectivity that is granted to the player in relation to the gameworld and non-ludic modes of heterocosmic subject-positioning. Recall that Galloway's point is that what sets "*gamic vision*" apart is that it frames a "*fully rendered, actionable space*" (2006, 63), while Tavinor argued that videogames expanded on

the construction of a “*perceiving self*” within the heterocosm by “also allowing the subject to act” (2009, 70). These statements can be taken as two sides of the same coin: an actionable space can of course be perceived as such only by a subject who has the capacity to act within it. Moreover, I already remarked, in section 4.1.6, that what is implicit, but unthematized, in both approaches is the notion of the ludic subject as the player’s subjective existence internal to the gameworld that allows it to be brought forth to the player’s consciousness as the world in which she is. Perron’s remarks highlight the necessity of taking this a step further, pointing out that the intuition of the gameworld does not occur only through the sensations of “seeing” or “hearing,” but through the experience of bodily kinaesthetic functions (walking, running, etc.) which I recognize, as a player, as *mine*, and which can only be the result of some level of an identification with a body in the gameworld that is equally taken up as mine.

It is Rune Klevjer, however, who goes to the greatest lengths in developing the notion of embodiment in games. In his project, Klevjer states that the playable figure – he uses the term *avatar* - “acts as a mediator of the player’s embodied interaction with the gameworld,” in that “it gives the player a subject-position within a simulated environment, a vicarious body through which the player can act as an agent in a fictional world” (2006, 10). The thesis upon which such a statement is founded is the idea that “one of the reasons why avatar-based games appeal to us is precisely because the principle of the avatar is grounded in, and plays with, the general phenomenology of the body” (2006, 9). From this premise, and building upon the scaffolding of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body (2002[1945]), Klevjer develops a theory of avatar-play which I shall be drawing on heavily in my own theorization of the embodied ludic subject and the playable figure. What is expressed here, then, is the key insight which the notion of *embodiment* allows us to add to an understanding of the player’s being-in-the-gameworld. It lets us talk more concretely about how the conditions for the experiential effects which have been classed under *immersion* or *presence* are established by the player’s involvement with the playable figure. What these earlier formulations missed – and what *embodiment* acknowledges – is that being-in-the-gameworld is not purely an experiential

phenomenon. On the contrary, the player's experiential – and hence, phenomenal – sense of being-in-the-gameworld is dependent on an ontological being in the gameworld, on being embodied as an entity that belongs to the gameworld.

### 5.2.2 *An opposing understanding of embodiment*

Before proceeding with my argument, it is necessary to pause to point out an alternative application of the concept of *embodiment* in game studies. This will allow me to bracket this understanding and keep it to one side – acknowledging it and drawing on it as and when necessary, but making a distinction between it and the primary sense in which *embodiment* is understood in this study.

This second understanding of embodiment is, in a sense, a reversal of the first. Alison Gazzard articulates its starting-point by stating that “we have our own spatial awareness outside of the screen through our body schema, but this is not replicated within the gameworld” (2011b). As a result, rather than the playable figure being understood as an embodiment of the player within the gameworld, the focus is shifted onto how ludic engagement is embodied in the player's physical, bodily being. Embodiment, in other words, happens on this side of the screen, not on the “elsewhere” the screen opens onto – or, in Peter Bayliss' words, “rather than the player being transported into the world of the game, the game itself is instead drawn out into the player's” (2007b, 99), meaning that it can be considered as a “playing *through*” the playable figure, which “highlights the player's own embodiment outside of the gameworld” (Bayliss 2007a, 3). As Paul Martin puts it, this involves looking “not at a player's sense of presence in the game environment but rather presence in the play space,” which involves a focus on the “playing-body,” that is, the player's body in the situation of ludic engagement (2012, 2).

This notion of embodiment brings into focus aspects of player experience that are occluded by the other understanding of the term. It lies at the basis of theories such as Graeme Kirkpatrick's argument that “gameplay is a physical activity that involves our

hands using the buttons and levers and triggers on the controller” (2011, 111)<sup>4</sup>, as well as projects such as Rikke Tøft Norgård’s consideration of the player’s bodily performance in videogame play (2011).

I do not wish to dismiss this understanding of the term or the validity and indispensability of the insights that can be gained by adopting the perspective it represents.<sup>5</sup> The player’s existence as an actual embodied human being in the playing situation plays a crucial role in the schema of ludic engagement: it is, after all, the seat of the external perspective which, in section 2.4, I highlighted as being as crucial an element of the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement as the gameworld-internal perspective of the ludic subject. As a consequence of this, in section 4.3.1, I criticized the “immersive fallacy” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 453) by pointing out that – as Vivian Sobchack argues with respect to the film viewer (1992, 24) – the player does not entirely conceal her embodied subjective standpoint *as* a player sitting on the couch in her living room. Having said that, the usefulness of *embodiment* as a conceptual term depends on preserving a clear meaning for it, and multiplying its references only serves to weaken its conceptual sharpness. This already becomes evident in Bayliss’ expansion on his understanding of embodiment. Avatar-play, he writes, establishes “a feedback loop between the embodied player embodying the avatar whose perceived limitations and capabilities are then embodied in the conduct of the player” (2007a, 3). *Embodiment* here is used to refer to three different processes in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. Firstly, the player is *embodied*, as a bodily entity “situated in the particular context of their

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<sup>4</sup> As a side note, one could remark that Kirkpatrick’s attempt to shift the focus of an aesthetics of videogames upon the player’s bodily activity in this manner betrays an unacknowledged bias towards action or rhythm-based games, where such an approach can prove fruitful, as opposed to, say, point-and-click adventure games.

<sup>5</sup> Nor is the distinction between the two positions necessarily as clear-cut as this might present it to be. Kirkpatrick, for instance, goes on to say that, despite the fundamental physicality of the act of videogame play, “we prefer to talk about what we do with games as if we were ‘in’ them and not holding the controller at all” (2011, 111). In the same vein, Bayliss distinguished “playing *through*” from “playing *as*”, even if he links the latter notion, problematically, to “the narrative and fictional possibilities presented by the character” (2007a, 3). On the other side of the fence, Klevjer’s notion of the avatar as a “prosthetic extension” (2006, 93), which I shall discuss at some length in section 5.4.1, attempts to graft the playable figure onto the player’s own embodied situation.

own experience” (Bayliss 2007b, 96). Secondly, the avatar is in turn *embodied by* the player, in the sense that the player internalizes the capabilities and limitations of the avatar – resulting in the curious inversion I have described, whereby it is the player that functions as an avatar of the figure, rather than vice-versa. Finally, the player’s performance of play constitutes an embodiment – in the sense of a giving of physical form to – these capabilities and limitations – in that these defining qualities of the playable figure, having been internalized by the player in Bayliss’ second sense of embodiment, themselves “become embodied in the intentions and actions of the player” (ibid.).

In this passage, Bayliss makes a number of extremely valid observations I shall have occasion to discuss in later sections. At the same time, however, the stretching of the notion of *embodiment* to refer to multiple processes and different facets of the player-figure relation robs the term of the specific meaning it has for questions regarding the player’s subjective experience *in* the gameworld. For this reason, unless otherwise specified, it is the first understanding of embodiment – *embodiment* as referring to the player’s being granted a bodily presence in the gameworld in the form of the playable figure – that I shall use the term for in this study. Accordingly, it is to Calleja’s notion of *incorporation* that I shall turn to highlight the challenges that need to be met by a theory of embodied being-in-the-gameworld.

### 5.2.3 *‘Incorporation’ and the ludic subject*

In response to the inadequacies he identifies in the terms *immersion*, *presence* and *telepresence*, which I have already outlined in section 4.2, Calleja proposes the concept of *incorporation* (2011, 169) as a better formulation of the phenomenal mechanism responsible for the player’s sense of being-in-the-gameworld. Incorporation is defined as “*the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar*” (ibid., italics in original). As this definition makes clear, *incorporation*, unlike the unidirectional movement implied by the ‘transportation’ sense of immersion, is to be understood as a two-way process: it “operates on a double axis: the player incorporates (in the sense of

internalizing or assimilating) the game environment while *simultaneously* being incorporated through the avatar into that environment” (ibid.).

I shall take the opening lines of *Adventure*, with which I introduced this study, as an example. The player’s investment in the playable figure addressed as “You,” which the player takes up as “I,” is what allows the gameworld to be incorporated into the player’s consciousness as the world in which she is – that is, for the player to accept as actual that she is standing at the end of a road, that there is a small brick building before her and a forest around her, and so on. At the same time, it is only possible for her to incorporate the gameworld into her subjective consciousness in this way on the precondition that she has been incorporated into the gameworld in the form of this “I” which, on the ontic dimension of the gameworld, *is* actually present as a being standing at the end of a road before a small brick building.

In other words, it is here that a term emerges that includes within it the dual aspect of *being* as both verb and noun. If *immersion* and *presence* describe only the experience of being-in-the-gameworld, *incorporation*, in its double movement, laminates this experiential sense of being-in-the-gameworld to an ontic sense. It is through being incorporated as an entity within the gameworld that the gameworld is incorporated into the player’s consciousness as the domain towards which that consciousness is oriented. In Calleja’s words, “incorporation occurs when the game world is present to the player while the player is simultaneously present, via her avatar, to the virtual environment” (ibid.). Incorporation, then, can be understood as the phenomenal consequence of embodiment.

Adopting the notion of incorporation also highlights the investment of ludic subjectivity in, and its determination by, the playable figure, whether this is as simple as the barest suggestion of a figure inherent in *Adventure*’s second-person pronominal address, or as elaborate on both a game-systemic and a heterocosmic dimension as Joel from *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013). It is thanks to the player’s investment in the playable figure that ludic subjectivity takes the form of an embodiment. However, the caution I made in section 1.5 bears repeating: this should not be taken to suggest that the

terms ‘ludic subject’ and ‘playable figure’ are interchangeable. I will engage in more detail with the necessity of keeping the two terms separate in section 6.1; for now, however, I can put the matter succinctly by saying that the playable figure is an entity in the gameworld, both an avatar (through a game-systemic frame of reference) and a character (through a ludic-heterocosmic frame), while ‘ludic subject’ refers to the subjectivity enacted in the player’s first-personal engagement with the gameworld and shaped through an embodiment in the form of the playable figure.

Nonetheless, the point remains that it is thanks to this incorporation in the form of the playable figure – to put it differently, it is in the playable figure being taken up as a body for the player’s ludic subjectivity – that the sense of being-in-the-gameworld structuring the player’s experience of the figure game is established and given its idiosyncratic character. Given that what gives *both* the gameworld and the experience of being-in-the-gameworld the specific character it takes in the player’s consciousness is that the player encounters it as a being who has a body within it, the notion of incorporation provides us with a structure for conceptualizing the phenomenal relation between the ludic subject as an *embodied* subject in the gameworld and the gameworld as it emerges as a lived *bodily* space for the ludic subject. In what remains of this chapter, then, I shall take up precisely this task of developing a phenomenology of the embodied ludic subject.

### **5.3 The phenomenology of the body**

If we are to agree with Klevjer’s assertion that a phenomenological accord exists between embodied experience of the gameworld through the intermediary of the playable figure and being-in-the-world as an embodied subject (2006, 90), then it is in conceptualizations of the latter that the former must be founded. In this section, then, I shall ground an approach to the embodied ludic subject by engaging with the phenomenology of the body espoused in the work of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, thereby setting the scene for a direct engagement with the embodied ludic subject in the final section of this chapter.

### 5.3.1 *The ontological necessity of the body*

At a basic level, the foregrounding of the body as the foundation of being-in-the-world emerges as an ontological necessity. Put simply: for a subject to encounter the things of a world, she must have an existence on the same ontological level as the things she is encountering. She must be incarnated as an embodied subject, *being* a body that is a thing among the things of the world.

To expand upon this point, I shall introduce Sartre's division of being into *being-for-itself* and *being-in-itself*. Developing the basic phenomenological notion of the relation of the subject to the world, and specifically echoing Heidegger's earlier division between the self-contained being-in-itself of things in the world and human beings or *Dasein*, as entities that "in their Being, comport themselves towards their Being," and "are delivered over to their own Being" (2008[1927], 67[H.42]), 'in-itself' refers to inanimate objects that simply *are* in the world, while 'for-itself' refers to the human subject that, in having consciousness of itself, can be a being *for* itself (that is, can be present to its own consciousness) in a way that the in-itself cannot. The distinction between the two can therefore be characterized as being that between perceived object and perceiving subject; the in-itself is the mode of being that pertains to things that merely *are*, and can be encountered as such in the world of experience (Sartre 1966[1943], 28-29), while being-for-itself is the mode of being that defines human consciousness, which, through being consciousness, must necessarily be consciousness *of* something,<sup>6</sup> and therefore "does not coincide with itself" – even when, in a reflective act of self-consciousness, it takes itself as its object, and thus becomes a being *for itself* (*ibid.*, 120).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This is an extremely simplified presentation of Sartre's discussion on the in-itself and the for-itself, omitting such basic elements as the role played by the concept of "nothingness" in the constitution of the for-itself. Still, to go beyond this basic sketch, which suffices for the purpose of establishing a phenomenology of the body that can be deployed for an analysis of the playable figure, would be to go beyond the scope of this investigation.

<sup>7</sup> Here, needless to say, is revealed the fundamental ontology of the subject which rendered it necessary to approach the ludic subject by means of a long detour through the analysis of its perceptual world – that is, the gameworld. This clarification of the for-itself and its relation to the in-itself lends more conceptual heft to the point I have already stated, in the unfolding of the intentional model of consciousness in section 3.1, that it is impossible to think of subjectivity except insofar as it is conscious of a world.



Though the in-itself and the for-itself constitute different modes of being, the two are, necessarily, bound in a primordial relation:

We know that there is not a for-itself on the one hand and a world on the other as two closed entities for which we must subsequently seek some explanation as to how they communicate. The for-itself is a relation to the world. (1966[1943], 405)

This, of course, already became apparent, in Chapter 2, on the level of the intentional act of consciousness, where the phenomenon, the thing as it is available to thought, combines within itself a noetic and a noematic dimension – that is, the experience *for* a subject or for-itself, and an object or in-itself *of which* it is an experience. The question, then, is to determine the plane of encounter upon which the two orders of being can engage in their relation.

In attempting to answer this question, Merleau-Ponty starts from the simple observation that sense experience involves a communion of the sensing and the sensed – a tangible point of encounter. He proceeds to make the case that this necessarily implies an ontic equivalence between the perceiving subject and the perceived object; that is, a presence of the for-itself within the ontological domain of the in-itself:

...between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle [...] This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. (1968, 133)

There is no reason to make a distinction between the senses, and if this is true of touch, it is equally true of vision: “he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at” (ibid., 134). Again, the import of Merleau-Ponty’s observation is clear: an encounter with the things of the world can only occur on a shared ontological ground.

The encounter of for-itself and in-itself, subject and world, is therefore dependent upon the for-itself’s embodiment in the ontological domain of the in-itself, that is, the subject’s presence as a body in the world. Sartre was aware of this, writing

that, “to say that I have entered into the world, come into the world, “come to the world,” or that there is a world, or that I have a body is one and the same thing” (1966[1943], 419).

In ludic terms, this means, as I have already noted, that the player needs to be granted an ontological status in the ludic domain. This, of course, is the idea that is at the core of Calleja’s notion of incorporation as an “extranoetic habitation” (2011, 29) of the gameworld. In this regard, it is striking to note that Merleau-Ponty describes the phenomenal role played by the body in terms that closely parallel those used by Calleja to define incorporation in the gameworld: the body, Merleau-Ponty writes, “incorporates into itself the whole of the sensible and with the same movement incorporates itself into a “Sensible in itself”” (1969, 138).

In other words, the phenomenology of embodiment is defined by a double movement, operating simultaneously in two directions. First, the body subsumes the phenomenal world into itself, as an ordered arrangement of relations and organizations of which it is the centre. In this sense the world as an experiential domain is incorporated into the body through which it is experienced. Secondly, and by the same token, the body is itself a sensible thing-in-the-world, and, as such, is incorporated into the world, in the mode of being-in-itself.

### 5.3.2 *The body as ‘first co-ordinates’*

The foregrounding of the body as the for-itself’s seat in the world, already present as a crucial dimension in Sartre’s existential phenomenology and elevated to the level of a primary theme in Merleau-Ponty’s project, identifies the question of embodiment as the necessary baseline of any engagement with existential questions of being-in-the-world. According to this understanding, in fact, body and world are inextricable on the phenomenal plane:

Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system. (Kockelmans 1970, 235)

My body constitutes the centre of the world as an existential sphere *for me*: the shape of the world is traced out with perceptual lines that inevitably originate from, and return to, my body as the zero point. Merleau-Ponty writes that “the word ‘here’ applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external co-ordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates,” and it is for this reason that the spatiality of the body is not “a *spatiality of position*, but a spatiality of *situation*” (ibid., 115). Where my body is, must for me always be the ‘here’ around which my bodily space is organized: as Edward S. Casey writes, if I am in a room, “no matter where I am in relation to the precise layout of the room, I remain just here and not *there*,” and “it is by my body – my lived body – that I am here” (1993, 50-51). As such, the body lays down the indexical point relative to which the lived world is organized. In purely spatial terms, ‘left’ or ‘right’, ‘near’ and ‘far’, ‘in front of’ and ‘behind’, are *deictic* terms, being determined in relation to the body as standpoint. By this understanding, the body is the *origo*, the central point of reference for the system of deictic relationships that gives structure to the world as my world-about-me. In this sense, as Sartre writes:

...my body is everywhere in the world; it is over there in the fact that the lamp-post hides the bush which grows along the path, as well as in the fact that the roof up there is above the window of the sixth floor or in the fact that a passing car swerves from right to left behind the truck or that the woman who is crossing the street appears smaller than the man who is sitting on the sidewalk in front of the cafe. My body is co-extensive with the world, spread across all things, and at the same time it is condensed into this single point which all things indicate and which I am, without being able to know it. (Sartre 1966[1943], 419-420)

To return once again to *Adventure*, it is noteworthy that it is precisely by means of the delineation of such a spatial *origo*, and the unfolding of a scene relative to it, that the ludic subject-position is established: “you” are standing *in front of* a small brick building, *around* “you” is a forest, and so on. I have described the ludic subject-position as a *standpoint* the player inhabits in relation to the gameworld, and, on this level, the term is literal.

Given the importance that spatial considerations have been granted within game studies – which I have already remarked upon in Chapter 1 – it is not surprising that this establishment of a spatial *origo* and the subsequent gathering of the world into a relative spatial situation has received considerable attention. In this vein, Stephan Günzel writes that “the player becomes involved in the game by being in the position of the character who acts” (2005, 8), and it should not escape attention that Calleja’s definition of incorporation specifies that the “systematically upheld embodiment” of the player fixes her “in a single location” in the gameworld (2011, 169).

That this spatial standpoint is the first step in the organization of the player’s spatial situation in the gameworld is evident in Anita Leirfall’s application of a Kantian approach to space to a study of directionality in videogames, where she argues that “we have a capacity for exercising powers [...] that exhibit a system of directions (from our vantage point as “origo”) which make orientation in both physical and virtual space possible” (Leirfall 2013, 7). This also becomes apparent in Christian Elverdam and Espen Aarseth’s articulation of relative game space organizations as opposed to absolute ones (2007, 7), which I shall return to in section 7.2.1.

However, it is not only as a spatial first position, imposing an organization upon the world as a spatial arrangement relative to its standpoint, that the body gathers a meaningful world around itself. To more fully conceptualize the relation between the embodied subject and the world, it is necessary to invoke the idea of the *facticity* of the for-itself, and of embodied being.

### 5.3.3 *Facticity and situation*

I have already touched upon the notion of *facticity* in section 3.5.4. At that earlier stage of the investigation – when it emerged in the context of the discussion regarding the ludic materiality of the gameworld – I invoked the concept to describe the fundamentality of the encounter between the ludic subject and the ludic materiality that serves as the guarantee of the actuality of things-in-the-gameworld.

However, it is in the context of an engagement with the phenomenology of the body that the question of facticity, and its implications upon ludic subjectivity, can be unfolded in its full complexity. Though it is first coined in the writings of the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1982[1794/5]),<sup>8</sup> the term ‘facticity’ as Sartre uses it follows the meaning the term has accrued within the phenomenological tradition. In short, having already noted that Sartre characterizes the for-itself as “a relation to the world,” facticity can be defined as the name Sartre gives to this relation.

At the initial level, the for-itself *is* in the simple fact of “its *presence to the world*” (1966[1943], 127): upon this basis, the for-itself’s being-in-the-world can be understood as its *facticity*, the situation in which it finds itself and which determines the possibilities and parameters of its free being. It is that contingent actuality which the for-itself takes on as the ground of its being and the horizon against which its freedom is measured:

...the for-itself is sustained by a perpetual contingency for which it assumes the responsibility and which it assimilates without ever being able to suppress it. This perpetually evanescent contingency of the in-itself [...] is what we shall call the *facticity* of the for-itself. It is this facticity which permits us to say that the for-itself *is*, that it exists, although we can never *realize* the facticity, and although we always apprehend it through the for-itself. (1966[1943], 131)

The for-itself can be said to exist, to *be*, precisely because it finds itself in relation to its factual situation: that is, it finds itself always already inextricably a part of being, located in a contingent actuality – which brings with it an echo of the notion of *Geworfenheit* (or “thrownness” into the world) which Heidegger identified as a basic quality of Dasein’s being, and which he in fact defined precisely as “the *facticity of its being delivered over*” (2008[1927], 174[135]). We can only apprehend the in-itself as it plays out as facticity *for* the consciousness of the for-itself: that is, as it manifests itself phenomenally for the

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<sup>8</sup> In Fichte’s writing, unlike in Sartre or Heidegger, ‘facticity’ is framed as the material contingency that the individual subject is to overcome in a transcendental leap into idealism. This is a radical distinction that emblemizes the distinction between Fichte’s post-Kantian idealism and Heidegger and Sartre’s existentialist phenomenology; however, a commentary on this philosophical opposition in the approach to facticity is outside the remit of this current study.

experiencing subject. Once again, world and subject (and gameworld and ludic subject) prove to be inextricable.

It is on this basis that Olli Tapio Leino argues for an understanding of games as “*extended facticities*, extensions of the “concrete details against which our freedom exists and is limited”” (2010, 11). The facticity established by the gameworld’s ludic materiality serves as the foundation for the establishment of what he terms the *gameplay condition* (2009, 12; 2010, 101) – the condition of responsibility for one’s freedom of action resulting from the game’s material upholding of the consequences of the player’s choices. Leino elaborates on this point against the background of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical treatment of play – most salient is Gadamer’s observation that the player, as the subject of the game, “enjoys a freedom of decision which at the same time is endangered and irrevocably limited” (2001[1960], 106).

At the limit of this resistance, Gadamer stresses the factor of “risk” as a structuring element in play, noting that it is the coefficient of any project of play: “even in the case of games in which one tries to perform tasks that one has set oneself, there is a risk that they will not ‘work’, ‘succeed’, or ‘succeed again’, which is the attraction of the game” (2001[1960], 106). It is against this risk of failure that the player’s efforts gain significance, and it is due to the ludic subject’s relation to the contingency of the gameworld that this risk is upheld: as Leino writes, “the gameplay condition is manifested in *concrete* aspects of the experience” (2010, 218).

#### 5.3.4 *Contingency, purpose and resistance*

However, it is not simply as pure contingency that the for-itself’s finding itself in the in-itself is given the shape of a factual situation, and hence of a meaningful existential world. For the purposes of a theory of the ludic subject, likewise, it is not enough to say that the embodied ludic subject finds itself as a thing among the things of the gameworld; while this simple fact of ontic incorporation is the necessary starting-point for a phenomenological understanding of embodiment in the gameworld, the

investigation must go further in determining how, on this basis, the embodied ludic subject can gather a meaningful existential world around itself.

Key to this is Sartre's observation that "there can be a free-for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world" (1966[1943], 621). It is not enough simply to consider the contingency of things-in-themselves as "an unnamable and unthinkable *residuum which belongs to the in-itself*" (Sartre 1966[1943], 620): that is, as pure, material Other in the sense which, in section 3.5.2, I argued, following Heidegger, constitutes the "earth" against which the world emerges (Heidegger 2004[1936], 174). This contingency can only manifest itself as meaningful within the field determined by the for-itself's existential project insofar as it is revealed as an obstacle or an affordance in relation to the working-out of this project. As such, the factual nature of the for-itself's being-in-the-world depends precisely on the encounter between its projects and this resistance:

...it is *by us* – *i.e.*, by the preliminary positing of an end – that [the] coefficient of adversity arises. A particular crag, which manifests a profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be on the contrary a valuable aid if I want to climb upon it in order to look over the countryside. In itself – if one can even imagine what the crag can be in itself – it is neutral; that is, it waits to be illuminated by an end in order to manifest itself as adverse or helpful. (Sartre 1966[1943], 620)

Merleau-Ponty draws on, and expands upon, this observation of Sartre's, even going so far as to use Sartre's example as a starting-point:

An unclimbable rock face, a large or small, vertical or slanting rock, are things which have no meaning for anyone who is not intending to surmount them, for a subject whose projects do not carve out such determinate forms from the uniform mass of the *in itself* and cause an orientated world to arise – a significance in things. (2002[1945], 507)

The crucial insight these passages reveal is the central role played by the embodied subject's *purposes* in determining the character things-in-themselves are given when they are incorporated into its bodily lived-world. It is only as they relate to my purposes – the goals which give my existential being its teleological orientation – that the things I

encounter can be given a specific meaning for me – as an obstacle to be overcome, an affordance towards my goal, and so on – and hence take their place in the sphere of the bodily lived world.

An example will serve to illustrate this point. If a *Minecraft* player takes on the project of building a hilltop stronghold, this is only rendered possible by the facticity of the player's situation within the game's virtual landscape. It is only thanks to the actual, undeniable ludic materiality of the stone blocks as game components, for example, that they can be grasped as an element of the in-itself encountered by the player: that they both limit the player's free movement (by standing in her way) and make it possible in the first place (by acting as ground to walk on). The player, as a subject in the *Minecraft* world, exists in a relation to the stone block that allows it to be brought forth, within the subject's factual situation, as something that can be quarried. It is this possibility that, in the first place, renders the building of a stronghold conceivable as a project.

At the same time as they establish the conditions of possibility for the project, the stone blocks also embody the element of resistance that is an equally intrinsic element of facticity. The player, having taken on the project of building the stronghold, cannot simply will the stone blocks of the hillside into the configuration she desires. The ludic materiality of the stone blocks inflexibly upholds their contingent actuality at a given coordinate within the game space, and the player is required to work in order to overcome this resistance, expending time in quarrying each stone block, transporting it to its desired new location and placing it there. It is this resistance which structures the effort that can be understood as constituting gameplay.<sup>9</sup>

If the player realizes her designs for her stronghold have been in error, and the two walls she has busied herself with constructing for the past hour do not intersect at the desired angle, the ludic materiality of the stone blocks as game components imposes upon her the consequences of her choices: she cannot simply choose to retroactively rethink her actions and build the walls at a different angle, because the actual

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<sup>9</sup> By the same token, then, gameplay can be understood as the effort required to overcome the resistance put forward the ludic material to actualization of the player's project.



arrangement of stone blocks stands as an undeniable testament to her choices and actions, one which she has no choice but to accept. In an extreme case, this results in the limit point of the gameplay condition as Leino defines it: a particularly pronounced or repeated failure of the project of play can lead to the enforcement of a “tangible limit” to the freedom to play (2010, 217). If the walls of the player’s stronghold, unfinished at nightfall, provide no shelter from the various monsters that come out at night, it is likely that, unless the player takes other precautions, the death of the playable figure is the outcome. In this manner, the player is made responsible for her own ludic being.

A central element in the embodied phenomenology of the world, then, is the organization of the world in the light of the embodied subject’s purposes within it. Merleau-Ponty takes the point further: it is not only the world that is given form and meaning by my orientation towards my purposes, but, inseparably, also my body itself. The *body schema*, my body as it appears *to me* as the fulcrum of my world, is a “collecting together of itself in pursuit of its aims,” and, as such, “if my body can be a ‘form’ and if there can be, in front of it, important figures against indifferent backgrounds, this occurs in virtue of its being polarised by its tasks, of its *existence towards* them” (2002[1945], 115).

### 5.3.5 *The instrumental complex and the ‘I can’*

Before we can even talk about the question of tasks and purposes – or about affordances and obstacles – an additional step is required. Sartre argues – extending his example – that it is only against the background of the instrumental capabilities of the individual’s embodiment in the world that the factual situation can gain meaning as affordances and limitations towards the individual’s projects:

...it can manifest itself in one or the other way only within an instrumental complex which is already established. Without picks and piolets, paths already worn, and a technique of climbing, the crag would neither be easy nor difficult to climb; the question would not be posited, it would not support any relation of any kind with the technique of mountain climbing” (Sartre 1966[1943], 620).

The notion of the “instrumental complex” that Sartre invokes here is a crucial one that deserves to be unpacked. What is meant by this term is an understanding of the world-about me as a structured form determined by the lines of instrumentality extending along possible paths of action – as Sartre puts it, in a memorable image, “the world as the correlate of the possibilities which I *am* appears from the moment of my upsurge as the enormous skeletal outline of all my possible actions” (ibid., 425). It is within a world understood in these terms that things-in-themselves can be brought into view as significant, one way or another, to the for-itself’s existential project: “it is in relation to an original instrumental complex that things reveal their resistance and their adversity” (ibid., 428).

This highlights the necessity of taking a step back, and of anchoring both the framework of the instrumental complex and the teleology of purposes it is oriented towards in a fundamental bodily capacity for action. If, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the fundamental tenet of the phenomenology of the embodied subject is that “consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” (2002[1945], 159-160), then it stands to reason that “consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (ibid.).

As such, it is the body as an “I can,” a range of bodily capabilities that it affords in relation to the world, that is the point of origin of the vectors of action that constitute Sartre’s instrumental complex: “there is a world for a subject just insofar as the body has capacities by which it can approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions” (Young 1980, 145). The “I can” is foundational: Ricoeur writes that “the “I can” [...] does not derive from the “I want” but provides a ground for it” (1992, 324). It is what is presupposed in the conscious or unconscious positing of any project:

Merleau-Ponty claims that all these projects *presuppose* that man is able to move his body, to act, to perceive. [...] The fact that a human being is able to accomplish all these different tasks involves no problems only and exclusively on

the presupposition that man's capacity of moving his body and his ability to perceive are self-evident. (Kockelmans 1970, 275)

The inverse is also true: if the range of bodily capabilities for action determine the meaning given to the world as an existential situation for the subject, then the *lack*, or, to put it differently, the *exclusion* of bodily capabilities that are *not* granted to the subject are just as important in determining the specificity of an embodied subject. As is revealed in Iris Marion Young's feminist reading of Merleau-Ponty, in which she explores the restrictions placed upon women's bodily comportment by the social conventions shaping the perception of femininity, if one's body schema precludes certain bodily actions towards the world, this is experienced as a pointed "I cannot" (1980, 146), binding the subject to a limited corporeal vocabulary in the enactment of her being-in-the-world.

Returning to the example from *Minecraft*, it is immediately evident that the pattern of obstacles and affordances into which the *Minecraft* landscape is resolved is determined by the "I can" the player is granted within this landscape (see Fig. 5.1). The stone-blocks are only revealed in their character as "standing-reserve" (Heidegger 2004[1953], 322), waiting to be put to use towards the end of a building project, because the player is granted the bodily capacity to quarry the stone. The player is granted enough inventory space to carry a certain number of quarried blocks in one go: this is both an affordance (in that the ability to transport blocks from place to place is what allows for the project of building the stronghold on top of the hill to be conceivable in the first place) and an obstacle (in that no more than this number of blocks can be carried in one go, thereby requiring the player to make multiple trips up and down the hill). On this latter point, the fact that climbing to the top of a hill takes more time and effort than traversing level terrain establishes a resistance to be overcome towards the end of building the hilltop stronghold which emerges entirely from the player's bodily situation in relation to the *Minecraft* landscape.

<b>“I can”</b>	<b>Affordance</b>	<b>Obstacle</b>
Digging ability	Stone can become building material	Stone takes time to be quarried
Inventory space (carrying capacity)	Stone can be carried	Only a certain amount of stone can be carried
Motility	Movement in space is possible	Movement in space expends time and effort

**Figure 5.1** The bodily determination of affordance and obstacle in *Minecraft*

This understanding of the embodied ludic subject intersects with Jonas Linderoth’s application of ecological psychology to the study of the avatar (2010; 2013), founded upon James J. Gibson’s conceptualization of the notion of *affordance* (1977). I have already discussed the matter of *affordance* in the context of the theorization of agency in section 4.4.2; here, however, it is now possible to emphasize the fundamentally corporeal nature of the concept, and the proximity it bears to the conceptual schema of the facticity of the embodied subject. In fact, I shall argue that, within this conceptual schema, the term ‘affordance’ can be used to refer to a point of encounter between a specific thing-in-itself, a bodily “I can”, and an existential purpose.

In Gibson's original usage of the term, an affordance is an “action possibility” that an object grants an agent. The handle of a teapot, for example, affords being grasped. This might suggest that an affordance is a property of an object – in this case, of the teapot. However, an object can only grant an agent a particular affordance if the agent has the necessary capabilities to make use of that affordance. The teapot provides the affordance of holding to a human agent with a hand with which to do the holding; it would provide no such affordance, however, if the agent before which the teapot were placed was an infant who had not yet developed the motor skills to close his hand around the handle, or a blue whale with no hand with which to do the holding. The unfortunate whale, whose flippers lack the capability of grasping to which the teapot

handle is addressed, has to resign itself to the fact that it cannot use the teapot to pour itself a cup of tea. The teapot grants the blue whale no affordance.

If a thing-in-the-world can present an affordance only if it is met by the right “I can” in the embodied subject’s body schema, it is also true that an affordance will not reveal itself unless it can be oriented towards a purpose or goal the subject recognizes as her own. If the human agent before which our teapot is placed has no taste for tea, she will have no intention or desire to use the teapot to pour herself a cup, and will, as such, not perceive the handle of the teapot as providing her with a useful affordance.

#### 5.4 The phenomenology of the ludic body

The observations I have made up to this point can therefore be summarized in three points that identify the senses in which, thanks to its status as an *embodied* subject, the for-itself carves out a meaningful world, as an existential sphere with the body at its centre:

1. The body establishes an *origo* around which a relative bodily space can be organized.
2. The *purposes* towards which the embodied subject is directed make contingent things-in-themselves appear as obstacles or affordances.
3. The bodily *I can*’ reveals possibilities for actions, gathering the world into an instrumental complex of such possibilities radiating outwards from the body.

At heart, this is a more specific expression of the fundamental phenomenological tenet, which I have already explored at length in Chapter 3, of the inextricable intermeshing of perceived world and perceiving subject, understood as mutually implicating poles of intentional experience – we should here recall Husserl’s statement that the world is brought forth into consciousness as “*my world-about-me*”, as an experiential structure that exists *for me*, organized around my subjective standpoint within it, and, inseparably, becoming also “*the world in which I find myself*”, that is, the world against which I can come into view as a subject (2012[1913], 53)).

I have laid out the phenomenological implications of an embodied understanding of the subject in the world, and contextualized my argument by tracing out these implications in practice in the player's engagement with *Minecraft*. However, in arguing that embodied ludic subjectivity operates according to the same experiential and existential structures as those Sartre and Merleau-Ponty identify as determining human being-in-the-world as embodied, I have so far largely omitted any discussion of the specificities of the former. The danger in this is that of making a glib equation between the phenomenal nature of the embodied subject's being-in-the-world and the embodied ludic subject's being-in-the-gameworld, setting aside the matter of any specificities that might inhere to the embodied ludic subject and its attendant aesthetic mechanisms.

It is time, then, to move in the direction of a unified theory of the embodied ludic subject, one that, while being grounded in the general phenomenology of the body whose salient points I have just outlined, is geared towards investigating the way in which the phenomenological mechanisms I have presented are manifested in ludic engagement.

In this regard, two existing theoretical developments announce themselves as being particularly noteworthy: namely, Klevjer's phenomenological theory of the avatar (2006; 2012) and Leino's conceptualization of the gameplay condition (2010), both of which have already played a significant part in the discussion to this point. I shall begin by making the case that Klevjer and Leino's perspectives both bring into view what can be termed an *extensional theory* of embodiment in the gameworld, according to which the bodily space of the playable figure is understood as an extension of the player's own embodied facticity. I shall argue that the extensional theory suffers from a number of conceptual difficulties, which I shall present. Finally, building upon certain observations in both Klevjer's and Leino's writing that already demonstrate the necessity of moving beyond the extensional theory, I shall propose an alternative understanding, returning to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty to highlight the two-sided phenomenology of the body that emerges as a direct consequence of embodied subjectivity, and linking this to the double perspectival structure of play as a foundation for a theory of the embodied ludic subject.

#### 5.4.1 *The extensional theory*

The starting-point for Klevjer's theory is the claim that, "in the phenomenological sense [...] the avatar should be understood as a prosthetic extension of the body-in-the-world"(2006, 93). Here, Klevjer leans on Merleau-Ponty's observations on bodily *extension*, which is developed in the example of the blind man who makes use of a stick to feel his way in such a way that the stick stops being a *thing* for him and becomes an extension of the body schema, a part of the 'I':

The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing parallel to sight. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002[1945], 165-166)

*Extension* implies addition; it suggests that a new element is added to the bodily totality, such that the body is itself kept in play, as it were, and only modified by means of the supplement of the prosthetic extension. What we are left with is our existing body *plus* the prosthesis; in Merleau-Ponty's example, the blind man feeling out his way with the stick uses the stick as an extension of his bodily sensorial complex. He might, in a moment of focus, concentrate his perceptual attention on the feel of the cobblestones over which the stick has moved: in the next instant, he might shift his attention to the sound of footsteps he hears behind him; and, in the *next* moment, to the weight of the briefcase whose handle he is grasping in his left hand. In each of these intentional acts of perception, as, indeed, with any act of embodied perception, there is a point of contact between his bodily, perceiving 'I' and the perceived world: respectively, the end of the stick, his ears, and his left hand. Of course, in their allegiance to the body as for-itself, to the perceiving-I rather than the perceived-I, none of these are themselves the object of his intentional perception; instead, they are all taken up into the same gestalt of the body-schema, in which, then, the stick takes its place alongside the ear and the left hand.

By the notion of a prosthetic avatar, Klevjer invites an understanding according to which the playable figure is similarly incorporated into the player's body schema, thereby allowing us to "extend our bodies across a *material* divide, into screen space"

(2012, 24). What this might mean for an understanding of ludic subjectivity and a linked phenomenology of the gameworld becomes apparent in Leino's notion of games as "*extended facticities*" (2010, 220) established for the benefit of the player. With the example of *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Games 2008), Leino highlights the artifactual nature of the game object, arguing that "we could describe *GTA IV* and other similar game artefacts as extending their players' *facticities*" (2010, 218): "as *GTA IV* affords certain things while not affording others, there is a finite repertoire of things which I can choose to do [...] the artefact ultimately dictates what is possible and what is not" (ibid.).

The underlying assumption behind Leino's framing here is that "game artefacts have concrete and actual existence in the world," and that, in this sense, they "do not, by default, stand out in any particular way" (ibid., 219). The implication is that the game, as an object that is encountered within the world of the player as an in-itself, embeds itself within the player's factual situation – not, in other words, in the sense of establishing a new factual situation into which the player is able to project herself as a ludic subject, but in the sense of extending the factual situation in which she already is by virtue of being embodied in the world. In this sense, the *origo* or starting-point of the bodily instrumental complex whose lines of action find their terminus within the objects encountered in the game (such as the *Minecraft* stone-blocks) remains the player's own body seated on the sofa in front of the television screen, or at her desk in front of the computer. By the same token, the *Minecraft* stone-blocks would thereby be incorporated into the same instrumental complex (and, by extension, the same lifeworld) as the coffee-cup on the player's desk that she can reach out, grasp and sip from.

While this would not erase the playable figure, it would certainly reframe the role it plays in determining the player's phenomenal relation to the gameworld, bringing it much closer in line with the idea of the figure as a tool or instrument. More radically, following such an understanding, it would not make sense to speak of the ludic subject as a pole of subjective experience distinct from the player's own standpoint, and, in fact, the concept of the ludic subject would become unnecessary, if not an outright distortion of the structure of ludic experience.



#### 5.4.2 *The problems with the extensional theory*

However, a number of objections need to be put forward in relation to such a framing. The first objection is an ontological one: the body that is present *in* and *to* the gameworld is the playable figure. The player's own body has no ontic existence within the gameworld, and it is only by means of a relation to the playable figure that the player can be granted the "extranoetic habitation" that Calleja grasps as being central to the player's experience of being-in-the-gameworld, and to meet the contingency of the in-itself that constitutes it as, to return to Merleau-Ponty's phrase, a "thing among things".

This objection rests on an even more fundamental one: suggesting an integration of the gameworld into the player's factual situation, in the vein of an 'add-on', ignores the fundamental ontological distinction between the gameworld and the player-world, which I already stressed in section 2.3. On the basis of this observation, other objections to the extensional theory make themselves apparent. The lack of spatial contiguity between the player's bodily situation and the gameworld, for instance, renders it problematic to think of these as forming a single spatial extension: to retain the same example, it is impossible to think of the *Minecraft* stone-block and the coffee-cup on my desk as existing within the same bodily space, definable in their deictic relationship relative to the same bodily *origo*.

In the same vein, making the instrumentality of the player's body and that of the playable figure coalesce into a single, coherent unified instrumental complex, according to the logic of the playable figure as prosthesis, needs to be put into question. When engaging with the playable figure, the "I can" that this figure affords is not *added to* the player's existing set of bodily capabilities, such that this latter "I can" also remains in play. Instead, the relation is one of substitution: the player's bodily capabilities, as an embodied being-in-the-world, are bracketed, and, instead, she takes on those of the playable figure as her own in the gameworld.

Having made this observation, then, how should we frame our approach to the question of player freedom differently? The answer is that we must reconsider the "who"

that the question of freedom relates to. The for-itself that encounters the components of the game and gathers them around itself in a factual situation against which it can enact its project – and, hence, play out its freedom – is not the player in her embodied existence in the player-world. Rather, it is the ludic subject, which is not to be equated either with the player in one direction, nor with the playable figure in the other: instead, it is to be understood as the existential subjectivity taken on by the player in relating to the game (and giving it the experiential form of a gameworld) through the playable figure as an embodied phenomenal standpoint.

#### 5.4.3 *Leino and “hybrid intentionality”*

Leino and Klevjer both anticipate a number of these observations. In Leino’s case, this comes due to the necessity of accounting for a problematic case of intentional experience of the gameworld. In *Far Cry* (Crytek 2004), if a flashbang grenade explodes in close proximity to the playable figure’s location in the gameworld, a particular set of audiovisual stimuli is generated. This, Leino rightly observes, can be described either through such statements as “sounds are replaced with a high-pitched noise” or “the image on the screen is replaced with a semi-transparent snapshot,” or, alternatively, by saying “I can’t see and hear properly,” which is more closely aligned with the intentional character the perceptions are given in the stream of gameworld experience (2010, 172).<sup>10</sup>

The problem, Leino notes, emerges when trying to determine the identity of the “I, who *could not hear anything* after the explosion” (ibid., 175). Clearly, this ‘I’ cannot be taken in isolation from *Far Cry*: this leads Leino to draw on the notion of *hybrid intentionality* suggested by Peter Paul Verbeek, which refers to situations “in which the human and the technological actually merge” into a new, cyborg intentional standpoint (Verbeek 2008, 391). On this basis, Leino speaks of “the unitary whole of the playing ‘I’” (2010, 227) constituted of an amalgamation of the player and the interface mechanisms of the game, including “avatars, minimaps and toolbars.” The subject of the

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<sup>10</sup> I shall return to this example in section 7.2.2, when discussing the relation between visual perspective and the ludic subject.

experience at hand – the subject whose vision and hearing are impaired by the flashbang grenade – is rendered by the formula “(Player/*Far Cry*)” (ibid., 176).

This, however, is a formulation which faces a number of problems. First, retaining for a moment Leino’s artifactual perspective on the game, which is the context in which the observation is made, this requires a line to be drawn, internal to the game object, between “the world of *Far Cry*” which is the domain of intentional experience for the subject in question (ibid., 177), and the aspects of the game that are incorporated, in a quasi-cyborg relationship, into the player’s body-schema to give rise to the hybrid intentionality that perceives the gameworld. It is easy enough to include interface elements like “minimaps and toolbars” on the side of the hybrid subject, given that these are not entities within the gameworld, but are rather constitutive of the player’s perceptual ‘openness’ onto it. The playable figure, or avatar, which Leino also includes in his list, however, is a much harder case, in that, while it certainly belongs to the subjectivity in play, in being taken up as ‘I,’ it is also an existent in the gameworld.

A second difficulty is that the domain this “playing ‘I’” intends continues to be “my facticity as extended by *Far Cry*” (ibid.), and the intentional structure Leino sketches out remains fundamentally one that locates its subjective and objective poles on opposite sides of the divide between the gameworld and the player-world: a point which is only not a problem for Leino because, as has already come up in section 2.3.3, he understands “gameworld” not as referring to a distinct ontological domain, but “as a signifying shorthand [...] for a *subset* of the actual world” (ibid.). Leino’s adherence to the extensional theory, then, remains unchallenged despite its modification through the grafting-on of the notion of hybrid intentionality.

The final difficulty with Leino’s formulation is that it does not account for a second line that needs to be drawn – namely, precisely the distinction between the subjective aspect of ludic experience that belongs to the gameworld, and the player outside the game. Not having a concept of the ludic subject as a distinct subjective standpoint that stands against that of the player renders it difficult, if not impossible, to make such a distinction, and hence, to explain why, in Leino’s example, I can “see my

blindness” and “hear my deafness” from the outside.

#### 5.4.4 Klevjer and the “prosthetic marionette”

Klevjer goes further in proposing an alternative understanding of the phenomenal structure established by means of the player’s engagement with the playable figure. Referring to Merleau-Ponty’s framing of bodily being-in-the-world as an “I can” wielded in the direction of things-in-the-world, Klevjer writes that “the defining appeal of games like *Super Mario 64* [Nintendo 1996] or *Grand Theft Auto III* [Rockstar Games 2001] is that we get to be a different *I can*, stepping into the shoes [...] of another body, in another world” (2012, 22). Crucially, then, this understanding of the ludic subject as a subjectivity that is distinct from the player’s own does not entail considering it as an Other: in the act of playing, the experience of the ludic subject is received by the player proprioceptively, that is, as *mine*; the ludic subject is essentially – and prior to the opening up of any objectifying distance – experienced as “I” while engaging with the gameworld. In a passage which deserves quoting at length, Klevjer goes a long way towards mapping out the implications that such an understanding would have upon the phenomenal nature of the player’s engagement with the gameworld.

...unlike an instrumental extension (a tool), the avatar does not expose our actual bodies to the environment; it only exposes itself, as a *vicarious* body. In contrast, a walking stick, a tennis racket or a car extends the functioning of the body directly and sets up a new bodily space which could potentially hurt it. Perceptual tools do extend and transform the ‘incarnated mind’ of the body, but they do not *themselves* mimic the position and destiny of an incarnated mind. In contrast, the avatar [...] has the capacity to project around itself its own bodily space.

Therefore, while it does mediate the agency and perceptions of the body (and as such functions as an extension), it does not subject the actual body to the aerial ecology that it mediates [...] the whole point of engaging with an avatarial extension is that it is subjected to and resides in its environment on behalf of the player. (2006, 96)

This framing appears to stand in direct opposition both to the idea of games as extended facticities and to the notion of the playable figure as a prosthesis, which, as we have seen, is based on much the same underlying principle of an extension of the player's factual situation. Rather than setting this up as an alternative to the extensional theory, Klevjer attempts to merge the two, aiming for a dual understanding of the avatar as both *prosthetic* embodiment and as *vicarious* embodiment by means of their synthesis in the image of the "prosthetic marionette" (2012, 27). Lacking an ontology of ludic subjectivity, however, the acknowledged paradox at the heart of this conceptualization remains unresolved.

An alternative way of framing this is to highlight the double intentional structure that emerges in the player's relation to the game in the mode of figure-based play. The player engages with the gameworld from the perspective of the ludic subject as for-itself; at the same time, the player does not abandon her *own* factual situation outside the gameworld. From this intentional perspective, the game object appears, as Leino observes, in its artifactual nature, as in-itself – and, crucially, this includes the playable figure and, by extension, the ludic subject.

This points the way towards a theory of embodied ludic subjectivity that is positioned to work through the paradox Klevjer observes, and thereby to account for the duality between the playable figure as a thing that is picked up and wielded by the player, and its being taken up as the body of the ludic subject, gathering the gameworld around it as its bodily space. To anchor this theory, I shall begin by returning to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty – specifically, in order to highlight the fact that the phenomenology of embodiment implies two phenomenological 'faces' to the body.

#### 5.4.5 *The two phenomenological aspects of the body*

While, as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty observed, the body establishes an opening through which the for-itself can gain access to its situation, there is a problem that comes into view: namely, how is it possible to reconcile the status of the body as it is lived, that is, as the embodiment of the for-itself in the world, with its simultaneous status as a thing in the world – that is, as an in-itself?

...if man were a pure consciousness (for-itself) or a mere thing among others (in-itself) he could not be “in” or “toward” the world. Man is not a pure consciousness because a pure consciousness is a gaze which can unfold everything and for which everything lies already in the open, whereas man’s experience must be characterized fundamentally by the idea of resistance, which, in turn, implies complications, obstacles, and ambiguities. Man is not a thing either. For although it is true that a thing can be said to coexist with other things, it certainly cannot transcend them, since it does not have a horizon, it is not “in” or “toward” the world. (Kockelmans 1970, 274)

This problem can be considered one of the key difficulties of the phenomenological approach to consciousness: “understanding the way in which our body is at once a body like any other (situated among other bodies) and an aspect of the self (its manner of being in the world) is a problem of vast proportions” (Ricoeur 1992, 33). At stake is the risk of an unwitting slide into a Cartesian dualism of *cogito* and body, which can only be avoided through a successful integration of these two phenomenal dimensions within a unified phenomenology of the body.

The difficulty was already tackled by Husserl, who argued that, while I do indeed encounter my body as one of the things in the world, I encounter it in a mode of relation which marks it out as different from all the other things-in-the-world:

Among the bodies belonging to this ‘Nature’ and included in my peculiar ownness, I then find my *animate organism* as uniquely singled out - namely as the only one of them that is not just a body but precisely an animate organism: the sole object within my abstract world-stratum to which, in accordance with experience, I ascribe *fields of sensation* (belonging to it, however, in different manners – a field of tactual sensations, a field of warmth and coldness, and so forth), the only object ‘in’ which I ‘*rule and govern*’ *immediately*. (1969[1929], 97)

What makes my body stand out among the things in the sensible field of my world is, firstly, the ascription to it of the fields of sensation which are the world to me, and, secondly, my simultaneous proprioceptive identification of these sensations – and,

inseparably, of the body – as *mine*, as that which “is most originally mine and of all things that which is closest” (Ricoeur 1992, 324).

In the same vein, Sartre acknowledges that the for-itself, as an embodied being in the world, is possessed of the same ‘thingness’ as the in-itself it encounters: “it *is* as pure contingency inasmuch as for it as for things in the world, as for this wall, this tree, this cup, the original question can be posited: “Why is this being exactly such and not otherwise?”” (1966[1943], 127). It is for this reason that the body can itself be encountered as a thing-in-the-world: I can examine my own hand, and, in the detachment of this perspective, my relation to my hand is much the same as would be that of a physician who might be treating it.

However, Sartre argues, this is *not* the way in which our body exists for us in the mode of the for-itself: “my body as it is *for me* does not appear to me in the midst of the world” (ibid., 402). If I see my hand holding an inkwell, Sartre writes, then “I unfold a distance between it and me” (ibid.), objectifying it and turning it into just as much of a pure in-itself as the inkwell it is holding. The body, as for-itself, is the sensing; it is only as in-itself that it enters the domain of the sensible in which Husserl in the first place locates it. The two aspects of the body are, for Sartre, incongruous: “either [my body] is a thing among other things, or else it is that by which things are revealed to me. But it can not be both at the same time” (ibid.).

Sartre’s understanding of the body as “a living dialectic between the body-as-instrument and the body-taken-as-bare-fact [...] allows us to understand how an existing consciousness can inhere in the world and, at the same time, be a project of that same world” (Kockelmans 1970, 276). However, the strict division Sartre delineates between the two senses of the body is problematic, given that “this ontology is essentially built upon the radical and irreconcilable opposition between the “for-itself” and the “in-itself” in which the Cartesian dualism of the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* is not only restored, but even aggravated” (ibid.).

Merleau-Ponty’s response to this difficulty is to intertwine the two aspects of the body: to find, in fact, in this dual nature the essence of its character *as* body.

We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the “object” and to the order of the “subject” reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. (1968, 137)

Merleau-Ponty illustrates this double-sidedness of the body by means of a meditation on the hand as both an instrument of touch *and* as being itself open, through the touch of the other hand, to being encountered as a thing-in-the-world: “in a veritable touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand [...] the “touching subject” passes over to the rank of the touched” (ibid., 134).

The body, then, becomes the site of a duality that lies at the heart of the question of subjectivity and the self – namely, the distinction between ‘I’ as perceiving subject and as perceived object. Ricoeur, in making the argument that otherness is “constitutive of selfhood as such” (1992, 3), makes the case that the body is the site of the original otherness that is ‘closest’ to the self. By virtue of being a body, my body is one body among the many bodies making up the world: it is, as Husserl argues, primordially of the world. At the same time, however, it is also *of the self*: it is the only body to which I relate with a sense of ‘mineness’. The distinction between these two impulses in the body – mineness and foreignness, self and other, is established at the same time that “one’s own body is revealed to be the mediator between the intimacy of the self and the externality of the world” (ibid., 322). In Ricoeur’s account, then, the body becomes the symbol for the “primary otherness” (ibid., 327) that lies at the heart of selfhood: “I, as this man: this is the foremost otherness of the flesh” (ibid., 324).<sup>11</sup> From my perspective as a subject, my body is indivisibly *mine*, it is the thing which I am; and yet it is also *me* in a sense I can

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<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur’s formulation here is particularly astute, in that “this man” that I can designate as “I” unfolds multiple levels of signification: “this man” is not only the body which I am, but also, as Sartre argues, my historical situation, the fact that I exist in a particular socio-historical situation as a person of a particular gender, ethnicity, social class, family background, etc. All of these are facts about me that determine the facticity of the situation in which I find myself as a for-itself; but, precisely in saying that “I find myself” in this situation, in these facts, it becomes apparent that these are facts that belong to the ‘I’ that is found, rather than the ‘I’ that is doing the finding: that is, to ‘I’ as an in-itself, not a for-itself.



dissociate from as a subject, a thing I can think of independently of the standpoint of my subjective consciousness. This is not to be interpreted as a simplistic dichotomy between flesh/body and mind/soul, which at its limit would take the form of the Cartesian dualism I have already cautioned against. The dichotomy that is revealed in the body cuts to the core of the subject that I am, as an ‘I’: it represents, in Ricoeur’s term, the otherness I am to myself, that which Sartre was equally aware of in saying that the for-itself “does not coincide with itself” (1966[1943], 120).

#### 5.4.6 *The embodied ludic subject and the ludic self*

I am here both anticipating a discussion that I shall bring to the level of a primary theme in Chapter 8, and returning to an insight I have already gestured towards twice in the earlier stages of this investigation. Firstly, in section 1.5, following Dan Zahavi (2008), the distinction between the subject as the ‘I’ that marks experience in its first-personal givenness and the self as an identity that emerges in self-reflection was cast as the defining duality of subjectivity. Secondly, in section 2.4.4, I returned to the issue, making the argument that this twofold structure of subjectivity is crystallized in, and foregrounded by, the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement. To recapitulate the point in brief: the ludic subject as the first-personal ‘I’ whom the player *is*, to whom the internal perspective and, as a result, gameworld experience pertains, is also perceived as an object from the implied player’s external perspective.

To hint at the shape that would be taken by an integration of the insight of the two-sided phenomenology of the body to the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement, and therefore to the study of the ludic subject, I shall return again to the discussion of *Minecraft* and the project of the hilltop stronghold. The activity of building the stronghold is *mine*, meaning that, in the striving that accompanies the taking of an action, “I feel *myself* active,” and the attendant sensations of *being active* belong “to no object that stands apart from me” (Lipps 1962[1903], 376). At the same time, the ‘I’ that is taking the action is an ‘I’ that stands apart from me, insofar as it is the ‘I’ that emerges from a contingent situation it is thrown into. This facticity results not only from the

arrangement of things-in-themselves encountered in the gameworld, but also from the conditions of its own embodiment: that is, its status as a thing among the things encountered by the for-itself as its situation.

If matters were to stop here, however, it could only be said that the embodied ludic subject exhibits precisely the same two-sided phenomenology as the embodied subject. What makes the case of the ludic subject unique, as I have already argued, is the capture of these two phenomenal sides of the embodied subject by the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement. It is, ultimately, the same playing individual who performs the actions of building the *Minecraft* stronghold and who watches the actions; crucially, however, it is the same individual subjectively distributed across two standpoints. What is vital to observe is that, firstly, the ludic subject and the implied player are played out as *different* subjectivities, and, secondly, they belong to the *same* person. It is revealing that Merleau-Ponty writes that:

I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk round them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe: in order to be able to do so, I should need the use of a second body which itself would be unobservable. (2002[1945], 104)

In the duality of subjectivities it sets in relation, this is precisely what the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement establishes, setting up the player-outside-the-gameworld as the “second body” that can frame the embodied ludic subject in its perception: as Kelly Boudreau notes, “the avatar performs a dualistic role of being the virtual body of the player within the gameworld while simultaneously existing wholly external to the physical body of the player” (2012, 85). It is this mechanism of “autoscopy” (Mishara 2009) which allows the formal structure of ludic experience to reflect, and to aestheticize, the “dialectic of *self* and the *other than self*” that Ricoeur identifies as being at the core of selfhood (1992, 3).

## 5.5 Conclusions

This consideration of the implications of embodiment has redrawn our understanding of the ludic subject as an *embodied* subjectivity, and, relatedly, that of the ludic lifeworld as a bodily space. Following the survey of the notions of *point of action*, *locus of manipulation* and *Game Ego*, as well as of the various senses attributed to the notion of embodiment in game studies, I engaged with the phenomenology of the embodied for-itself articulated by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, identifying three fundamental mechanisms by which the body shapes the subject's being-in-the-world: its demarcation of a spatial *origo* relative to which a bodily space can be organized *for it*, its orientation towards its existential project which makes things-in-the-world come into view as obstacles or affordances, and the "I can" which it allows the for-itself to wield in the direction of the world. This allowed me to propose a phenomenology of the embodied ludic subject positioned against what I termed the extensional theory of ludic embodiment encountered in the work of Klevjer and Leino, and built upon the lamination of the two-sided phenomenology of the body to the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement.

On this basis, Chapter 6 can now proceed to engage directly with the playable figure in its ontological and phenomenal dimensions, and thereby to establish a model by which the multiple, seemingly paradoxical dimensions of the relation between the player and the playable figure can be brought together into a unified aesthetics of subjectivity.

In a sense, this chapter has drawn to a close the first movement of this investigation: that in which a theoretical and philosophical framework for engaging with ludic subjectivity and its role in ludic experience was constructed. This has involved specifying the nature of games as aesthetic objects, which, on the basis of an engagement with the aesthetics of the play-act, led to an uncovering, both of the necessity of the notion of the 'gameworld', and of the double perspectival structure according to which ludic experience is distributed across both a perceptual standpoint internal to the gameworld and a standpoint external to it. This was followed by a development of the phenomenology of the gameworld, as it is gathered in the player's experience around the

ludic subject-position as an internal standpoint; this, in turn, revealed the necessity of theorizing the sense of being-in-the-gameworld, which, finally, in this current chapter, was revealed to be the *embodied* being-in-the-gameworld of an *embodied* ludic subject.

Upon this foundation, this study can now proceed towards an engagement with the aesthetics and poetics of ludic subjectivity in practice, focusing on the formal techniques and structures by which it is established and enacted, and contextualized within close critical analyses of specific game examples.



## Chapter Six

### The playable figure

In the introduction to this study, which began with a foregrounding of the “you” the player encounters in the first lines of *Adventure* (Crowther and Woods 1976), I made the point that, although this second-person pronominal address interpellates the player, who takes it up as an ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ and thereby establishes a ludic subjectivity, it also, simultaneously, delineates an entity that stands apart from the player.

This entity, which I termed the *playable figure*, is, as I pointed out in section 1.5, not to be confused with the ludic subject, or even, more narrowly, with the embodied ludic subject. It is, in the Sartrean terms I deployed in Chapter 5, an in-itself that stands against the ludic subject as a for-itself, an object rather than a subject. And yet, without the playable figure, there would be no embodied ludic subject, in that, in being adopted as ‘I-in-the-gameworld,’ it acts, in phenomenological terms, as the ludic subject’s body.

As became apparent in the discussion on the phenomenology of embodiment in Chapter 5, not only is the body, as thing-in-the-world, the necessary ontic foundation of a for-itself’s being-in-the-world, it also structures and determines the subject’s worldly being. Accordingly, this chapter shall be dedicated to an engagement with the playable figure itself, and with the multiple dimensions of the relation between it and the player.

In order to establish the basis for the development of a conceptual model of the player-figure relation, I shall begin by providing an outline of the ontology of the playable figure as the *being* that the player *is* in the gameworld, focusing on the distinction between the two primary terms that have been used to conceptualize the playable figure within game studies – *avatar* and *player-character* – and the divergent perspectives on the figure they open onto, which I shall consider in terms of the interrelation between the ‘game as system’ and the ‘game as heterocosm’ framings discussed in section 3.4.

This shall allow me to move on to a consideration of the *phenomenological distinction* that is also implied in the opposition of ‘avatar’ and ‘character.’ Here I shall argue that a

simple binary distinction cannot satisfactorily address the complexities of the player's relation to the playable figure; instead, I shall propose a model of the player-figure relation that is structured as an intersection of two phenomenological dualities determining the relation between the player and the playable figure. I shall describe these as an *identity distinction* between the playable figure's status as *self* and *other*, and a *perspectival distinction* between a *subjective* and *objective* relation to the playable figure. In the second half of the chapter, I shall then provide an illustration of these multiple modes of relation at work by means of a close analysis of Act 1 Scene 2 of the point-and-click adventure game *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013-).

The development of this model, and its being brought to bear upon this formal analysis, shall not only render concrete a conceptualization of the mechanisms by which ludic subjectivity operates through the player's engagement with the playable figure. It shall also bring into view the ways in which the player-figure relation sets in motion an aesthetics of subjectivity, as well as grant a glimpse into what such an aesthetics would look like in practice. As such, the analysis that concludes this chapter shall prefigure the investigations that shall be undertaken over the course of the remaining chapters, which shall be devoted precisely to the mapping out of the structure and movements of the aesthetics of subjectivity pertaining to the embodied ludic subject.

## **6.1 The ontology of the playable figure**

As befits a focus on ludic subjectivity, the overarching epistemological approach I have adopted in this investigation is that of the game as played – as a result, its constitutive analyses have been conducted on the plane of ludic experience. However, given the conclusion of the previous chapter – where it became apparent that the emergence of an embodied ludic subjectivity as a being-in-the-gameworld must occur on the basis of an ontic existence within the domain of the gameworld, of a *being* that the player *is* in the gameworld – it becomes necessary to shift, for a moment, into the register of ontology. The aim of the current investigation is to determine the multiple dimensions of the

relation between the player and the playable figure; this, however, can only be done on the basis of what the playable figure *is* – in other words, to account for *how* the playable figure grants the player an ontic existence (what Gordon Calleja terms an “extranoetic habitation” (2011, 29) within the gameworld.

### 6.1.1 *The ontological and phenomenological dualities of the playable figure*

Within the considerable body of work on the question of the playable figure in game studies, it is impossible to find any clear consensus, even regarding the basic ontological nature of this figure or the term to be used to refer to it. Broadly speaking, the two terms most commonly employed to refer to the entity that the player takes on as ‘I’ in the gameworld are *avatar* and *player-character* (Boudreau 2012, 71). This is not an inconsequential terminological schism. The terms reveal opposing understandings of the nature of the figure – which is not to say, as I shall demonstrate, that they have not often been used indiscriminately or interchangeably, or that there is not a significant overlap in their implications to a unified ontological and phenomenological understanding of the playable figure. Nonetheless, Rune Klevjer argues, “it is important to emphasise that the notion of the avatar [...] is distinct from the notion of playable *character*,” and “there is, for analytical purposes, a lot to gain from keeping ‘character’ and ‘avatar’ distinct (2006, 116). Klevjer makes the implications of the terms, and the conflicting positions they represent, clear when he writes that “we must make a distinction between ‘avatar’ understood as a playable *character* (or persona), and ‘avatar’ understood as a vehicle through which the player is given some kind of embodied agency and presence within the gameworld” (2012, 17).

Game studies has tended to identify the nature of the figure as being determined by precisely this essential duality, even in cases where the terms ‘avatar’ and ‘character’ are not invoked directly. Peter Bayliss defines the figure as one that can be “considered to be co-temporously an independent entity embodied by its own constitution as well as a surrogate that embodies the intentions and actions of the player” (2007a, 4). Similarly,



speaking of Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996), Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy write that:

Lara is simultaneously replete with meaning in terms of the construction of her physique and the availability of a coherent biography through which to make sense of her subjectivity and her actions, but also empty enough to enable the player to inhabit her (2006, 91).

Again, the same duality can be seen emerging in practice in Kristine Jørgensen's empirical study of the relation players of the first-person shooter *Crysis* (Crytek 2007) developed with the game's avatar. Initially, the impression is that "seeing the gameworld through the eyes of the avatar creates the feeling that the player *becomes* the avatar" (2009, 2). However, when this avatar suddenly speaks in its own voice, it "gives the impression of suddenly turning from being completely controlled by the player into being an individual and autonomous being with a will of his own" (*ibid.*, 3).

The problem, however, is that a survey of the relevant literature reveals that a cluster of divergent significances have been subsumed to the single binary distinction between 'avatar' and 'character'. At a minimum, it is necessary to highlight two separate distinctions being made in the opposition of 'avatar' and 'character'.

The first – as Klevjer suggests in his demarcation of the concepts – is an *ontological distinction*. By this understanding, 'avatar' refers to the status of the playable figure as a game component, while 'character' refers to its status as a represented individual on the game's heterocosmic dimension. Secondly – as is brought to the fore by both Bayliss and Dovey and Kennedy – is what can be termed a *phenomenological distinction*, according to which 'avatar' refers to the playable figure in its 'I' dimension, and 'character' describes its paradoxical status as simultaneously "a different entity." These two distinctions are evidently not parallel, and the fact that they have been conflated is one of the primary difficulties with the discourse of 'avatar' and 'character'. In the interests of clarity and terminological rigour, I shall reserve the usage of 'avatar' and 'character' to the delineation of the two ontological dimensions of the playable figure.

Dealing, as it does, with the playable figure as it determines – and as it is given in

– ludic experience, it is the phenomenological distinction which shall allow me to map out the structure of the player-figure relation, and, as such, it is this second distinction which shall constitute the primary focus of this investigation. However, it is only upon the foundation of an ontological understanding of the playable figure that such an analysis can be articulated, and, as such, it is towards this task that I shall turn first.

This analysis does not send this investigation into uncharted territory. In section 3.4, a consideration of the cosmological dimension of the experiential gameworld led to the identification of ‘game as system’ and ‘game as heterocosm’ as the two frames of ontological interpretation applicable to the player’s lived experience of the gameworld. The notions ‘avatar’ and ‘character’ fit neatly into these respective frames. ‘Avatar’ describes the playable figure as a game-systemic entity – in other words, a game component. “Character,” on the other hand, describes the playable figure as a heterocosmic entity. By extension – keeping in mind the fact that the playable figure is taken up as the body that lets the ludic subject be an *embodied* subject – it can also be said that ‘avatar’ is the form in which the ludic subject is embodied in relation to the game system, while ‘character’ refers to the ludic subject in its heterocosmic dimension.

### 6.1.2 *Avatar*

As with most interrogations of critical concepts, it is appropriate to start at the level of etymology. Souvik Mukherjee has explored the history of the adoption of the term ‘avatar’ from its source domain in Hindu philosophy, where it refers to the incarnation of a deity in a human manifestation on Earth. As Mukherjee writes, in the original Sanskrit, “‘avatar’ comes from the words ‘ava’ and ‘tri’ meaning ‘below’ and ‘crossing’ respectively – thus an avatar is the ‘crossing-down’ of a god to free humanity from evil” (2012, 1).

Keeping its etymology in mind, the term describes a move across ontic domains: more specifically, it refers to the material manifestation, within a subordinate ontic realm, of a consciousness belonging to a higher domain. In other words, what is entailed in the original concept of ‘avatar’ bears a close affinity to the second half of the double movement Calleja identifies within the mechanism of incorporation, that is, “*the*

*systematically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location*” (2011, 169).

If ‘avatar’ refers to an incarnation within an ontic domain as an entity belonging to this domain, it is necessary to consider the ontological character of the avatar-entity – what kind of a being is it, and how does it fit into the domain to which it belongs? Adopting the frame of the ‘game as system’, the most basic answer to the question, “What is the playable figure?” is to say that it is a game component, one of the set of interrelated entities constituting the game system.<sup>1</sup> This still leaves the matter of defining the playable figure against the other components of the game system. One way to do so is to describe the playable figure as, to borrow a term from Aki Järvinen, a “component-of-self” as opposed to a “component-of-other,” belonging to an opposing player, or a “component-of-system,” belonging to the game system itself (2008, 64). However, *component-of-self* is a broad category. In a strategy game such as *Civilization II* (MicroProse 1996), for example, the category of components-of-self includes all of the military and civilian units that the player can move around the map, the cities belonging to the player’s civilization, and so on. These are all components-of-self, but they are not playable figures. Similarly, it is much too broad to say, with Daniel Kromand, that “an avatar will be any game-unit that has action possibilities and that answers to the player” (2007, 400).

In addition to this *mineness*, the playable figure gains a particular privilege through being the *only* component, in games operating through an embodied ludic subjectivity, that responds directly to player input, translating this into output in the form either of a change in its own state, or in that of one or more of the other elements of the game system. This does not mean that the playable figure is necessarily the only component-

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<sup>1</sup> In some cases, it might be necessary to speak, not of a single component, but of a group of components grasped by the player as a single component through a Gestalt of the playable figure. Such might be the case with the first-person shooter genre, for instance, where what is grasped as the playable figure – say, Gordon Freeman in *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) is actually a composite of several systemic elements: a camera position, a hit-box determining the figure’s susceptibility to attack, a hand and gun visible on screen, etc. Nonetheless, these elements coalesce, from the player’s perspective, into the form of a unified figure – “players do not even see Gordon Freeman [...] but still, they seem to form an attachment to him” (Lankoski 2011, 291). It is of such a figure, then, that I shall continue to speak.

of-self. In a role-playing game such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), for instance, the player might have an inventory full of weapons, armour, jewellery, keys and so on, all of which, by simple virtue of being the player's, are just as much components-of-self as the playable figure itself. However, these are all integrated into the instrumental complex whose centre is the playable figure: it is the playable figure that wields the weapons, wears the armour, receives a statistical boost from the jewellery, uses the key in a lock, and so on.<sup>2</sup> What makes the playable figure an avatar, in purely game-systemic terms, is that all the player's interactions with the gameworld are structured through it. The player acts *on* the other components of the game system *through* the avatar, making it the singular point of origin of all the lines of action the player directs towards the components of the game system.<sup>3</sup>

The corollary to this observation is that the avatar must, under normal circumstances, maintain constant responsiveness to the player's input. At every moment of ludic engagement, the avatar must present the player with the possibility of taking

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<sup>2</sup> It is certainly possible to identify games with what might be called a *hybrid* ludic subject-position – one that is fundamentally embodied within a single playable figure, but that also transcends this playable figure and allows the player to exert indirect control over other components-of-self. *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) is an example here: during missions, the playable figure, Shepard, is accompanied by two squad members whom the player cannot control in the same direct, embodied fashion as Shepard – and who therefore cannot, strictly speaking, be considered playable figures – but who can be given orders through a pause-time interface. In many such cases, and *Mass Effect* is emblematic here, it remains possible to conceptually integrate this indirect control over other entities within the instrumental-complex of the avatar: for instance, by interpreting the player's usage of the pause-time interface to instruct a squad member to switch weapons as the action 'giving an order' performed through Shepard.

<sup>3</sup> It might be objected that it is, in fact, possible to identify games that feature more than one playable figure: squad-based action games such as *Hidden & Dangerous* (Illusion Softworks 1999), for example, allow the player to switch at will between multiple playable figures. This objection, however, can be countered by stating that, even if the player can switch between playable figures, she is only ever, at any given instance of ludic engagement, playing through a single playable figure. If I am playing *Hidden & Dangerous*, I might be controlling a four-man SAS squad, and, unlike in *Mass Effect*, I might be able to switch between the members of the squad and control all of them directly, but it remains the case that, at any moment, I am only directly controlling one member of the squad as a playable figure, and giving orders to the other three squad members indirectly. Having said this, it is also important to acknowledge the considerably more marginal cases in which the player is, in fact, required to operate more than one playable figure simultaneously: *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios 2013) can stand as an example of this. Such exceptional cases construct a structure of ludic experience that is so different to the embodied ludic subjectivity that is the focus of this investigation that it must be thought of as something else entirely: an example of the transcendent ludic subjectivity to which embodied ludic subjectivity was contrasted in section 1.3.

action – it must establish for the player a constant “*disposition* and readiness to act” (Calleja 2011, 41). Loss of control of the avatar *in the act of playing* (as opposed to clearly marked instances of “off-line” engagement such as cut-scenes (Newman 2002)) tends to be a dramatic event: Olli Tapio Leino discusses, as an example of this, the traumatic experience of being ‘captured’ by a roof-barnacle’s tentacle appendage in *Half-Life* (Valve 1998), and finding oneself unable to do anything as Gordon Freeman is pulled up into the barnacle’s hungry mouth (2010, 39). This also implies that the playable figure as avatar cannot act of its own accord:<sup>4</sup> Diane Carr writes that “Lara [Croft] is a vehicle, and she will only move if, as and when the player compels her to” (2002, 173).<sup>5</sup>

It might appear that this framing of the avatar is not far from James Newman’s argument that the playable figure is not primarily a distinct figure at all, but simply “sets of capabilities, potentials and techniques offered to the player” (2002). This purely instrumental perspective on the playable figure, the idea that it “is to be understood as more of a *tool* than as a subject-position” (Klevjer 2006, 62), finds an echo in Jonas Linderoth’s understanding of the figure as “a piece of equipment, a tool that extends the player’s agency” (2005). Klevjer defines this as the “cursor theory” of the playable figure, drawing on Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins’ suggestion that the figure “is little more than a cursor that mediates the player’s relationship to the story world” (1995) – which, incidentally, is repeated in Gonzalo Frasca’s assertion that the figure “just becomes a “cursor” for the player’s actions” (2001).

The problem with this approach, Klevjer argues, is that, “a mouse cursor does not make the player belong to or *be* in the game environment,” whereas this is precisely

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<sup>4</sup> As with any rule, there are exceptions to this. For instance, in a particular moment in *The Curse of Monkey Island* (LucasArts 1997) the player-avatar, mild-mannered pirate Guybrush Threepwood, is having a conversation with a gang of particularly disreputable and intimidating low-lives. When Guybrush is asked by the gang leader whether or not he trusts him, the player is given the choice of a number of withering remarks answering the question in the negative. Whichever option the player chooses, however, what Guybrush actually says is a glib, cowardly, “Of course I trust you!” Of course, Guybrush – as with many point-and-click adventure game avatars, leans heavily towards the ‘character’ side of the equation, and such a blatant declaration of independence as refusing to carry out the player’s instructions is a particularly marked demonstration of this. I shall return to this point, and this example, in section 9.5.1.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note the extent to which Lara Croft seems to be the go-to exemplification of a playable figure for game studies, both when discussing ‘avatar’ and ‘player-character’.

what a playable figure does (Klevjer 2012, 18). As such, the cursor theory “tends not to focus so much on the question of *being* in a gameworld” (ibid., 19) which this investigation has repeatedly stressed as being key to ludic subjectivity as founded in the playable figure. The cursor remains ontologically distinct from the realm upon which it inscribes the user’s actions.

Conversely, the playable figure is not only the player’s means of acting upon the other components of the game system, it is also her means of being *acted upon*. “If we recognize that Lara Croft is indeed an “embodiment” of the player, this would imply not only that she mediates the player’s ability to jump or walk, but also that she embodies the player’s risk of *falling down* the ravine” (2012, 18). Such a two-way relationship between the playable figure and the things of the gameworld is a result of the encounter happening on a single ontological plane to which both the figure and the things-in-themselves of the gameworld belong: recall Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s point that it is only by virtue of the fact that my body “takes its place among the things it touches,” and opens itself up to the possibility of being touched in turn, that it can be, *for me*, my body *in the world* (1968, 133).<sup>6</sup>

This congruence between this conceptualization of the avatar and the phenomenological account of the body-subject articulated in section 5.3 is by no means an accident. I have already made the claim that the playable figure is the ontic foundation for the ludic subject, granting it a foothold in the gameworld as an embodied subject. What has become apparent in this consideration of the playable figure as ‘avatar,’ then, is that the reason it is possible for the player to adopt the playable figure as ‘her’ body, and

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<sup>6</sup> This interrelation of the playable figure and the game system can be given a different slant if its contextualized in the implications of the ‘game as system’ idea as a cosmological frame as discussed in section 3.4.3. Speaking, again, of Lara Croft – who seems to be the go-to exemplification of a playable figure for game studies – Peter Bayliss observes that, “the game-world of *Tomb Raider* is constructed in ‘Lara Units’, gaps between the platforms are either standing jump or running jump distances, or otherwise impassable [...] the game-world of *Tomb Raider* is designed so as to offer affordances that fit the locomotive abilities of Lara Croft” (2007a, 2). As a game component, the playable figure is integrated into the game system according to the rationale of the *logos* manifested in the system. To retain Bayliss’ example, if the *Tomb Raider* player encounters a gap that is wider than the distance Lara Croft can jump, the player will conclude that she is not ‘supposed to’ take that route, and it is possible to progress through a different route – a judgment that is a product of the expectation of order that characterizes the ‘game as system’ frame.

to gather in her lived experience the elements of the game system into a bodily lifeworld relating back to, and organized according to, this embodied ludic subject-position, is precisely because, in its formal qualities as a game component, the playable figure structures the player's relation to the game system in a form which, in the crucial senses I have outlined, is analogous to the embodied subject's bodily engagement with the world. It is on this basis that a sense of being-in-the-gameworld can be compared, in phenomenological terms, to the subject's being-in-the-world, and that, inseparably, the playable figure can be taken as 'avatar,' as the *being* that the player, as ludic subject, *is* in the gameworld.

### 6.1.3 *Player-character*

However, this is only half the story. If the 'avatar' side of the duality between 'avatar' and 'character' refers to the playable figure as articulated through the frame of reference of the game as system, then it is easy to surmise that the 'character' side of the duality describes the aspect of the playable figure that comes to light when examined through the frame of the game as heterocosm.

The opening of the playable figure, and, by association, that of ludic subjectivity, onto a poetics of character, as a unity of textual signification coalescing into the representation of a heterocosmic individual, is one of the most crucial moments of the aesthetics of the ludic subject: it represents the point at which the ludic subject, having been enacted by the player, is inscribed into the textuality of the game and presented to the player as an ordered unity according to the formal principles of mimetic and narrative representation. As such, it warrants a focused engagement, and, to this end, Chapter 9 shall take the intersection of the notion of character and the ludic subject as its theme. For now, then, I shall not engage with the notion of character in depth in its own right, focusing instead on the role in which the term has been used to oppose 'avatar' in the conceptualization of the playable figure.

As I shall point out in Chapter 9, it is hard to define precisely what a character *is*, though, paradoxically, we do not have any trouble recognizing one when we see one. It is

perhaps for this reason that there is a relative paucity of direct analytical engagement with the notion of the player-character, especially in comparison to the wealth of material available regarding the avatar – it is, in fact, hard to find a concrete definition of the notion of the ‘player-character’. This is not to say that the term itself is infrequent in the relevant literature; however, very often, despite the term ‘character’ being used, what is referred to is in fact more akin to the idea of the avatar than to any notion of the textually-determined representation of a heterocosmic individual.

Thus, for instance, Espen Aarseth writes that, in the adventure game, “the user assumes the role of the main character and, therefore, will not come to see this person as an other, or as a person at all, but rather as a remote-controlled extension of herself” (Aarseth 1997, 113). James Paul Gee similarly describes the “virtual character” as “the player’s surrogate” (2008, 259), and as the vehicle for her embodiment in the gameworld. Such a usage of the term ‘player-character’ bears no functional difference from ‘avatar,’ and indirectly suggest a bracketing of the ‘character’ dimension of the playable figure as being, if not irrelevant, then certainly secondary to its ‘avatar’ dimension. This is certainly the conclusion reached within the ‘cursor theory’ of the playable figure which I have already outlined, as typified by Newman’s statement that ludic engagement “disregards representational traits in favour of the constitution of character as sets of capabilities, potentials and techniques offered to the player” (2002).

This is enough to demonstrate that the duality of *avatar* and *player-character* has often been construed as a tense co-existence. Jørgensen makes this explicit, arguing that it is, if not impossible, at least extremely difficult to reconcile the fixed nature of character to the free possibility of action afforded by the avatar in a satisfactory manner. Using *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar North 2010) and *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010) as examples for the respective situations, she suggests any attempt at such a reconciliation can only hope for one of two unsatisfying outcomes. First, a schism might result between the avatar that acts according to player input during play and the character that acts according to its fixed qualities in non-ludic sequences such as cut-scenes.



Alternatively, a drastic restriction might be placed on the avatar's capacity for action in order to ensure it remains in step with the character (Jørgensen 2010).

Where a concrete impression of what is meant by 'character' as opposed to 'avatar' does emerge, it is to suggest that 'character' addresses the status of the playable figure as an entity distinct from the player. Thus, Tronstad writes that the term 'avatar' should be reserved for situations in which "the character functions as a representative of the player in the game" and "has no perceptible identity of its own" (2008, 258), while 'player-character' should refer to situations in which "it takes on an identity separate from our own, in the sense that we can clearly identify the character separate from ourselves (ibid., 259). Seeming to operate according to this dichotomy, Bayliss writes that "the avatar is also a character, that is, an entity constituted separately from the player" (2007a, 2). Implicit in this is the matter of identity: Gee, for instance, contrasts the "virtual identity" of the "virtual character in the virtual world" to the player's "real-world identity" (2004, 54). In the same vein, Clara Fernández-Vara writes that the identity of a defined player-character "sets them apart from the player, emphasizing the gap between character and player" (2011, 13).

This still leaves unaddressed the question of *what* a character is. In Chapter 9, I shall take on this question as a focus, drawing both on investigations into the nature of character in game studies (Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman 2003; Lankoski 2011; Fernández-Vara 2011), and in literary theory (Price 1983; Margolin 1986; 1990; Phelan 1989; Palmer 2004; Heidbrink 2010). For now, I shall merely draw attention to the status of 'character' as referring to a "possible non-actual individual" (Margolin 1990, 844) – that is, to a heterocosmic individual represented as a textual construct.

The duality inherent in the term 'player-character' is no terminological accident: despite referring to an individual in the heterocosm, and therefore to someone who, from the player's perspective, is "not-I," the 'character' dimension of the playable figure is nonetheless subsumed into the ludic subject: just as the avatar is taken up as 'I' on the level of the game system, the character is taken up as 'I' on the level of the ludic heterocosm.

## 6.2 The phenomenology of the playable figure

On the basis of this understanding of the playable figure as both ‘avatar’ and ‘character,’ I can now engage with the task of conceptualizing the relation between the player and the playable figure. The starting-point for this, as I have already noted, is a *phenomenological distinction* highlighting the fact that the playable figure, as it appears *to me* in ludic experience, is both ‘I’ and ‘not-I,’ both ludic subject from whose internal standpoint the player perceives the gameworld and a distinct figure from whom the player is distanced in inhabiting the external perspective.

However, this distinction is not singular, but, rather, a composite of two distinctions which constitute the two primary axes of the player-figure relation. I shall term these the *identity distinction*, referring to the fact that the figure is granted the status of both ‘self’ and ‘other’, and the *phenomenological distinction*, which describes the fact that the player relates to the figure in both a subjective and an objective mode. Though these two are closely intertwined, there is much to be gained from keeping them conceptually separate in terms of a theorization of the player-figure relation. As such, I shall elaborate on each of these distinctions in turn, before bringing them together into a two-axis model that can provide a more nuanced understanding of the player-figure relation than that resulting from the duality of avatar and character.

### 6.2.1 *The identity distinction*

The fact that the playable figure is simultaneously attributed the status of both ‘self’ and of ‘other’ is not new to this investigation. It was already amply apparent in Chapter 1, when considering the entity addressed as “you” in the IF adaptation of *The Hobbit* (Beam Software 1982). There, I noted that the interpellation of the player inherent in the second-person pronominal address alternates with the reference to the entity as “Bilbo Baggins,” a represented individual distinct from the player.

It might appear as if this is merely a restatement of the distinction between ‘avatar’ and ‘player-character’ which I have just surveyed. However, to equate ‘self’ and ‘other’ with ‘avatar’ and ‘character’ respectively is a mistake: instead, the distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’ cuts across both ontological dimensions of the playable figure. I shall demonstrate this by looking at how the play of ‘self’ and ‘other’ occurs upon both aspects of the playable figure in turn.

I have argued that, as a game component – an entity within the ontic domain of the gameworld – the playable figure is defined as an avatar in its being taken up as the body of the ludic subject. It is in this sense that the avatar becomes the player’s ‘I-in-the-gameworld’. However, even without the question of character having been broached, an element of otherness is just as intrinsic to the avatar as the element of selfhood:

Appearing on screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as self and other, symbol and index. As *self*, its behavior is tied to the player’s through an interface [...] its literal motion, as well as its figurative triumphs and defeats, result from the player’s actions. At the same time, avatars are unequivocally *other*.  
(Rehak 2003, 106)

Just as surely as the avatar is taken up by the player as ‘I,’ it is also an entity which *stands against her* as a thing in the gameworld. Conversely, it is certainly true that ‘character,’ being understood as the representation of an individual in the ludic heterocosm, would seem to open more readily onto a perspective of otherness than one of selfhood: Bayliss’ comment, quoted above, that the notion of ‘character’ conveys the sense of the figure as “an entity constituted separately from the player” is indicative in this regard (2007a, 2). However, as Grant Tavinor argues:

The relationship between the player and their character does seem to be one of *identity*: if asked of a number of characters on a screen “Which one are you?” gamers do not hesitate to pick out their character. (2009, 70)

The retort to such a position is that articulated by Bayliss, Gee, Jørgensen and Fernández-Vara, who, as we have seen, argue for a distinction between player and character on the level of identity.

However, it is not – or not primarily – a question of choosing between one or the other: of saying that a particular player’s relation to a particular playable figure is either one of self or of other. If I am playing *Super Mario World* (Nintendo 1991) and I am asked, by someone unfamiliar with the game, who that is on screen, I am equally justified in answering, “That is me,” or, “That is Mario.” Just as they are on the ontological dimension of the avatar-as-game-component, identity and difference are both constitutive of the player’s relation to the figure on the level of character. Certainly, on an experiential level, the balance might shift towards the pole of the self, or towards that of the other, in a particular instance of ludic engagement. Nonetheless, both the self-aspect and the other-aspect are integral components of the relation. Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, Mario in *Super Mario World*, even “you” in *Adventure* are all equally ‘I’ and ‘not-I.’

This duality does not admit to resolution. Instead, it is in the wavering between the two positions that the aesthetic character of the playable figure can be identified – a wavering resulting from the fact that, in taking up a playable figure – say, for the sake of argument, Mario – as ‘I,’ the ludic subjectivity that I inhabit towards the gameworld is both “me” and “Mario,” that is, both “I” and “not-I,” or, perhaps, “I-as-Mario.”<sup>7</sup>

This in-between quality has led Kelly Boudreau to speak of what she terms a “hybrid-identity,” which “does not reside in either the player or the avatar, but rather is a fluid, sometimes fleeting form of being that exists somewhere between the player and the avatar (or player-character) during the process of videogame play” (2012, 86). Boudreau’s notion of hybridity is crucial to understanding how the self-other duality constituting the identity distinction gives rise to the emergence of a negotiated identity in between the two poles – that is, in the term I have proposed in this dissertation, a *ludic subject* that is not myself, as player, and not the playable figure in its own right, but, rather, me-as-the-figure.

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<sup>7</sup> If I may be allowed, for a moment, to step outside this investigation’s emphasis on the implied player as a function of the game’s formal structure, rather than on individual players, it should be pointed out that this is also what allows for the reconciliation of the fixity of a character and the variation of individual playing approaches. If we both play *Super Mario World*, we are “me-as-Mario” and “you-as-Mario” are *different* ludic subjects, and it might even make sense to consider them *different characters*.

### 6.2.2 *The perspectival distinction*

It is not enough, however, to stop at this distinction between the playable figure in its status as ‘self’ and as ‘other’. I have already stated that there is a second duality at work, one which I have labelled as the phenomenological distinction, and it can be stated as: *the player can engage with the playable figure in both a subjective and an objective mode of relation.*

A first insight into the shape that this duality takes in ludic experience can be gleaned by considering Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s criticism of what they term the “immersive fallacy” (2004, 450). I already touched upon this critique in my analysis of the term *immersion* and the objections to it in section 2.4.3 above, but a more sustained engagement with their argument is now warranted. By their definition:

The immersive fallacy is the idea that the pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality. According to the immersive fallacy, this reality is so complete that ideally the frame falls away so that the player truly believes that he or she is part of an imaginary world. (2004, 450-451)

The immersive fallacy, then, refers to the notion of *immersion as transportation* which I discussed in section 4.2.1, albeit one shorn of any qualification or nuance.<sup>8</sup> What is interesting for the purpose of the investigation at hand is the manner in which it invokes the question of the relation between the player and the playable figure. Salen and Zimmerman argue that, “the immersive fallacy would assert that the player has an “immersive” relationship with the character, that to play the character is to *become* the character” (2004, 453). Instead:

A player’s relationship to a game character he or she directly controls is not a simple matter of direct identification. Instead, a player relates to a game character through the double-consciousness of play. A protagonist character is a persona

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<sup>8</sup> While Salen and Zimmerman’s criticisms would be entirely valid if such a formulation of immersion were indeed dominant, it would be a challenge to locate any serious argument for the kind of total, all-consuming sense of immersion that Salen and Zimmerman rightly describe as a fallacy. Even in theoretical projects, such as those of Janet Murray (1998) and Marie-Laure Ryan (2001a), where immersion is granted a major role, attention is paid both to the very specific methods by which the fragile illusion is upheld, and to the narrow limits within which it is bracketed. As such, the critique of the immersive fallacy veers dangerously close to becoming a straw-man argument.

through which a player exerts him or herself into an imaginary world [...] However, at the very same time, the character is a tool, a puppet, an object for the player to manipulate according to the rules of the game. In this sense, the player is fully aware of the character as an artificial construct. (ibid.)

In short, “the player takes on the role of the figure in relation to the gameworld while remaining aware of her own existence as a player manipulating a game object” (ibid.).<sup>9</sup>

The notion of *double-consciousness* introduced in this passage is key: moreover, it is one whose place within the conceptual schema of ludic experience has already been set. In deploying Eugen Fink’s ontology of play in order to arrive at a conceptualization of the gameworld in Chapter 2, I noted that, according to Fink, the player takes on a “role” within the play-world in relation to the play-thing: just as the doll, in play, becomes a child, the playing girl becomes its mother (2012[1958, II]). However, Fink writes, in a distinct prefiguration of Salen and Zimmerman:

...we must distinguish between the real human being who ‘plays’ and the human role within play. The player ‘conceals’ himself by means of his role; in a certain measure he vanishes into it. With an intensity of a peculiar sort he lives *in* the role – and yet, again, not like a person who is deluded [...] In the performance of play, there remains a knowledge, albeit strongly reduced, about his double existence. [...] This doubling belongs to the essence of playing. (ibid.)

There is no question of a distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’ here: from the perspective of the playing girl, the mother that she plays, as her ludic subjectivity, is just as much ‘herself’ as her subjectivity as a player. Instead, the “doubling” Fink refers to here is nothing other than what I have termed, in section 2.4, the double perspectival structure

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<sup>9</sup> Though, in section 1.5.2, I explicitly contrasted the question of ludic subjectivity to that of role-playing, it is pertinent to point out that this is a point that is also recognized within theorizations of the act of role-playing as it pertains to RPGs. As Sarah Lynne Bowman writes, though, in role-playing, “players learn how to inhabit the headspace of someone other than their primary ego identity,” (2010, 8), this still engages the “aspects of their primary identities” which the enacted character draws on or contrast with (ibid., 127). Regarding pen-and-paper role-playing, Gary Alan Fine writes that “when animating a character a player must choose between playing his own self in the guise of that character or playing the self of that character” (2002[1983], 4). Dennis D. Waskul writes that “the activity [of role-playing] necessarily involves two distinct, yet simultaneous roles during the same activity; participants are fantasy personas *and* the players who enact the personas” (2006, 28).

of ludic engagement. Fink distinguishes between the two subjective positions the player must retain in suspension during the act of playing: first, there is the “role” adopted towards the play-world, which determines the relation the player is to adopt towards the things therein (if her role is ‘mother’, her engagement with the ‘child’ is presumably to be one of care), and, hence, to her mode of being-in-the-play-world. Second, there is the position of the “human being who ‘plays’”, who retains an awareness that the role of ‘mother’ – and the sphere of action or ‘world’ to which the role pertains – is one that is ‘only’ being played.

These standpoints correspond, directly, to the internal perspective of the ludic subject and to the external perspective of the implied player; as such, I shall loop back to the arguments I presented in developing the double perspectival structure in order to better articulate the notion of the double-consciousness put forward in Salen and Zimmerman. In section 2.4.4, I argued that the implication of the double perspectival structure for the player’s relation to the ludic subject is that it is related to both *subjectively* and *objectively* – it is both the internal perspective through which the gameworld is framed, and a figure in the gameworld that is itself perceived from the external perspective.

This double perspective is grounded in a two-sided phenomenology of the playable figure as the player’s body in the gameworld, which, as Paul Martin has observed, is both subject and object (2012, 2). In the subjective mode, the player adopts the playable figure as *her* body-in-the-gameworld, engaging with the gameworld as an embodied ludic subject through the playable figure’s ‘opening’ onto the gameworld. The result of this is that the figure itself disappears from the player’s focus: it is not a thing which I see, but “that by which things are revealed to me” (Sartre 1966[1943], 402). This is revealed in Aarseth’s comment that “when I play, I don’t even see her [Lara Croft’s] body, but see through and past it” (2004a, 48). In this sense, the ways in which the figure structures a ludic subject-position for the player to inhabit in relation to the gameworld have been articulated over the course of this investigation so far, through the lens of the notions of immersion (Murray 1998; Ryan 2001a; Grau 2003; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Thon 2008), presence (Lombard and Ditton 1997; McMahan 2003), telepresence (Minsky

1980; Steuer 1992; Taylor 2003), focalization (Neitzel 2002; Nitsche 2005; Arjoranta 2013), recentring (Ryan 2001a), agency (Murray 1998; Mateas and Stern 2005; Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009), embodiment (Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007a; 2007b; Gee 2008) and incorporation (Calleja 2011).

In the *objective* mode of the player-figure relation, conversely, the player does not inhabit the perspective of the figure, but, rather, maintains a perceptual position (not necessarily – and not exclusively – in the visual sense)<sup>10</sup> outside of the figure, perceiving it objectively (that is, as an object which is given in an intentional act of perception) from a point-of-view distinct from it. In this mode, then, the figure becomes itself present to the player as an object of perception: the player is no longer only aware of the gameworld as perceived through the figure, but becomes aware of the figure itself. As an example of an approach within game studies which has foregrounded the objective mode of the player-figure relation, we can suggest Emma Westecott's puppet theory of the avatar (2009).

### 6.2.3 *The interrelation of the two distinctions*

To summarize, the playable figure is both a manifestation of the player and also, at the same time, a distinct individual, a character with its own attributes and characteristics that set it apart from the player as Other. In addition to this, thanks to the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement, the player adopts the ludic subject-position represented by the figure as her own and looks out at the gameworld from this perspective, while, at the same time, retaining an awareness of herself as a player engaging with the figure as an object. In short: the playable figure is granted the status of both *self* and *other*, and it is related to both *subjectively* and *objectively*.

The logical next step, it would seem, would be a linking of these two dualities – the one in the ontological status of the playable figure, and the one in the player's subjective relation to it – in a model that traces a direct correspondence between one and

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<sup>10</sup> In the context of the ludic subject-position, I shall consider the interrelation between visual point-of-view and perspective in the wider, multi-layered sense implied in the notion of a subjective standpoint, in Chapter 7.



the other, thereby defining two divergent modes of experiential relation between the figure and the player. It is in this direction that game studies has moved to date. The unstated implication of the binary of ‘avatar’ versus ‘character,’ which I have already explored, is that, if the figure is viewed by the player as ‘herself,’ that must be because it is subjectively inhabited, as an avatar or manifestation of the player; if, on the other hand, it is viewed objectively, from an external perspective, then it can only be viewed as a distinct other, and, hence, as a character.

Through outlining the implications of the two distinctions, however, I have demonstrated that such a dual model of the player-figure relation is over-simplistic on a number of levels. Most relevantly to the purposes of this investigation, such a two-dimensional understanding of the player-figure relation is an indispensable component of a theory of the mechanisms of ludic subjectivity.

The twofold understanding of subjectivity laid out by Dan Zahavi, which I first introduced in section 1.5, is relevant again here. I shall again invoke the point that an approach to the subject must keep in mind the two ways in which the subject appears to herself: first, “the self as an experiential dimension”, in which the subject is equated with the first-person perspective that is the ground for phenomenological experience of the world, but that, by that token, cannot itself be experienced; secondly, the idea of “the self as a narrative construction”, created after the fact in order to unite the disparate strands of moment-to-moment experience under a coherent identity (2008, 8).

Broadly speaking, the distinction here is one between the self as subject and the self as object – or, to return to Sartre’s terms, as for-itself and in-itself. Insofar as I am a subject and there is, for me, a world, it is because I, as subject, am not what I see but what is seeing. As a result, “the ego emerges only when we adopt a distancing and objectifying attitude to the experience in question” (ibid., 34). Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued for a similar insight in his development of an embodied phenomenology: though the individual’s body itself is not an object of perception (insofar as it is that by means of which other objects are perceived), it can *become* an object of perception. Thus, for instance, when the left hand touches the right hand, the body is both (perceiving) subject

and (perceived) object (2002[1945], 105; 1968, 134). Paul Ricoeur, in the tellingly-titled study *Oneself as Another* (1992), makes perhaps the most cogent case for the fact that the individual's understanding of herself and her own subjectivity is constructed through “a dialectic of *self* and the *other than self*” (ibid., 3) that lies at the very heart of selfhood.

This is also true of the player's relation to the ludic subject, their ‘self’ within the gameworld – as has become apparent, the ‘I-in-the-gameworld,’ which is granted the status of both self and other, is also, across both of these poles of identity, both perceiving subject and perceived object. As such, an understanding of the player-figure relation must be founded on an uncoupling of the self/other distinction from the subjective/objective perspective.<sup>11</sup>

### 6.3 A model of the player-figure relation

Adopting such a multi-faceted understanding of the structure of the subject therefore leads us to move beyond the binary model of the player-figure relation that has dominated game studies to date. Instead of an either/or option defining the player-figure relation as either a subjective relation of self or an objective relation of other, it seems we might instead suggest four possible modes of relation organised along two axes: determining not only whether the relation is subjective or objective, but also, at the same time, whether the relation is one of self or other. This would give us four aspects of the player-figure relation: subjective/self, subjective/other, objective/self, objective/other (see Figure 6.1):

- The *subjective relation of self* occurs when the player inhabits the ludic subject-position established by the figure and perceives this subject as ‘herself’. Here, the ludic subject is not itself brought into view; rather, it is that through which the gameworld is perceived.

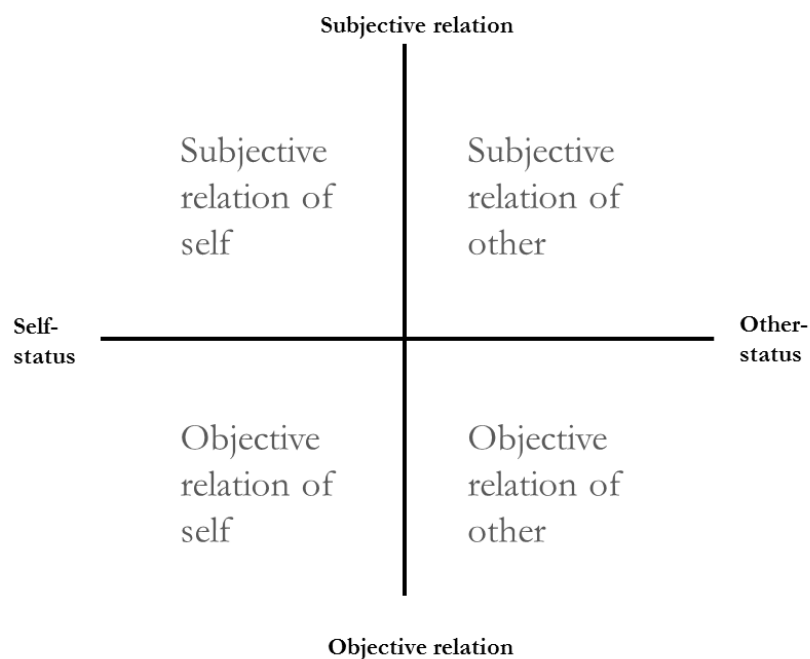
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<sup>11</sup> These arguments shall be thematized as the main focus of Chapter 8, where I shall highlight the self-reflexive turn by which a first-personal engagement with the gameworld from the standpoint of the ludic subject-position can itself become the object of the player's perception, as the representation of a *ludic self*.

- The *subjective relation of other* occurs when the player inhabits the ludic subject-position established by the playable figure, taking it on in relation to the gameworld and thereby ‘inhabiting’ the figure as an internal standpoint, but nonetheless perceives the subjective perspective through which she is perceiving the gameworld as being distinct from her own perspective, and, thus, as belonging to an other – in most cases, identifying the perspective through which the gameworld is given to her as belonging to a heterocosmic individual, that is, a character.
- The *objective relation of self* occurs when the player perceives the figure objectively, from an external perspective, but nonetheless relates to it as ‘herself.’ This dimension of the player-figure relation, then, involves the player perceiving an objectified representation of her own ludic subjectivity, thereby allowing for a textualization of the player’s own ludic self to be brought into view through an autoscopic mechanism.
- The *objective relation of other* occurs when the player perceives the figure objectively, framed as an object of perception from the external perspective, but relates to it as a distinct individual separate from herself. This corresponds most closely to the idea of ‘character’ as the representation of a heterocosmic individual.

These are not to be understood as mutually exclusive alternatives: it is never a case of *either* an exclusively subjective *or* objective perspective, or of *either* a relation of identity *or* of difference. No matter which perspective or mode of relation comes to the fore at any given point, it remains shadowed by its inverse, and the distinctive nature of the player-figure relation lies precisely in the – frequently paradoxical – interrelation and interdependence of these opposing modes and perspectives, between which no definitive lines of demarcation can be drawn. As Annika Waern has noted, *bleed* between the perspectives that can be attributed to the ludic subject-position and to the figure-as-character reveals the permeability of the separation between the two subject-positions (2010) – and this, as shall become evident in the

case study I shall undertake in the second half of this chapter, is not to be taken as an accidental or even an occasional occurrence, but as lying at the very heart of the aesthetic constitution of figure-based play, and, hence, of ludic subjectivity. It is no wonder that Salen and Zimmerman extend the idea of double-consciousness into that of the player’s “hybrid-consciousness” in relation to the gameworld (2004, 455), or that Boudreau, as I have already noted, speaks of a “hybrid-identity” that “does not solely belong to the player, nor to the playable character” (2012, 13).



**Figure 6.1:** A model for the player-figure relation

#### 6.4 Case study: *Kentucky Route Zero*, Act 1 Scene 2

In order to gain a clearer picture of these interrelations, and of how the player-figure relation operates in the intersections between the four aspects identified by this model, I shall turn to a close engagement with an instance of the player-figure relation in action. As my example, I have chosen a scene from *Kentucky Route Zero* (hereinafter *KRZ*), an episodic point-and-click adventure game whose first episode (or “Act”, in the game’s

parlance) was released in January 2013. The playable figure is Conway, a delivery-person working for a small antiques business. The scene I shall take as the basis of my analysis – the second scene in Act 1 – plays out on the Marquez family farm. It follows an opening scene in which Conway pulls up to the Equus Oils gas station, looking for directions to an address to which he has to make a delivery, but which he can't seem to find. Joseph, the aged gas station attendant, cryptically remarks that Conway needs to take “the Zero”, before suggesting he can get better directions at the Marquez household.

#### 6.4.1 *The opening*

As Act 1 Scene 2 opens, the player views Conway and his dog (Homer or Blue, depending on the player's choice in the opening scene) in extreme long shot, on an empty path lit by the truck's headlights. The scene is framed by the wooden supports and roof of a porch overlooking the scene; at irregular intervals, a figure in silhouette walks past in the extreme foreground, momentarily obscuring the view.

This is an explicitly cinematic – or even theatrical – visual framing that immediately implies the player in a very specific position. One could say, leaving the heterocosmic frame intact, that the player is granted the perspective of one of the unnamed locals sitting on the porch, dispassionately observing the scene – and Conway – from their vantage point. More importantly, the visual suggestion of the proscenium arch imposes a self-reflexive formalism on the scene, explicitly foregrounding the player's status as audience to the scene (see Figure 6.2).

It would appear that a neat conclusion could already be drawn here. Clearly, the relation that is emphasized in this instance is the objective relation of other. In this moment, the player's perspective on the environment is in no way coterminous with Conway's: she does not see the scene subjectively *through* Conway, instead, she sees Conway objectively, looking *onto* him as a character *in* the scene. Crucially, however, this is not an instance of what Newman would term *off-line engagement*, defined as non-ergodic engagement “where no registered input control is received from the player” (2002). The player is not watching Conway perform actions of his own volition in a cut-scene. While

she is engaged in this objective relation to Conway, viewing him from afar as an object in a staged scene, the player also retains control of both Conway’s capabilities and perceptual apparatus. This is crucial: as Klevjer argues, it is through the capabilities that the playable figure grants the player in relation to the gameworld – which, as was discussed in section 5.2.5, Klevjer conceptualizes through Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the bodily “I can” (2002[1945], 160) – that it can anchor a subject-position that structures the player’s phenomenological grasp of the gameworld (2012, 27).



**Figure 6.2:** The opening scene.

Conway’s capabilities, in the tradition of the point-and-click adventure genre, are formulated around a context- and item-specific ‘use’ command; similarly, his perception is largely established by means of an equally context-specific ‘look at’ command. *KRZ*’s interface communicates both of these in the form of visual icons contained in text-boxes hovering on-screen next to objects with which interaction is possible.

Two points are of interest here. Fernández-Vara argues that an adventure game is defined as one in which “the main mode of interaction is based on a verb + object structure” (2008, 213). She notes that the historical move away from parser-based text adventures and towards graphical point-and-click adventures was marked by a curtailing

of the player's freedom of action: whereas parser-based games could potentially accept and react to a wide variety of inputs (and allowed the player to at least test out any verb she could think of), point-and-click adventure games presented their limited vocabulary on screen and would not accept any input beyond these verbs. Finding a hunk of meat in the kitchen of the Scumm Bar in *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990), for example, the player is given the option of looking at it or picking it up, but the lack of the appropriate verb in the interface already precludes the player from thinking that it might be possible to eat it. In this context, KRZ can be seen to represent an even further curtailing of player freedom of action than the classic point-and-click adventure game: not only does it display the range of possible 'verbs' on-screen, it even goes so far as to highlight the (usually no more than two or three) points within a given scene where some kind of action is possible.

Second, in Klevjer's terms, this constitutes *symbolic* rather than *tangible* interaction, where "the player gives *instructions* to the avatar, via the controller interface" rather than being given direct control (2012, 27). Fernández-Vara reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that, despite the shift to a graphical interface, the player's control over the avatar in point-and-click adventure games remains, as it is with text adventures, syntactic rather than direct (2008, 221).

It is perhaps advisable to qualify Klevjer's assertion on this point, and posit that the difference between the two categories he proposes is not one of kind but merely of degree. After all, *any* instance of engagement with a playable figure is predicated upon some form of mechanism by which the figure responds to commands given by the player through the interface. As such, while conceding that some control configurations do more than others to close the phenomenological gap between the instruction and the performance of the action (as, for example, in the case of most action-adventure games), to say that this is, in any literal rather than metaphorical sense, 'tangible', is to distort the nature of the mechanism at work.

As such, even if the point-and-click interface remains, in comparative terms, a distancing mode of control, it still provides the basic structure for establishing a

phenomenological perspective upon the gameworld – a subjectivity for the player to inhabit that is distinct from her own, and, moreover, a subjectivity that is *embodied*, being dependent upon Conway’s bodily situatedness in the scene. In this particular instance, while the player sees Conway from the perspective of the porch, three objects in the scene are presented with a text-box that highlights possible interactions – the truck, the dog, and a lone lamp-post illuminating the path ahead. Each of the three text-boxes has the eye icon that constitutes Conway’s ‘look at’ command; moreover, the text-box attached to the dog includes a ‘talk to’ icon that starts a rather one-sided conversation between Conway and his dog, and the text-box attached to the truck also includes a ‘use’ icon that, if selected, causes Conway to get into the truck and drive away, effectively exiting the scene and returning to the world map.

#### 6.4.2 *‘Looking at’ the world*

In the interest of providing a robust conceptual underpinning to the analysis at hand, I shall pause to briefly consider the phenomenological nature of the ‘look at’ command as a formal convention of the point-and-click genre. Considered as an action, it constitutes one of the primary verbs in the lexicon of actions granted to the player in relation to the gameworld (Crawford 2004, 228-229). This is especially evident in earlier examples of the graphical point-and-click adventure game, such as the various games LucasArts produced using the SCUMM engine between *Maniac Mansion* in 1987 and *The Curse of Monkey Island* in 1997. Here, unlike in *KRZ*, “look at” was literally presented, thanks to the SCUMM interface, as one of a set of written verbs that the player can direct towards objects in the world. What is even more vital, however, is the way in which the ‘look at’ function shapes the player’s perspective on, and experience of, the objects in the gameworld. After all, in graphical adventure games, the player does not need to use the ‘look at’ function to see an object in the gameworld: all she needs to do is look at the object presented on screen. What role does the ‘look at’ function perform, then?

In simple terms, it can be understood as constituting a sustained gaze: the ‘look at’ command focuses subjective attention on a particular object, isolating it as a distinct



figure of perception against the ground of the world. In phenomenological terms, we can call it an *intentional* function, meaning ‘intention’ in the sense of phenomenological sense of *intentionality* I discussed in section 3.1.

The question that needs to be asked, however, is – whose subjective perception does the ‘look at’ command enact, or, in other words, who is the subject intending the object framed by the command? In most cases, what results from directing the ‘look at’ command towards an object is a verbal description of that object. *KRZ* is no exception to this. If the player ‘looks at’ Blue/Homer, for instance, the following text description is offered: “An old dog in a straw hat. Both have seen better days.” Evidently, the ‘look at’ command reveals information about the object at hand that is not available to the player’s own visual perception: from the game’s minimalist, low-detail polygonal visual presentation, for instance, the player cannot possibly determine that the dog is old.

What this makes clear is that the ‘look at’ function enshrines a specific subjective point-of-view in relation to what it grasps. This leads to the conclusion that the nature of the ‘look at’ function is the presentation of objects in the gameworld from a subjective perspective distinct from the player’s. Moreover, the information obtained from this perspective is conveyed through the introduction of a narrative voice, an introduction – to speak in Platonic terms – of an instance of *diegesis* in a form more commonly defined by *mimesis*, a representation in the mode of telling rather than that of showing. This narrative voice, and the perspective on the gameworld from which it speaks, is not that of the player – making the ‘look at’ function, then, an instance of what, in section 4.1.1, I termed the noetic mode of presentation, wherein what is presented is not simply an object, but the object as intended by a perceiving subject. For this reason, the ‘look at’ command points both in the direction of the intentional act’s noematic content – the object that is intended, i.e. what is seen – towards its status as *noesis*, that is, as the intentional act of a perceiving subject who is thereby brought into view.

It is arguable that, in many cases, and certainly in the case of *KRZ*, this perceiving subject is to be identified with that of the player-character, that is, the playable figure in its heterocosmic dimension. Petri Lankoski makes use of the notion of *alignment* to refer

to the manner in which the player is given access to information in the game, a process which will either associate the player's perspective to that of the figure (through a congruence in the range of information that is available to both) or position them as separate (if the player has access to more or less information than the character does) (2011, 302). Though Lankoski does not make the association, this bears a strong resemblance to Gérard Genette's original formulation of the narratological concept of *focalization*, which this investigation has already delved into in section 4.1.3. There, I noted that Genette defines focalization as a "restriction of field" (1980, 189) achieved through a "selection of narrative information" (1988, 155). Genette, then, provides us with a more rigorous terminology with which to analyze the presentation and restriction of information, and to answer the question, "Who sees?" According to Genette's taxonomy of degrees of focalization, we are dealing here with a case of *internal focalization*, where the perspective is linked to that of a character (1980, 189). At the same time, the notion of alignment, Lankoski demonstrates, highlights not only *what* is known, but also *how* it is accessed. With respect to KRZ's 'look at' function, this can be formulated as: the player instructs the figure to 'look at' an object by clicking on the object, the figure approaches the object, and only then, once the figure is located in the right position to examine the object, is its description shared with the player.

Given that the act of consciousness intertwines the intended object with the subjective consciousness for whom it is intended (Husserl 2012[1931], 163), each instance of the 'look at' function reveals the subject that is doing the perceiving as much as it reveals the object being perceived, laminating the two as opposing sides of the same *noesis*. The player 'looks at' an object in an adventure game not only to learn something about the object, but also, just as importantly, to find out what the player-character thinks about that object.

Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone has noted the extent to which, in the *Monkey Island* series (LucasArts 1991-2000), this serves to distance the player from the character by means of the foregrounding of the playable figure Guybrush Threepwood's "personal' whim, preference or aversion" when examining objects – for instance, his

disgust when 'looking at' porcelain (2013, 4). Conway's subjective perspective is drawn in subtler strokes, but it is still the case that each stated observation that addresses the instruction to 'look at' something constitutes what we can term a "predefined function" (Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman 2003, 3) or what, in section 9.5.1, I shall call a "character action" – an act (in this case, a verbal act) that can be attributed to the character as a distinct heterocosmic individual, rather than to the player. Even from the three such observations available here, at the beginning of the scene under investigation, the sensitive player can isolate some defined features of his unique perspective on the world: most notably, a capacity for laconic observation, and a distinct tinge of melancholy or wistfulness. These insights can then be taken as "characterization statements" (Margolin 1986, 206), contributing to the concretization of an impression of Conway as a living, breathing individual in the heterocosm by revealing his perspective on the things he looks at.

How does this force us to reconsider the relation at work between the player and Conway in this scene? It seems it is necessary to complicate the hasty conclusion that immediately suggested itself. At the same time as the player is viewing Conway from her external audience-position on the porch, seeing him as a character in the scene, a represented *other*, she also shares Conway's point-of-view on the scene. In this moment where the objective relation of other is dominant, another aspect of the relation – the subjective relation of other – remains in play as another experiential layer.

#### 6.4.3 *Walking the path*

The player's relation to Conway's subjective perspective becomes even closer when she instructs him to start walking up the path. Of course, the player has good reason for doing so as opposed to, for instance, instructing Conway to go back to the truck and leave the scene. I have already mentioned that Conway has a motive for being here: he is seeking directions to complete his delivery, and has been led to believe he can find help at this farm. In ludic terms, then, this constitutes a quest – a series of actions, usually

linked in a spatial traversal of the gameworld, that need to be performed in order to achieve a stated goal (Tosca 2003a; Aarseth 2004b; 2005).

Lankoski (2011, 296) has argued that what he terms “goal-related engagement” constitutes one of the primary methods by which a bond of identification is formed between the player and the character. He defines this mode of engagement as “fundamentally an “I” experience: it is about the players acting to reach their goals” (ibid., 306); at the same time, if the player’s ludic goals in relation to the game can be made to relate to the goals the player-character possesses as a heterocosmic individual, then “the emotions of the [player character] and the player will be correlated” (ibid., 298). In section 5.2.4, I already discussed the central role played by an orientation towards goals or purposes in the determination of embodied subjectivity (Merleau-Ponty 2002[1945], 115), and I shall return to this point in the course of my unfolding of the dimensions of the ludic subject-position in section 7.2.

This alignment of perspectives is also represented visually. As Conway walks up the hill, the view zooms in closer to Conway’s position. The proscenium arch of the porch is left behind, and the way ahead comes into view: the player can see, along with Conway, that the path leads to a farmhouse on top of the hill, next to what appears to be a graveyard. It is not only this change in framing that works to align the player’s visual point-of-view on the scene to Conway’s, but also the game’s impressionistic use of lighting, which highlights specific objects and parts of a scene as distinct figures as and when they emerge into Conway’s perception, and allows them to retreat into a monochromatic ground as his attention shifts away. In this case, just as the scene ahead of Conway comes into view, the scene he has left behind – the truck, the dog, the lamp – recedes into the background; it is no longer contained in his subjective perspective, and, hence, it is no longer part of the player’s, either (see Figure 6.3). The notion of focalization as a “restriction of field” is presented in literal terms here.

As Conway walks up to the house, the viewpoint continues to zoom into the scene, with the framing becoming ever more constricted: when Conway is at the door, the house fills the frame, just as it occupies the whole of Conway’s field of vision and his

attention. However, the house remains a dark, monochromatic silhouette: just like Conway, the player can perceive its shape, but cannot glimpse what is inside (see Figure 6.4). Once the player has instructed Conway to open the door, a text-box appears, granting the player the affordance of using an unseen light-switch. (We can assume, by drawing on our own experiences of walking into unlit rooms, that Conway has felt around for the light-switch in the dark, and that, as such, the availability of the light-switch within the perceptual field of the ludic subject-position constitutes another instance of the player's being made privy to Conway's subjective experiences – in this case, an experience of the light-switch intuited through the sense of touch – and, therefore, another instance of the subjective relation of other.)

It is only at this point, once the light bulb has flickered to life, that the shape of the house is filled in and the interior comes into view. The player can only see the interior of the house when Conway can see it, and she might share in his surprise when the light reveals a woman standing in the room (see Figure 6.5). Once again, the game's visual presentation links the two perspectives together and ensures that, though the player never stops being aware of Conway as a distinct individual she is objectively perceiving, she comes to relate to this other subjectively, adopting his perspective on the gameworld; even – as in the case of the perception of the woman in the room when the lights go on – herself experiencing the same sensation of surprise she might attribute to the character.

Crucially, this sense of surprise is not, at least not initially, attributed to Conway as someone distinct from the player – there is no need here to, as Leino suggests, “resort to the second-order structure of empathy when describing emotions in play” (2010, 219). It belongs to the player herself – I, as a player, experience it proprioceptively, as “my” surprise – and results from the embodied “situation of being” (Sobchack 1992, 81) framed by the ludic subject-position. It is, then, to be precise, an instance of the subjective relation of self, in the sense that I, as player, take ownership of the intentional experience obtained from the perspective of the ludic subject-position – I am able to say, “As soon as *I* turned on the light, *I* was surprised to see a woman had been standing in



**Figure 6.3:** Walking up the path.



**Figure 6.4:** At the house.



**Figure 6.5:** Turning on the light.

the darkened room.” At the same time, the perspective, being that of a ludic subjectivity attached to a figure that is also a character in the heterocosmic dimension of the scene at hand, is also attributed, and the player is aware of its being attributed, to Conway as a heterocosmic individual distinct from the player – as such, the line between the subjective relations of self and of other begin to blur.

#### 6.4.4 *Defining through choice*

*KRZ*'s use of dialogue mostly becomes relevant in the later parts of the scene, which constitute an extended conversation between Conway and Weaver Marquez, the woman he encounters in the house. However, there is one earlier instance of dialogue, which establishes *KRZ*'s usage of dialogue as a means of determining both Conway as a heterocosmic subject, and the player's relation to this subjectivity. Standing next to Blue/Homer in the opening of the scene, the player has the option of instructing Conway to talk to the dog. If she takes this option, she is presented with a choice between two lines of dialogue: “Pretty dark out here, huh?” / “So I guess we just head up the path here; the farmhouse is up the hill a bit”.

Choosing one dialogue option over the other makes no functional difference: either way, the dog will not respond. However, each option bears slightly different implications for the nature of Conway's subjective outlook on the world. The choice refers back to earlier dialogue choices in Act 1 Scene 1 that follow a similar pattern, asking the player to choose between a comment that reveals a no-nonsense desire to get on with the task at hand, and an alternative choice that, instead, reveals an observational interest in the scene for its own sake. The first dialogue option in the game, in which Conway, having just pulled into the gas station, responds to old man Joseph's query, immediately sets the pattern down in explicit terms: “I've been driving all evening looking for ‘5 Dogwood Drive’.” / “I've got a delivery to make on Dogwood, but I'd rather watch the sunset.”

Each of the two dialogue choices frames Conway's perspective on the world differently: or, rather, each dialogue choice is the result of Conway describing the world through a different perspectival frame that reveals different personal traits. Since Conway cannot be both a disinterested, unhurried observer of the moment at hand *and* an efficient, goal-driven individual who sees only means and ends – since, in other words, he cannot both privilege the journey over the goal, and the goal over the journey – the two options are mutually exclusive.

If Conway's characterization as an individual in the gameworld – and the resulting make-up of his subjectivity in relation to that world – cannot contain both attributes while maintaining coherence, it must be the case that only one of the two attributes is to be taken as true: naturally enough, this is the one implied by the dialogue option the player actuates. What this makes clear is that Conway, as a character, is not a fixed, predetermined construct. While some things about Conway-as-character are predetermined and inflexible – his name is Conway, he works as a delivery-person for a small antiques store, he is possessed of a distinct weary melancholy, and so on – others depend, to a considerable extent, on the choices made by the player in the act of playing. Conway is only completed when the player actuates a specific performance of him within the (admittedly narrowly restricted) possibility space offered by the game's network of choices. As such, when we speak of Conway, we are speaking of Conway as actuated in one particular playthrough.

In this, Conway stands as a metonym for the way in which the ergodic nature of videogames necessitates actualization through the selection of a specific path of traversal through the permutations of possibility of the underlying textual engine (Aarseth 1997, 1). To address the specific manner in which ergodicity relates to the formation of the playable figure as character, one can recall Gee's definition of the identity of the avatar as what he terms a "projective identity" emerging between the poles of the player's "real-world identity" and the avatar's "virtual identity" (2004, 54). Though the terms are rather vaguely defined in Gee's formulation, *virtual identity* describes "one's identity as a virtual character in a virtual world" (ibid.), and appears to align closely with the heterocosmic



perspective on the playable figure as a character bearing an individual subjectivity that is Other to the player's own *real-world identity* in relation to the ludic heterocosm. As I already discussed in section 1.3, Gee uses the term *projective* with the sense of the resulting identity being an ongoing project worked out in the interaction between player and game for the duration of the player's engagement. The game, by this understanding, frames the boundaries of this possible range of characteristics that can be attributed to its figure, by rigidly limiting the choices and possibilities for action available to the player: this is the sense in which Janet Murray spoke of "dramatic agency" (2005) and Nick Montfort discussed the "fretting" of the player-character as "a constraint and possibility defined by the author" (2007, 145).

To return to the specific dialogue option in question: if, as in this case, there is no functional difference to choosing one option rather than another, on what basis does the player make the choice? In general (and assuming the player is not simply making choices randomly, or according to moment-by-moment whim) two options would appear to be before us. In the first case, the player might be choosing dialogue options in a conscious act of role-playing. Maintaining a relation to Conway-as-other, in both the subjective and objective modes of this relation, the player actively constructs him as a distinct subject, and hence as a character without losing sight of his 'otherness' – that is, without ever identifying the resulting figure as 'herself'.

This is probably the case for large sections of the conversation that ensues in the Marquez house between Conway and Weaver, in which Weaver poses a string of questions relating to Conway's background. When it appears that Conway might not be very familiar with how a TV set operates, for instance, Weaver asks why he did not watch TV as a child. The player is given three dialogue options to determine Conway's response: "Mum heard ghosts in the static." / "Dad was worried about radiation." / "I watch TV." The response the player chooses is unlikely to have much to do with the player's own childhood experience with TV, and is much more likely to be a result of the player's attempting to actualize a particular vision of what Conway is like as a distinct person. Choosing either of the first two options, for example, would characterize

Conway as having had a troubled, or at least eccentric, family background and, potentially, an unhappy childhood; the last option, conversely, would imply either a “normal” childhood (whatever such a thing may be), or a reticence about painful memories. Whichever option the player chooses, then, the subjectivity that Conway represents will be shaped by the choice, and will, to some degree, determine the frame through which the player perceives subsequent events in the game – a case of what Waern termed *bleed-out*, “when the player shares the emotions of the character” (2010, 5).

The second option to consider is that the player might choose her answers to fit her own perspective on the gameworld. To illustrate this point, let us return to the initial dialogue choice at the start of the scene, with which we started this section. In deciding whether to express absorption in the moment at hand, or anticipation of the goals ahead, the player is certainly, as we have just argued, defining Conway as an independent individual. However, in the case of this particular choice – and in many other cases – she is also being given the opportunity to express her own subjective outlook on the gameworld by selecting the option which most closely adheres to it. A player who chooses the second option, for instance, might be one who has thoroughly internalized the quest structure that generally defines the adventure game genre, and who has, as a result, framed the gameworld in such a way as to push para-ludic distractions to the background. Conversely, a player who chooses the first dialogue option is more likely to be one who has taken to heart Joseph’s remark, in the opening scene, that, “You’ve just got to stop and take in that road.”

In both cases, the mental act that the speech act is read as being representative of – for the first option, perhaps an apprehension at the uneasy atmosphere of the scene, or, alternatively, an observation of the loneliness of the remote location; for the second option, an impatience at the long-winded process involved in finding a way to Dogwood Drive – belongs not to Conway, or, at least, not only to Conway. It is, primarily, a mental act resulting from the player’s own subjective experience of the gameworld from the standpoint of the ludic subject-position, and it only *also* belongs to Conway insofar as, through the player’s dialogue choice, Conway is made to reflect this ludic subjectivity –

thereby constituting an instance of *bleed-in*, when the player's own subjective perspective is projected onto the character (Waern 2010, 5).

What initially appeared to be, in the case of the player sharing Conway's perspective on the gameworld, simply an instance of the subjective relation of other – with the player taking on the foreign perspective of a character – is here revealed to be something more complicated. The representation of Conway's subjective position in relation to the gameworld has been shown to be partly configured by the player, with this configuration occurring in such a way as to reflect, at least at certain, vital points, the ludic subjectivity the player enacts in relation to the gameworld. As a result of this, the subjective position attributed to Conway, which, so far, it has appeared the player inhabits without suspending her awareness of its being an other's point-of-view, grows indistinguishable from the perspective that the player identifies as her own. Just as it did in the attribution of the emotion of surprise at the first sight of Weaver Marquez, close analysis here reveals the same inseparable intertwining of the subjective relations of self and of other.

It is not the case, then, that the subjective relation of self supersedes or eclipses the subjective relation of other: instead, the two become closely interlinked, with the player identifying the subject-position and its associated figure as *both* Conway and as 'herself', with the balance between the two positions shifting from moment to moment. The player is more likely, for instance, to attribute the statement, "Pretty dark out here, huh?" to 'herself', while, on the other hand, attributing "Dad was worried about radiation" to Conway-as-character.

#### 6.4.5 *A record of the ludic subject*

It has been established that Conway, as character and as ludic subject, is only completed once the player has actualized a particular path through the choices and possibilities for action afforded by the game – in other words, Conway is *enacted*.<sup>12</sup> The next question we

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<sup>12</sup> I shall return to the notion of *enactment*, and its ties to both the conceptual schema of action and the question of an aesthetics of ludic subjectivity, in section 8.1.

must consider, then, is: how does Conway, as produced through the player's engagement with the game, emerge as a coherent figure that the player can relate to?

Stepping into the mode of interpretation that Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron account for under the hermeneutic spiral (2009, 117, see section 3.4.2), a thematic analysis of *KRZ* would easily conclude that it is a game that foregrounds and thematizes its own mediation. Most prominently, it does so through a preoccupation with outmoded media technology. Not only do old televisions and radios feature prominently in both its plot and visual arrangements, but the game itself bears the audiovisual signs of dead medialities, referring back both to the history of the videogame medium and to earlier medialities, from the simulated cathode-ray flicker of its opening menu text onwards. Its angular, low-detail, solid-colour polygonal visual style recall 3D animation techniques in early 1990s adventure games, in particular *Another World* (Chahi 1991). Other stylistic techniques refer back even further: the map that Conway navigates when travelling between scenes is drawn in minimalist, white-on-black vector graphics *circa* 1981, with added textual descriptions that recall nothing so much as the scene descriptions in interactive fiction games such as *Adventure*.

In deploying these stylistic borrowings from the medium's history, *KRZ* aligns itself within a postmodernist idiom, its stylistic *bricolage* of visual tropes and techniques betraying a self-reflexive concern with its own presentation and mediality, "a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces" (Hutcheon 1988, 125). Bearing in mind Westecott's remark that the screen-based mediality of videogames means that "the player is always audience to her own play act" (2009, 2), the foregrounded self-reflexivity of this presentation in *KRZ* directs attention to the game's status *as* game – and, hence, to the actions happening within it as ludic actions – as well as to the process of re-presentation itself.

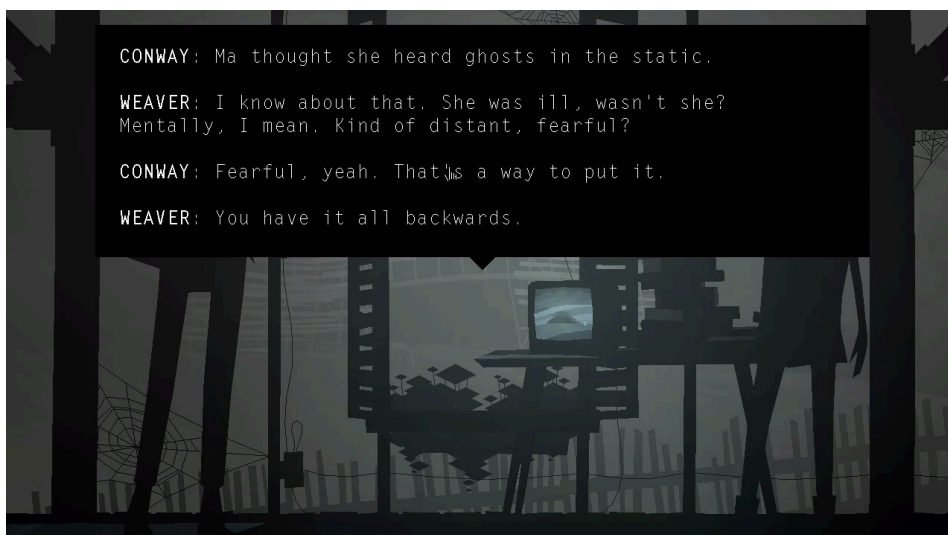
Moreover, this is an impression strengthened by *KRZ*'s generic properties. The nature of the point-and-click adventure genre means that, unlike in, for instance, a first-person shooter or an action-adventure game, there is a more obvious temporal

dissociation between player input and resulting visual presentation of the intended action, which, naturally, works to foreground this representative quality.

The most interesting aspect of *KRZ*'s mediation, however – and the most revealing in terms of the nature of the player-figure relation – lies in its treatment of dialogue. Whenever the player engages in a conversation with an NPC, the dialogue resulting from the player's recent choices is preserved on-screen in the form of a textual presentation. The interesting thing here, however, is the format this textual presentation takes. The lines of dialogue spoken by Conway and his interlocutors are presented in the format of a dramatic script or screenplay – an impression strengthened by the game's division into numbered acts and scenes, as well as by the use of a font style whose cultural association with the typewritten manuscript is unmistakable. This is particularly interesting when taken in the light of the designers' stated intention of placing players in the role of "the actor in a play", in that they "don't necessarily choose the dialogue or the plot, but they choose how to inflect it and how to think about, depending on their method of acting, the inner life of the character," thereby engaging in a form of "creative construction" (Elliott in Grayson 2013). It is tempting to link this back to Gee's notion of a "projective identity", and it is important to recall that, as we discussed earlier, the player's choices in shaping Conway-as-character are not purely disinterested choices about the nature of a distinct individual who the player grasps objectively. Instead, these choices are manifested through the taking of actions from the ludic subject-position Conway represents – and, as we have already argued, the line between this perspective on the gameworld being identified as Conway's and as the player's own, as a subjective relation of self or other, is blurred.

*KRZ*'s re-presentation of the player-as-Conway's verbal acts in the form of a dramatic script therefore gives the impression of a dramatic presentation emerging as a unified text through the player's working-out of a path through the choices offered by the game (see Figure 6.6). This can be grasped as a very literal manifestation of Calleja's notion of *alterbiography*, "the ongoing narrative generated during interaction with a game environment" (2011, 124), which I shall return to in section 8.2.2.

Given that Conway, as the protagonist of the dramatic presentation generated during the playing of *KRZ*, represents a ludic subject taken on by the player as 'I' as much as he represents a character in his own right, the distinction between an alterbiography of entity and of self becomes, not effaced – for it remains a valid distinction for discussing the multiple layers of experience at work – but porous. Certainly, the protagonist of the dramatic script the player sees on-screen is Conway, and, in perceiving Conway thus as a represented character, the player is engaging with him in the objective relation of other. However, since Conway is also inhabited by the player as a ludic subject, it follows that it is also as a ludic subject, as taken up by the player as 'I-in-the-gameworld,' that he becomes part of the game's dramatic presentation, and, hence, of its textuality. In perceiving herself in this way, then, the player adopts the objective relation of self, by which she becomes available to herself (insofar as she grasps the ludic subject as herself) as an object of her own perception. The ludic subject is therefore framed through an external point-of-view. However, this happens while the player continues to relate to the figure as the self, thereby establishing an aesthetic mechanism of autoscopy, or self-perception (Mishara 2009, 591).



**Figure 6.6:** Producing a dramatic script.

The player's ludic subjectivity – the self that she works out in relation to the gameworld, in the shape of the playable figure – is therefore re-presented to her as an object of perception. Not only that, but the representation of the player's ludic subjectivity is presented to her within the context of the textual unity the game as an aesthetic object possesses when framed through the external perspective – a textual unity whose elements are organized according to the formal schema of narrative, theme and so on. Given the central function that both Ricoeur (1992) and Zahavi (2008) grant to the notion of narrative as a structuring principle guiding the transition between the notion of the subject as the first-personal bearer of experience and the notion of the self as the unity of this moment-to-moment stream of intentional consciousness under the sign of a consistent identity, it is not surprising that it is precisely this embedding of the re-presentation of the enacted ludic subject within the formal structures of the game-as-text that bestow upon it the shape, form and characteristics of a coherent ludic self. Here, the objective relation of self – the final aspect of the relation – comes forcefully into view.

#### *6.4.6 Sharing the gaze*

There is a final point of interest to consider in the scene in question. This relates to something which occurs late in the scene: drawing Conway's attention to patterns she perceives in the TV static, Weaver instructs him to "look closely". At this point, in the fashion the player is accustomed to, a text-box appears on-screen, displaying the option to 'look at' the TV (see Figure 6.7). I have already discussed the phenomenological implications of the 'look at' command, and, at this point, the player would presumably expect the command to work in the way in which it has been established: that is, providing her with a verbal description of the object in question (in this case, the TV) as it is experienced from Conway's subjective perspective – hence, another instance of the subjective relation of other.

Instead, what happens is that the visual perspective pulls in closer to frame the TV. For the first time in the scene, and in the game as a whole, Conway disappears from view: at this moment, the player's visual point-of-view becomes coterminous with

Conway's. It is the player's literal viewpoint, not just Conway's, that shifts in focus, zooming in on the TV, then past the TV to the view from the window behind it. Here, it is not Conway who 'looks': it is the player, along with Conway, who sees a barn, a windmill, two horses and a fence. The subjective perspective at work here is not *only* Conway's, but is primarily to be understood as the player's own perspective on the gameworld – in the sense that the player identifies the ludic subject to whom this subjective perspective belongs as 'herself'. Of course, it is in the light of Conway's own goals – specifically, his need to locate 5 Dogwood Drive, and, hence, his need to find the entrance to “the Zero” – that the scene is viewed, and, in that sense, the subjective relation of other remains at play to a considerable degree. However, the shift in visual framing renders the subjective relation of self more prominent (see Figure 6.8).

As a hypnotic loop of ambient electronic music emerges to the fore on the soundtrack, the player, perhaps keeping in mind the admonition to “look closely”, inspects every detail of the seemingly mundane rural scene for anything of particular significance, taking the scene as a whole, and the individual objects within it, in her intentional grasp. Still, nothing happens: it is only when the player pulls back from her intense focus in perceiving the scene and clicks the mouse button that the next text box – containing Weaver's next lines of dialogue – comes up. Weaver's comment – “Hey. Hey, wake up. You spaced out for a minute there” – refers not only to Conway's losing himself in contemplation of the mysterious scene, but also to the player's doing the same, thereby not realizing she has to click the mouse button for the scene to progress. Again, the line between Conway-as-subject and the player's own subjective perspective on the gameworld has been, momentarily, entirely effaced: it is not only that the player has taken on Conway's perspective as her own while retaining a sense of his distinctive identity, but that Conway himself has vanished from view, both literally and figuratively, and the subject-position is grasped entirely as the player's own.





**Figure 6.7:** “Look at” the TV.



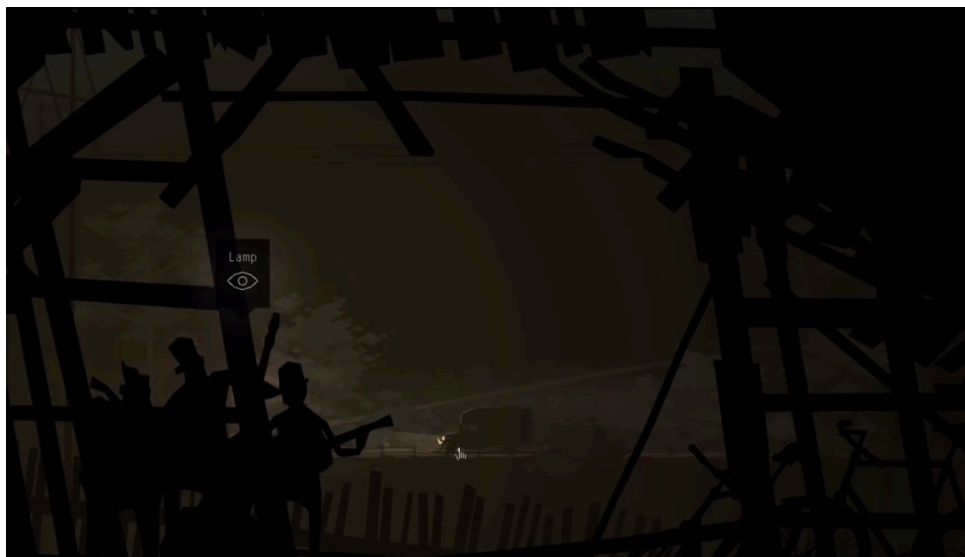
**Figure 6.8:** The view past the TV.

After having been absorbed in this scene, Conway and the player grow aware of the bigger picture again – the view zooms out to show the interior of the house, but Weaver is gone. The sense of the uncanny that this sudden disappearance presents is predicated not only on a limitation of Conway’s perspective, but also of the player’s. It works precisely because, in the instance of Weaver’s disappearance, the player has fully adopted Conway’s subject-position, and shares the limitations of his viewpoint, attention and focus – or, in Lankoski’s terms, his alignment. The player does not see what happens to

Weaver because Conway doesn't see, and her perspective on the gameworld is, in this moment, his: a perfect example of the subjective relation of other in action.

#### 6.4.7 *Drawing things to a close*

The scene ends in a rapid inversion of the sequence of perspectival shifts through which it unfolds. As Conway leaves the now-empty house and follows the path down the hill and back to Blue/Homer and the truck, the visual point-of-view zooms back outwards until, finally, Conway returns to being a small figure in a bigger scene, framed by the porch in the foreground. The silhouetted figures on the porch through which the player first viewed the scene in its opening moments have now gathered themselves into a bluegrass band, and, as the scene draws to a close, they strike up a performance of a song whose lyrics offer a commentary on Conway's plight (see Figure 6.9).



**Figure 6.9:** The bluegrass band.

These final moments therefore enact a return to Conway being framed as an other through an external perspective, with the player in the position of the audience viewing the scene, and Conway as a character within it, from the outside. However, if it had been possible to take this perspective at face value at the start of the scene, it is certainly impossible to do so at the end, once the player has related to Conway in all four aspects

we have identified in the player-figure relation. This close analysis of this scene has demonstrated how these aspects interrelate in a complex relationship, interweaving the player and Conway in relations of identity and alterity, objective distance and subjective merging. When playing/with the figure of Conway, the player *is* Conway, but also plays him as a distinct figure. She sees the gameworld from the subject-position he represents, inhabiting him as a ludic subject, but she also perceives him – and, insofar as she identifies with his subjective position, herself – from an external position, as object. It is in the interrelations of these seemingly paradoxical dimensions that the aesthetic and formal nature of the player-figure relation comes fully to the fore.

## 6.5 Conclusions

With respect to this scene in *KRZ*, then, the question regarding the ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ is revealed in its full complexity. What is brought into view is the system of subjective relations that structures the aesthetics of subjectivity with which this investigation is concerned. In short, and to sum up the four dimensions of the player-figure relation, the ‘I’ under the lens is both *the I that sees the gameworld*, and *this individual through whose eyes I see the gameworld*; at the same time, it is both *the I that is seen in the gameworld*, and *this individual who I see in the gameworld*. These, respectively, conform to the *subjective relation of self*, the *subjective relation of other*, the *objective relation of self* and the *objective relation of other*.

The focus on the playable figure that the investigation has adopted in this chapter has shed light on the concrete formal processes by which ludic subjectivity – as it was conceptually articulated in the analyses undertaken in the course of the preceding chapters – is established as a subjectivity that is both *lived* and *perceived*. The remaining chapters shall now take up the task of fleshing out the various aspects and interrelations of the aesthetics of subjectivity that emerges against the background of the multi-dimensional player-figure relation this chapter has mapped out.

To this end, Chapter 7 shall flesh out the subjective relation to the playable figure, highlighting, in practical terms, how it is on this basis that the contours of the

ludic subject-position are determined as a structured 'comportment' or mode of being-in-the-gameworld. Chapter 8, then, shall bridge the subjective and objective relations, demonstrating how the player's enactment of a ludic subject in the course of experiencing and acting in the gameworld is accompanied by a simultaneous representation of this ludic subjectivity, placing the player in an aesthetic relation to her own ludic subjectivity. Finally, Chapter 9 shall take as its focus the question of *character* that has been touched upon in this chapter, accounting for the way in which this represented ludic subjectivity can, through the intercession of the ordering textual structures of narrative form, be given the shape of a unified ludic self.



## Chapter Seven

### The structure of the ludic subject-position

The overall structure of the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity has now been brought into view. This was achieved thanks to the development, in the preceding chapter, of the two-axis model of the player-figure relation, according to which the playable figure is attributed the status of both *self* and *other*, and is related to both *subjectively* and *objectively*.

Following this model, the ludic subject is revealed as the being-in-the-gameworld that is enacted when the player engages in a subjective relation to the playable figure, the 'I' who exists in and experiences the gameworld from the internal standpoint cleared out for her through taking on the playable figure as a body. The objective relation, conversely, results when the playable figure – and, by the same token, the ludic subject – is framed through the external perspective, and becomes a distinct object of perception in its own right.

This chapter shall expand upon the subjective dimension of the relation, taking as its theme the structure of the ludic subject-position itself. As has been made amply clear, the ludic subject-position refers to the perceptual 'opening' or point-of-view the player is granted upon the gameworld; in fact, as has emerged from the lines of analysis followed in the preceding chapters, it is thanks to the ludic subject as a perspectival standpoint that it is possible, in the first place, to speak of a 'gameworld' as phenomenally gathered up into a factual situation, and, hence, a lifeworld, for the player. However, it is not in the direction of the gameworld that this chapter's engagement with the ludic subject-position shall proceed, but, rather, in the opposite direction – towards the subjective existence implied as the bearer of the subject-position. As Jean-Paul Sartre writes:

The notion of a point of view supposes a double relation: a relation with the things *on which the body is* a point of view and a relation with the observer *for whom the body is* a point of view. (1966[1943], 433)

A consideration of the subject to whom a perspective belongs, then, is inherent in the

very idea of the perspective itself:

...the phenomenology of being someone is essentially connected to the phenomenology of perspectivalness, to the experiential perspectivity of one's own consciousness. Our experiential life possesses a focus of experience, a point of view. It is a first-person perspective in the sense of being tied to a self. Thus, it doesn't make sense to speak of a first-person perspective without speaking of a self. (Zahavi 2007, 4)

Although, as the model of the player-figure relation arrived at in Chapter 6 makes clear, this subjectivity that is established for the player through an engagement with the playable figure can be granted the status of both *self* and of *other*, the distinction, and the interrelation, between these two aspects of the relation shall not be taken as the theme of this chapter – though it will inevitably be present in the background to many of the points raised. The implications of the fact that the resultant subjective perspective is *both* taken by the player as her own *and* perceived as a foreign subjectivity, bearing the mark of an other, will inevitably be present in the background to many of the points raised, and shall be unfolded in Chapter 8; here, the focus shall be squarely on delimiting the mechanisms of ludic subject-positioning by which a ludic subject is determined in the first place.

I shall begin by contextualizing the notion of the ludic subject-position within the various senses attributed to 'perspective' in relation to games. On this basis, I shall then dissect the concept of the ludic subject-position into a set of distinct, interrelated formal mechanisms functioning to subjectively position the player in relation to the gameworld. Finally, by means of a comparative analysis of ludic subjectivity in *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) and *Proteus* (Key and Kanaga 2013), I shall demonstrate the way in which these various mechanisms, operating in unison to determine a ludic subject-position for the player, structure her subjective existence towards the gameworld as a particular comportment and mode of being-in-the-gameworld.

## 7.1 The ludic subject-position and the gameworld

The concept of the ludic subject-position is intended to formalize the idea of a subjective standpoint which the player is invited to adopt in relation to the gameworld. As such, it constitutes a more-or-less stringently delimited perspective that brings the world into the player's experience in a particular form. In attempting to pin down its constituent elements, and, hence, its structure, it is therefore instructive to consider the various senses in which the question of perspective in videogames has been framed – as well as, subsequently, making explicit what the concept of the ludic subject-position can add with regard to this question.

### 7.1.1 *The multiple senses of 'perspective'*

John Sharp notes that perspective in videogames can refer to:

...a means of constructing images with the illusion of dimensionality; a set of literary conventions relating to the point of view from which stories are told; the visual perspective from which players see a game; a player's perspective for seeing and interacting with a game; and to the rhetorical perspective embedded in a game's design. (2014, 107)

Sharp refers to these divergent senses of *perspective* in games as, respectively, *linear perspective*, *visual perspective*, *narrative perspective*, *player perspective* and *rhetorical perspective* (ibid.). Even at the level of these basic definitions, it is evident that the idea of the ludic subject-position as a standpoint taken on by the player towards the gameworld adheres most closely to what Sharp terms the 'player perspective', without, as I shall argue below, being entirely identical to it. This does not mean that aspects covered by the other senses of perspective should be considered as irrelevant, either for a more general understanding of perspective in games, or for the specific aim of theorizing what is entailed in the notion of the ludic subject-position.

For the purposes of an investigation into ludic subjectivity, linear perspective can be collapsed into visual perspective, as constituting a set of geometric techniques for the



establishment of the illusion of three-dimensionality: the practices of linear perspective therefore become the means to the end of representing, as a two-dimensional image, the visual impression of a three-dimensional world as framed from a particular standpoint within it. In its own right, visual perspective stands in a complex relation to the ludic subject-position, related to, but distinct from it: as such, the notion of ‘perspective’ in games should not be limited, as it often is, to a matter of visibility. For reasons of clarity, I shall adhere to the term *point-of-view* when speaking of perspective in purely visual terms, in contrast to the more general implications inherent in the idea of perspective which I intend to link more closely to the ludic subject-position.

Narrative perspective, as became evident in section 4.1.3, is a complex discussion: even bracketing the fact that a narrative text can incorporate multiple perspectives, and focusing purely on a single “articulate reading moment” (Iser 1980, 114), it is useful, at a minimum, to distinguish between the perspective of focalization and that of narration (Genette 1980, 189) – that is, between the represented perspective internal to the heterocosm (on the story level) and the representing perspective external to the heterocosm (on the discourse level) (Chatman 1986; 1990, 144-145; Prince 2001, 46). Splitting Sharp’s ‘narrative perspective’ along this fault-line, the perspective of narration, as a textual function and a discursive strategy, can be subsumed into the rhetorical perspective. Meanwhile, the perspective of focalization, as relating to a “focalizer”, a heterocosmic entity whose subjectivity constitutes the filter through which the heterocosm is presented (Bal 2006, 18), can be understood as a dimension of the player perspective: Sharp’s mapping-out of the aspects of the player perspective, which I shall consider below, already accounts for such a dimension.

Finally, *rhetorical perspective*, relating as it does to the discursive functions performed by the game as a textual artifact – and including within it, as I have just argued, the perspective of narrative presentation – is related to the external standpoint of the implied player rather than the internal one constituted by the ludic subject-position. As such, though it refers to a crucial dimension of ludic engagement, it does not relate to

the establishment of the ludic subject-position which the current chapter is concerned with.

### 7.1.2 *From perspective to the ludic subject-position*

Given the significant overlap between the concept of the ludic subject-position and what Sharp describes as the player perspective, it is worth expanding briefly on the latter.

Sharp subdivides *player perspective* into four primary senses: who the player is, what the player can do, what the player is asked to do, and what the player feels (2014, 113-4).

*Who the player is*, as Sharp describes it, appears to refer to the heterocosmic role the player is granted, or, as he puts it, “the character or role the player assumes – a space marine, an archeologist, an elf, a god-like controller, a plumber, a rocket ship – is one important layer of framing inside the game” (ibid., 113). *What the player can do* refers to “the actions the player can carry out during the game” (ibid.). *What the player is asked to do*, as an aspect of the player perspective, accounts for the ways in which “the goals the player is asked to achieve” (ibid., 114) shape the player’s relation to the gameworld. Finally, *what the player feels* covers the fact that the player’s “emotional response [to objects and elements of the game object], whether it be celebratory, happy, frustrated, angry, or otherwise, colors the player’s perspective on their play experience” (ibid.).

This final dimension of the player perspective is arguably the least satisfyingly drawn on Sharp’s dimensions: without a solid theory of emotional involvement in games (such as that proposed by Olli Tapio Leino (2010) or Gordon Calleja (2011, 135-146)), the concept lacks rigour. The fact that it is presented as *both* the result of the other dimensions of the player perspective *and* a separate dimension in its own right is even more problematic.

Putting this difficulty aside, Sharp’s unpacking of the various senses of perspective in relation to games is an invaluable clarification of a term whose multiple significations are not often so clearly demarcated. However, having broken down the notion of perspective into its constituent elements, Sharp stops short of unifying these disparate dimensions into an understanding of the subject to whom they all pertain. This,

of course, is not a criticism – Sharp’s aim, after all, is taxonomical rather than phenomenological or structuralist. Still, it is this gap that the linked notions of the ludic subject-position and the ludic subject are intended to fill.

## 7.2 The dimensions of the ludic subject-position

Over the course of the investigation so far, I have, for the most part, been speaking of the ludic subject-position as a single, unitary formal structure, which has only been reinforced through the metaphors I have deployed to articulate the notion – ‘standpoint’ and ‘perspective’ again suggest an idea of the ludic subject-position as a singular vector of orientation. This, however, is far from the case. Instead, the ludic subject-position is best understood as a loose conglomeration of diverse formal mechanisms, sharing only the common denominator of operating, in some way, to determine the player’s relationship to the gameworld. The notion of incorporation and the phenomenology of embodiment, which I discussed in Chapter 5, present us with the theoretical principles by which the various perspectival dimensions making up the ludic subject-position can be threaded together around a common centre, coalescing into a perceptual gestalt and linked in relationships of mutual influence and determination.<sup>1</sup>

In this section, then, I shall unpack the dimensions of the ludic subject-position. This shall allow me, in the latter part of this chapter, to bring them back together, demonstrating how the interplay of the various formal structures relating to the ludic subject-position work in unison to determine the player’s mode of being-in-the-gameworld: this shall be accomplished by means of a contrastive analysis of ludic subject-positioning, and of the resulting modes of being-in-the-gameworld, in *Minecraft* and *Proteus*.

It should not be surprising to note that the dimensions of the ludic subject-position exhibit a considerable (though not total) degree of overlap with the constitutive

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say, as the analyses to follow shall demonstrate, that it is not also possible for these various structures to operate at cross-purposes.

phenomenological aspects of embodied subjectivity explored in section 5.3. It is this congruence that makes it possible for the ludic subject-position to be taken up as such a position in the first place- Accordingly, the dimensions of the ludic subject-position which I shall explore below are: spatial standpoint, visual point-of-view, aural standpoint, capabilities and limitations, goal-orientation and passion. I shall expand upon each of these in turn.

### 7.2.1 *Spatial standpoint*

In section 5.3.2, I made the observation that one of the most fundamental ways in which the body gathers its world around itself is precisely in its giving the subject a *position* in the world: that is, in its laying down of “first co-ordinates” (Merleau-Ponty 2002[1945], 115). Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives this spatial dimension of embodiment a crucial role in the phenomenology of perception, arguing that it is “this spatial existence which is the primary condition of all living perception” (ibid., 126). The same is true of ludic subjectivity as embodied in the playable figure. In order to expand upon the implications of spatiality as a determining principle upon the ludic subject-position, I shall consider the spatiality of the ludic subject from five different angles: the establishment of an *origo*, the restriction of the field of information available to the player, the ontic proximity to things-in-the-gameworld it renders possible, and the capacity for motility.

*i) Origo.* The first point to make is that – to return to Gordon Calleja’s definition of the notion of incorporation, already discussed in section 5.2.3 – the playable figure establishes a “*systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location*” (2011, 169). This grants the player an *origo* in the space of the gameworld – a ‘here’ or ‘first position’ relative to which, as I noted in section 5.3.2, a bodily space is laid out, with things-in-the-gameworld organized deictically – near or far, left or right, above or below, and so on – along lines extending outward from the playable figure as *origo* or point of origin. As Dan Zahavi writes, “the body is characterized by being present in any experience as the zero point, the absolute “here”, in relation to which every experienced object is oriented” (1994, 65-66).

It is opportune to mention again Stephan Günzel's observation that "the player becomes involved in the game by being in the position of the character who acts" (2005, 8), as well as Anita Leirfall's development of the player's position in the gameworld as spatial *origo* on the basis of a Kantian theory of directionality (2013). One approach to the spatiality of games which is particularly relevant to the spatial *origo* as a dimension of the ludic subject-position, and that therefore warrants further analysis, is Christian Elverdam and Espen Aarseth's distinction between what they term *absolute* and *relative* positioning in game space. In their words, "positioning describes whether the player can discern his or her position exactly as the game rules dictate it (absolute) or if he or she must relate to other objects to describe his or her position (relative)" (2007, 7).<sup>2</sup>

Elverdam and Aarseth's distinction is a useful one, and the notion of relative positioning helps to describe the way in which the playable figure's establishment of a spatial *origo* determines an indexical organization of the gameworld for the player as a lived, bodily sphere. However, this determination of an indexical spatial organization relative to the standpoint of the playable figure as *origo* is only the first way in which the figure's spatial standpoint determines the embodied ludic subject-position.

*ii) Restriction of field.* The second point to note regarding the significance of the spatial standpoint is that, through its support of two other dimensions of the ludic subject-position – the visual point-of-view and the auditory standpoint, both of which I shall, in turn, focus on below – it serves to determine the range of information available to the player regarding the gameworld. In this way, the spatial standpoint acts as the principle for a "restriction of field" of information, which, as Gérard Genette notes in his development of the concept of focalization, is one of the primary mechanisms by

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible to argue that it is not a question of a particular game making use of *either* absolute *or* relative positioning, but that, in most situations of engagement with game space, both are possible, shifting only in prominence and relevance. In chess, for example, while it is certainly true that a strong absolute positioning system is readily available – allowing me to specify that my queen is positioned at E4 – relative positioning can also have great significance in the game – for instance, if I were to inform you that your king was positioned three squares ahead and two to the right of my knight. Conversely, even in a game like *Minecraft*, in which positions in space are primarily experienced in relative terms, players can have recourse to an absolute form of positioning: accessing the debug screen by pressing F3 allows the player to read an absolute coordinate for their current position within the game space. This caveat having been made, however, the basic distinction they highlight is undoubtedly an analytically fruitful one.

which a particular perspective on a textually-established world is enshrined (1980, 189).<sup>3</sup>

It is instructive to recall here the point made in the sketching-out of the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement in section 2.4, and, in particular, Bernard Perron's example regarding the exploration of the Wood Side Apartments in *Silent Hill 2* (Konami 2001). The fact that the gameworld-internal perspective of the ludic subject only grants the player access to a limited range of information regarding the gameworld, as opposed to the theoretically total knowledge available from the external perspective, is to a great extent determined by the ludic subject's spatial standpoint. In Perron's example, the player has no way of knowing there is a flashlight in Room 205 until she adopts a spatial standpoint *in* Room 205 – in other words, the contents of Room 205 are only included within the range of information available from the ludic subject-position once the embodied ludic subject is in Room 205.

*iii) Proximity and distance.* The third point of significance of the spatial standpoint with regard to the ludic subject-position comes into view when recalling Merleau-Ponty's observations, discussed in section 5.3.1, regarding the ontology of the body as a thing-in-the-world, which "takes its place among the things it touches" (1968, 133). Thus, the location of the playable figure is not only about a set of co-ordinates, but also about its *proximity to*, or, conversely, *distance from*, the things encountered in the gameworld (it is noteworthy, of course, that 'encounter' is already a term that operates within a spatial paradigm, as does Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that the body "takes its place"). In short, the spatial standpoint in the gameworld is what allows the ludic subject to be *in the world among the things of the world*, to be 'close to' things. This, in turn, is what allows the embodied subject to *relate to* things: to pick them up, to put them towards some use, to act upon them, and potentially, in turn, to be acted upon by them.<sup>4</sup> As Martin Heidegger writes, "what is ready-to-hand in our everyday dealing has the character of *closeness*" (2008[1927], 135[102]). This *proximity to things* that the spatial situation of the embodied

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<sup>3</sup> This refers back to the discussion on the question of focalization in section 4.1.3.

<sup>4</sup> The ways in which the encounter with things-in-the-gameworld is structured according to the properties of the playable figure itself shall be considered below, under the name of *capabilities and limitations* and *passions* as further dimensions of the ludic subject-position.

subject engenders, then, is what renders possible the gathering of the contingency of things-in-themselves into a factual situation *for* the subject:

The concept of “facticity” implies that an entity ‘within-the-world’ has Being-in-the-world in such a way that it can understand itself as bound up in its ‘destiny’ with the Being of those entities which it encounters within its own world. (ibid., 82[56]).

*Ico* (Team Ico 2001) provides us with a particularly striking example of this dimension of the spatial standpoint in relation to the ludic subject-position. The player, in the guise of the titular young boy, must escape from a vast, ancient castle, together with a strange, pale girl, Yorda, whom he encounters and frees from a cage suspended in one of the castle’s chambers. During the course of the game, Yorda comes to be threatened by mysterious shadowy figures that drag her off into the dark portals out of which they emerge unless they are fought off.

The player is thereby placed in a relation of care towards Yorda, and this is translated directly into a play of proximity and distance that represents one of the game’s primary dynamics. Adopting a protective disposition, the player will attempt to remain close to Yorda whenever possible, and the game provides a mechanic dedicated precisely to this task. Pressing R1 on the Playstation 2’s Dual Shock controller makes Ico call out to Yorda if she is not nearby, and, unless she is prevented, she will then walk up to his standpoint. Pressing R1 again when Yorda is in close proximity will make Ico extend his hand to her, and it is possible, in a gesture that emphasizes the link between care and closeness, to traverse long sections of the game while holding Yorda’s hand.

In many situations, on the other hand, the player is forced to leave Yorda behind momentarily in order to solve one of the game’s environmental puzzles. The distance that is unfolded between the player-as-Ico and Yorda as the object of care thereby leads to anxiety, as the player worries about Yorda coming under attack by the shadowy figures when she is not within easy reach.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The echoes, in this passage, of the Heideggerian notions of ‘care’ and ‘fear’ as essential structures of the being-in-the-world of *Dasein* (2008[1927], 179[140]; 225[180]) are not accidental. Sebastian Möring has

*iv) Motility.* There is a final point to note regarding the spatial standpoint as a dimension of the ludic subject-position. The establishment for the player of specific coordinates in the gameworld as “here, where I am” (Sobchack 1992, 4) also implies the inverse – that the rest of the gameworld is ‘not-here,’ not where I am: this is the basis, as I have shown, by which the spatial standpoint can serve as a restriction of the field of information available to the player. However, although I have so far been speaking of the spatial standpoint as a static point, the spatiality of the ludic subject’s being-in-the-gameworld is of course defined by its *motility*, that is, its capacity for movement.

With respect to the ludic subject-position, this is important for two reasons. First, it reveals the capacity of the player, as ludic subject, to change her spatial standpoint within the gameworld according to the capacities for movement afforded by the playable figure, which, of course, leads to a redrawing of her factual situation within which her ludic subjectivity can orient itself towards its existential projects. If I find myself standing at the entrance to my stronghold in *Minecraft*, looking out over the edge of a canyon, and see, on the far rim, a seam of coal that answers to my present needs, then, in terms of my current spatial standpoint, the coal is marked by its *distance from* me, and hence by its failure to be present to me as ready-to-hand. At the same time, my *proximity* to the stronghold grants me a sense of safety. However, the capacity for movement the playable figure grants me allows me to decide to embark on a journey which, at its culmination, grants me a new spatial standpoint in which my ‘here’ and ‘not-here’ have traded places – the seam of coal, in its proximal actuality, becomes available to me as ready-to-hand (giving me the capability of mining the coal), while, conversely, my *distance from* the safety of the stronghold might become a cause for anxiety or fear as dusk begins to fall.

Secondly, the capacity for movement *in its own right* is crucial, insofar as it makes the embodied subject’s experience of being in a spatial domain literally an experience of *movement through* that domain: a point which is brought to the fore in the phenomenology

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examined these existential structures as they can be observed to be at work in ludic engagement (2013, 289). In this regard, it is noteworthy that these existential structures are often manifested in spatial terms: “fear is at play if the harmful object is at an approachable distance from where it can potentially be harmful” (ibid., 293).



of place developed by Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward S. Casey. It is through inhabiting a space, familiarizing myself with it by working out the paths of traversal and embodied movement it allows, that it is translated *for me* into a meaningful place. Tuan suggests that “all people undertake to change amorphous space into articulated geography,” and it is precisely the process of interpretative familiarization that marks the movement from space to place: “what begins as undifferentiated space ends as a single object-situation or place [...] when space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place” (1977, 72-73). Casey argues that the process of inhabiting a landscape is that of “transmuting an initially aimless and endless space into a place of concerted action, thereby constituting a dense placescape” (1993, 29). The movement from space to place, then, is literally a movement, a process of exploration and experimentation with the possibilities of the given space: “places [...] are something we experience – where *experience* stays true to its etymological origin of ‘trying out’, ‘making a trial out of’” (ibid., 30).

This process is an inherently embodied one. “If I am to get oriented in a landscape,” Casey argues, “I must bring my body into conformity with the configurations of the land” – by, for instance, placing oneself in specific relations to landmarks, or working out paths determined by the contours of the landscape. Once I have done so, “I am able to find my way in a placescape that to a significant degree is marked and measured, as well as perceived and remembered, by my own actions” (ibid., 28). The range of capabilities of movement that the player is allowed within the gameworld, then, determine the form it takes as a meaningful place *for* the player – and, inseparably, the player’s subjective existence as it takes place within it.

### 7.2.2 *Point-of-view*

As a visual opening onto the world, point-of-view can be seen to logically follow on from the spatial standpoint established by the body’s existence within the world. There is, however, a qualification that needs to be made here, and it is that, in many games, we cannot make as transparent an equation of spatial standpoint and visual point-of-view as it is possible to make for the embodied subject. In games employing a first-person point-

of-view – ‘first-person’ here being used in the ‘camera’ sense, rather than in the phenomenological sense in which I have been using it to refer to the *mineness* of experience – there is no need to make a distinction between the spatial standpoint and the visual point-of-view, and identifying these as aspects of the same ludic subject-position presents no difficulties.<sup>6</sup> However, in many other games, the visual perspective the player is granted upon the gameworld is entirely dissociated from the position in which the playable figure is located in the gameworld.

The dissociation of visual perspective from the spatial standpoint can be interpreted as establishing two distinct subjective points of encounter between the player and the gameworld. This is the motivation behind Britta Neitzel’s – and, in her wake, Jan-Noël Thon’s – separation of the “point of view” and the “point of action,” which I have already considered in section 4.1.4. On the basis of this observation, the tendency has been for visual point-of-view to be given experiential prominence: in other words, the player’s subjective perspective in relation to the gameworld has generally been identified with the visual point-of-view rather than with the spatial *locus* of the playable figure. This was already evident in the attempts at applying the notion of focalization to an analysis of perspective in games. Whether in Neitzel’s equation of visual *point of view* with the mechanism that focalizes a particular perspective upon the gameworld, or Michael Nitsche’s suggestion that the focalizer in *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 1996) is Lakitu, the camera operator following Mario around, it is to the visual standpoint that focalization has been attributed.

This argument is echoed, directly or otherwise, in various approaches to the question of perspective. Astrid Ensslin, for example, writes that “there are major differences between seeing the avatars perform actions in what is called third-person games (or gaming modes), and seeing the gameworld literally from the avatar’s own perspective, which happens in first-person games (or gaming modes)” (2011, 125). The wording here implies a strong shift in the player’s subjective position in relation to the

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<sup>6</sup> Here, the aptness of Alexander Galloway’s contextualizing of this visual technique with the cinematic technique of the subjective point-of-view shot (2006, 41) becomes apparent.

figure that is entirely tied to point-of-view: a first-person perspective implies a subjective affinity between the player and the figure, while the (at least partial) dissociation of perspective and figure resulting from the third-person perspective entails a subjective separation that objectifies the figure. The suggestion, it would seem, is that visual point-of-view supersedes the ontic embodiment of the figure in constituting the player's subjective access to the gameworld. More directly, this is precisely what Grant Tavinor affirms when he states that "gamers do often identify with the point of view in videogames" (2009, 75).

There is some justification to this approach. In *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980), for example, the player's omni-present point-of-view provides her with a perceptual field that is far wider than the one that could putatively be attributed to Pac-Man himself, as embodied in a particular spatial standpoint in the maze. In such a case, the ludic subject-position as the player's opening onto the gameworld certainly incorporates within it this visual point-of-view which cannot be subsumed to the embodied standpoint of Pac-Man himself. For instance, the player might choose to change direction and turn back the way she came because, from her omni-present, top-down perspective, she can see that there is a ghost approaching round the corner, even though this knowledge would not be given from Pac-Man's situated visual field. For this reason, it would be a mistake to found the ludic subject-position purely on the standpoint of Pac-Man as playable figure without taking into account how this subject-position integrates within it a visual point-of-view that grants the player a wider field of knowledge than is available to the figure as embodied subject. The same is true of situations in which the visual point-of-view grants the player a more restricted field of knowledge than would be available to the playable figure – as in the case of the carefully-controlled camera perspectives typical of survival-horror games, which "play with the field of action in order to hide monsters off-screen" (Perron 2012, 81).

Nonetheless, it is just as simplistic to identify the player's subjective standpoint with visual point-of-view at the expense of all the other dimensions of the ludic subject-position. This becomes evident in light of the fact that it remains perfectly possible for

the *Pac-Man* player to exclaim, “That ghost is right behind me!” This is despite the fact that “nothing can ever be ‘behind’ the frame of view” in a game like *Pac-Man* (Klevjer 2006, 151).<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the usage of the deictic preposition ‘behind’ here refers back to *Pac-Man* as embodied subject in the gameworld: it is his spatial standpoint as indexical *origo*, and the player’s taking up of this standpoint as an aspect of her ludic subject-position, that makes the statement possible. Similarly, it is in relation to this same spatial standpoint that the proximity of the ghost comes to signal to the player that she is in danger. Keeping such points in mind, it is not surprising that, in spite of his theory of focalization in games, Nitsche concedes that many games utilizing a third-person perspective “have shown that the camera does not have to be in a first-person point of view to connect the player to a single virtual role” played out in relation to the gameworld (2008, 215).

Having established, then, that visual point-of-view stands in a polyvalent relationship with the embodied ludic subject-position – in that it cannot automatically be reduced to it, nor, conversely, can it be entirely dissociated from it – it is necessary to map out some of the basic principles by which the two might relate.

In their typology of games, Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå distinguish between games with an *omni-present* perspective, which “allow the player to examine the entire field or arena at will,” and games with a *vagrant* perspective, in which “the perspective follows a player-token or avatar” (2003, 49). This bipartite distinction is retained in Elverdam and Aarseth’s 2007 update to the typology; however, it might be considered too simplistic on a number of fronts. Even adhering to the examples provided in the typology itself, no distinction is made between a game like chess, in which the entire space of play is visible at any given moment of play, and one like *Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1994), in which only a section of the space is visible at any given point. The earlier development of the typology explicitly considers both of these as examples of the omni-present perspective. In the later formulation, on the other hand, the omni-present perspective is

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<sup>7</sup> Klevjer is here speaking of the isometric point-of-view of games such as *Baldur’s Gate* (Bioware 1998), but the point stands with regard to *Pac-Man*, and, indeed, almost any 2D game.

specifically defined as one in which “the player has a complete overall view of the game space” (Elverdam and Aarseth 2007, 7).

At a minimum, it would appear, three broad categories of point-of-view would be necessary: a truly *omni-present* point-of-view which encompasses the entire game space at once, what might be termed a *free* perspective, in which the view is limited to a sector of the game space but there is little restriction on the movement of the visual frame around the gameworld, and an *embodied* point-of-view, which is in some way attached to a playable figure, and thereby dependent upon the figure’s location within the game space.

For our current purposes, I shall note that all three modes of point-of-view can be attached to an embodied ludic subject-position. *Pac-Man* or *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981) stand as examples of an omni-present point-of-view relating to a ludic subject embodied in a playable figure. Meanwhile, *Baldur’s Gate* (BioWare 1998) makes use of a free isometric point-of-view that can be controlled by the player independently of the playable figure’s location in the game space. Finally, the fixed perspective category is, as I have pointed out, necessarily linked in some way to a playable figure: it can include not only games, such as *Minecraft*, with a first-person visual point-of-view, but also games, such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013), that deploy a third-person perspective.

However, it is not simply a matter of determining whether or not the point-of-view is related to the embodied subjective perspective of the playable figure. As Klevjer points out, the association of visual point-of-view upon the gameworld with the playable figure, which he terms “prosthetic perception” and views as a basic dimension of the “subjective avatar” (2006, 146),<sup>8</sup> is not an either/or distinction, but “a matter of degree” (ibid., 150). As he argues, even the side-scrolling perspective in a 2D shooter such as *Defender* (Williams 1981) exhibits, in a minimal form, an association of point-of-view and playable figure.

Keeping this in mind, it becomes possible to identify modes of association between point-of-view and the embodied ludic subject that go beyond a simple

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<sup>8</sup> The objections I raised in section 5.4.1 to the question of *prosthesis* as Klevjer uses it to conceptualize the avatar – which, as I argued, succumbs the extensional fallacy – remains valid here.

geometrical relation of the former to the latter's spatial standpoint. In *Baldur's Gate*, the player is given full control of the game's isometric perspective, and can move it away from the playable figure entirely, to display areas of the gameworld not inhabited by the figure at that given moment. However, the dissociation of visual perspective from the playable figure is not as total as this might make it seem. Areas of the map the player-character has not already explored are blacked out; moreover, areas outside a fixed radius surrounding the playable figure are covered in fog-of-war, meaning that, outside of this radius immediately surrounding the playable figure's standpoint, the movements of enemies or non-player characters are not perceived. Even in cases where the visual point-of-view is not geometrically coterminous with the playable figure's visual field, then, it is still the embodied ludic subject through which it is filtered.

A particularly pronounced way in which the visual point-of-view is marked by the embodied ludic subject to whom it belongs is the deployment of what might be termed *subjective visual effects* that explicitly mark the act of vision as belonging to the playable figure. Here I shall make reference again to the case of the flashbang grenade explosion in *Far Cry* (Crytek 2004) as analyzed by Olli Tapio Leino (2010, 172), which I first discussed in section 5.4.3. As I noted there, Leino uses the observation of the temporary 'blindness' and 'deafness' experienced by the player following the explosion of the flashbang grenade as the starting-point for a development of what, following Peter Paul Verbeek, he terms the "hybrid intentionality" of experience of the gameworld. At that stage of the investigation, I noted the difficulties with the notion of hybrid intentionality as Leino articulates it. Nonetheless, his central observation – that the interpretation of the audiovisual effects generated by the game as 'blindness' and 'deafness' "does not make any sense outside the context of *Far Cry*, that is, if we take the I as in isolation from *Far Cry*" (ibid., 175) – is crucial here. This makes the 'I' that is affected by the flashbang grenade, the 'I' whose seeing and hearing are temporarily impaired, a subject that is constituted only within, and in relation to, the gameworld

As in *Far Cry*, the convention of subjective visual effects is most prevalent in games employing a first-person point-of view: already in *Wolfenstein 3D* (id software

1992), at the birth of the first-person shooter genre, the screen would briefly flash red whenever the playable figure, BJ Blascowicz, took damage. Clearly, this serves as a mechanism for providing the player with important visual feedback, letting her know when she is taking damage. However, interpreted in phenomenological terms, it also serves as an additional marker – beyond the simple fact of positionality manifested in the point-of-view – of the embodied subject to whom it belongs. In other words, it indicates a perceiver who is not the player, as an embodied subject in the player-world, and whose body exists in the gameworld and is affected by it.

This is significant in two directions. First, it counters Neitzel’s assertion that, in games adopting a first-person point of view (what she terms the *subjective point-of-view*):

...the body of the avatar can only be an imaginary one because the spot at which the body belonging to the hand, as well as the eyes belonging to the body should be situated remains empty [...] since the avatar can never be seen, the player does not know in which way the eyes of the avatar see. (2002, 6)

Neitzel’s argument is that this intangibility of the body-in-the-gameworld attached to a first-person point-of-view means that there is nothing for an embodied perspective to latch onto, and that, as a result, “for the player there is no possibility but to transfer her own vision to the imagined avatar” (ibid.). *Wolfenstein 3D*, however, shows us that it is the opposite that is true: the only way to account for the affection of the visual perspective by the sensation of pain is to claim that it is in fact the playable figure’s vision that is taken on by the player.

The second insight that needs to be made is that this is not exclusive to games that employ a first-person point-of-view. Indeed, it did not even originate there: it is possible to find precedents to *Wolfenstein 3D* in, for example, *Prince of Persia* (Mechner 1989), which, despite making use of the side-on perspective typical of the two-dimensional platform game, displays a split-second flash of bright red every time the Prince receives a blow in a swordfight. Such effects have only grown more elaborate over time. In *Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune* (Naughty Dog 2009), if Nathan Drake’s health falls below a certain threshold, the colours on screen grow desaturated, the image blurs, and

sounds are muffled. In *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED 2007), the quest “Old Friend of Mine” culminates with the playable figure, Geralt, having a number of strong drinks with some old friends with whom he has been reunited: his resultant drunkenness is represented by means of a superimposed doubling of the on-screen image and an irregular rocking motion to the point-of-view.

The fact that these subjective visual effects are taken as signaling the intentionality of the playable figure constituted as an embodied perceiving subject, however, is only half the story. Sticking to the example of *Wolfenstein 3D*, if the conclusion is simply that, phenomenologically, the red flash can be interpreted as the visual representation of an intuition of physical pain belonging to the playable figure, this would leave the player out of the loop. Clearly, the sensation of being shot does not belong to the player: and yet, in taking on board the embodied ludic subject-position that has BJ Blascowicz as its body, the player assimilates this intuition as her own: this is what allows her to say, “*I* was shot because *I* made a mistake,” and to act, intuitively and prereflectively, on the intuition – perhaps running for cover, or turning towards her assailant to return fire.

### 7.2.3 *Auditory standpoint*

In comparison to the wealth of discussion surrounding visual perspective in games, comparatively little has been written that acknowledges the fact that the taking-on of a subjective standpoint in, and perspective upon, the gameworld has not only a visual dimension, but also an auditory one – a point Tavinor gestures towards, but does not follow up, when he speaks of the playable figure as a “virtual listener” in addition to all its other qualities (2009, 77).

The distinction Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå make between the omni-present and the vagrant perspective on the level of visuality can be extended to the auditory sense. Here, an omni-present auditory standpoint would describe games in which every sound in the gameworld is audible at a volume that is not related to the player’s spatial standpoint (or lack of one): this is usually, but not necessarily, linked to an equally omni-



present visual perspective. A vagrant auditory standpoint, on the other hands, describes games in which the player's location determines the field of hearing, with sounds produced in close proximity being audible at a higher volume, while sounds produced further away are fainter or entirely inaudible.

An example will serve to illustrate the importance the auditory standpoint can gain. In "Eavesdropping," the fifth mission in *Thief II: The Metal Age* (Looking Glass Studios 2000), Garrett's objective is to infiltrate the Eastport Seminary, one of the strongholds of the Mechanist cult that holds great influence over the city. He has been tipped off about a secret meeting being held there at midnight on a particular date, and has been led to believe that the meeting concerns him directly. The aim of the mission, having sneaked into the seminary via any of the several entry routes available, is to navigate its corridors and hallways undetected, in order to, finally, be in the right position outside the locked meeting-hall door in order to overhear what is being said inside. Until Garrett is in precisely the right spot outside the door, he (and, by extension, the player) cannot hear what is being said, making the case a perfect example of the aural dimension of spatial positioning.

#### 7.2.4 *Capabilities and limitations*

This is a dimension of the ludic subject-position which I have already discussed at some length in section 5.3.5 in the course of outlining a phenomenology of the body. In short: one of the strongest determining factors that shapes the ludic subject-position in relation to a given game's world is the set of capabilities the playable figure affords her in relation to it, which push her in the direction of certain modes of relation to the gameworld. As Peter Bayliss argues, "we need to move away from thinking about player intention simply flowing through the avatar into the game-world towards how these intentions are mediated by what the avatar can do in the game-world" (2007a, 2). In a similar vein, Nitsche, speaking of *Tekken* (Namco 1984), argues that "the interactor [*Nitsche's word for 'player'*] is confined to the chosen user-avatar's limitations and abilities and its restrictions

shape the player's access to the virtual world and the evolving discourse,” thereby providing the player with “guidance and a dramatic role” (2008, 215-216).

A point I already mentioned in passing in section 6.4.2, in the course of the critical analysis of the player-figure relation at work in *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013-), is Chris Crawford’s suggestion that it is useful to think of a lexicon of verbs open to the player, allowing her to perform actions that represent meaningful statements within the gameworld (2002). The richness of this lexicon will vary from game to game - a first-person shooter, for instance, might include little but variations on ‘move’, ‘shoot’ and ‘pick up’, while a role-playing game might make a much wider range of possible actions available to the player. Text-based adventure games, such as *Adventure* (Crowther and Woods 1976), and even many point-and-click adventure games, such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990), literalize this concept, presenting the player with an actual list of verbs on-screen, usually including, for instance, “Use”, “Look at”, “Talk to”, and so on. However, the same observation is fundamentally true of any game: even if the lexicon is not verbalized, it remains the case that the player is presented with a particular set of actions that can be directed towards the gameworld.

Applied to the playable figure, this insight would appear to lead directly to the instrumental perspective on the playable figure as avatar, which I touched upon in section 6.1.2, and which is typified by James Newman’s assertion that the playable figure should be understood as “sets of capabilities, potentials and techniques offered to the player” (2002). It is necessary, however, to take this observation further. It is not enough to state that a ludic subject-position is defined by the set of actions the playable figure allows the player – in such a way that, say, Gordon Freeman in *Half-Life 2* (Valve 2004) is defined as a ludic subject-position by the verbs ‘shoot,’ ‘run,’ ‘pick up,’ and, conversely, the pointed absence of the verb ‘talk’. Verbs taken in isolation in this way are of little analytical import: ‘shoot’, for example, cannot be construed as a meaningful action, and cannot tell us anything about the ludic subject, unless put in context through a stating of what entities in the gameworld the ludic subject is able to direct the action at. The capabilities and limitations of the playable figure therefore need to be incorporated into a

phenomenology of embodied being-in-the-world before they can reveal anything about the ludic subject-position they determine.

Luckily, the outlining of the phenomenology of the body in Chapter 5 already identified the conceptual tools by which this may be accomplished. In section 5.3.5, I presented the arguments made by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty regarding the ways in which, as an embodied subject, I always already *am* my capabilities for action, meaning that, in Merleau-Ponty's crucial phrasing, "consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'" (2002[1945], 159). The possibilities for action of the embodied subject gather her factual situation into an "instrumental complex" (Sartre 1966[1943], 620), in which possible projects are brought into view and things-in-the-world are revealed as affordances or obstacles in relation to these projects. The inverse, as I noted, is also true, in that the "I can" could be perceived as shadowed by an "I cannot" (Young 1980, 146) if, as an embodied subject, I am aware of my limitations as well as my capabilities.

The notion of the bodily "I can" therefore allows us to incorporate the instrumental notion of the playable figure as a lexicon of verbs or a set of capabilities into a phenomenology of the body, understanding this capacity for action as a basic dimension of embodied subjectivity. What this means for the ludic subject-position is that, as revealed in the point made by Klevjer, which I already quoted in section 5.4.4, "the defining appeal of games like *Super Mario 64* [Nintendo 1996] or *Grand Theft Auto III* [Rockstar Games 2001] is that we get to be a different *I can*, stepping into the shoes [...] of another body, in another world" (2012, 22). The playable figure, then, grants the player a specific "I can" that, in Merleau-Ponty's term, organizes her embodied subjectivity as the centre of her lifeworld into the form of a particular body-schema – and, inseparably, gathers up the gameworld into a meaningful instrumental complex.

I have already given an example of the manner in which the bodily "I can" of the playable figure determines the ludic subject-position towards the gameworld: in section 5.3.5, I offered an analysis of how the player's engagement with *Minecraft* as a bodily lifeworld was determined by her project of building a stronghold, which in turn was only

possible based on the ways in which her “I can” brought things-in-the-gameworld into the aegis of her instrumental complex.(see Fig. 5.1). For this reason, I shall limit myself here to a brief illustration, chosen for its capacity to demonstrate how the sudden addition of a new capability the player is able to wield through the playable figure redraws her “I can,” and, as such, inseparably, both her body-schema as an embodied ludic subject and the world as instrumental complex to which it forms the centre.

About halfway through *Half-Life 2*, the player is given access to the gravity gun, allowing her to pick up a variety of loose items scattered around the game’s environments and put them to a variety of uses, either towards the short-term goals of surviving from moment to moment, or the long-term goal of making it to the end of the game – holding onto the objects as shields from enemy fire, or launching them at high speed, turning them into effective projectiles. This represents a radical shift in the way these objects are intended by the player – what initially appeared to be useless junk, serving only to add to the atmosphere of a decaying, detritus-strewn metropolis, suddenly becomes intended as an extremely useful resource.

A last point to note in this regard is that, in some cases, the fact that the playable figure’s capabilities and limitations shape the player’s ludic subject-position, and, hence, her perspective upon the gameworld, is literalized through being reflected, in a manner akin to the subjective visual effects discussed above, on the level of visual point-of-view. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady 2009), for example, allows the player to switch from the standard view to a ‘detective mode’ that highlights relevant objects in the gameworld while reducing everything else to a nondescript, dark blue background: ‘relevant’ here meaning those objects towards which the ludic subject’s “I can” could be directed, granting an affordance towards a possible action – enemies that can be attacked, stone gargoyles upon which Batman’s grappling hook could be put to use, and so on.

### 7.2.5 *Goal-orientation*

The matter of the bodily “I can” of the playable figure as a dimension of the ludic subject-position leads directly to the next mechanism by which the player’s relation to

the gameworld is determined: namely, the setting of goals towards which her efforts are directed. This is ground that this investigation has covered before. In section 2.2.3, building on the observations of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989[1960], 107), I discussed task-orientation as a defining quality of the ludic action, and the extent to which goal-orientation has been discussed as a crucial element of gameness became apparent again in the discussion on agency in section 4.4.2. Moreover, in section 5.3, goals – in the form of the existential project or “end” towards which the for-itself orients its being – were granted a central role in the determination of the embodied for-itself’s bodily space. Sartre’s example of the crag that “waits to be illuminated by an end in order to manifest itself as adverse or helpful” (1966[1943], 620) is particularly instructive in this regard, and also in the interlinking of the question of goals to that of the bodily “I can”. To reiterate briefly what I have already discussed at greater length, a goal can only be taken on as such if it falls within the horizon of possibility opened by the “I can” and the instrumental complex it unfolds around the player; at the same time, the possibilities of action that the “I can” structures in the encounter between the player and the gameworld only gain significance once the teleological orientation towards some purpose or project has been set.

The setting of goals, then, determines the ludic subject-position insofar as it makes the gameworld appear to the player in the light of these goals. A useful parallel to draw might be to Kevin Lynch’s investigations regarding city space. Lynch has suggested that the city-dweller negotiates an understanding of – and makes possible an engagement with – the complexities of the contemporary cityscape through a process he terms ‘imaging’, by which he refers to the creation of a cognitive map or image that reflects the individual’s specific usage of the space.

Environmental images are the result of a two-way process between the observer and his environment. The environment suggests distinctions and relations, and the observer – with great adaptability and in the light of his own purposes – selects, organizes and endows with meaning what he sees. The image so developed now limits and emphasizes what is seen, while the image itself is being

tested against the filtered perceptual input in a constant interacting process.

(1960, 6)

The key phrase here is “in the light of his own purposes”. The cityscape, Lynch suggests, is selectively mapped – reduced and emphasized - according to the individual city-dweller’s interests and objectives. Certain objects, places and paths advance into view as distinct, meaningful entities, and together they form that particular city-dweller’s image of the city – the overwhelming chaos of the cityscape reduced into an ordered cosmos that, in the patterns of its selection and ordering processes, reveals at least as much about the observer as about the city.

In the same way, the player’s intuition of the gameworld is determined by the goals she takes on within it: it is in relation to these goals that certain things-in-the-gameworld will be brought forth in her perceptual field as desirable objects to be attained, or as tools that, being ready-to-hand, can be put to use, others come into view as obstacles or dangers to be avoided, and others still recede into the background.

Just as in the case of the dimension of capabilities and limitations, it is possible to find examples of games that foreground the goal-oriented dimension of ludic subject-positioning on the level of the visual point-of-view. In *Thief: Deadly Shadows* (Ion Storm 2005), items that count as ‘treasure’, and that therefore add up towards the player’s loot score at the end of the mission, are highlighted by means of a glimmering effect, allowing them to stand out as objects of intentional focus.

A qualification needs to be made here, however: the centrality of goal-orientation as one of the primary dimensions of ludic subject-positioning should not be taken to exclude the possibility of the player – as a ludic subject acting within the gameworld – also taking actions that do *not* have a clear teleological orientation towards either an immediate or a final goal. In section 2.2.2, I paused upon Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the abstract bodily movement (2002[1945], 127-128), which he defines as an action which, having no reference to an object in the world or to a final purpose, instead brings *itself* – that is, the body in its movement – into view. At that stage of the investigation, the concept of the abstract movement was deemed unsuitable as a foundation for an

aesthetics of ludic actions, given the clear teleology of most actions in this category. While that stands unchanged, it is also pertinent to point out that, within the general goal-oriented drive of ludic engagement – and, hence, of engagement with the gameworld from a ludic subject-position – room can be cleared for actions that are *not* goal-oriented, and that, as such, adhere to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the abstract bodily movement. In other words, it is also possible for the player to engage with the gameworld from the ludic subject-position simply for the pure enjoyment of wielding the “I can” she has been granted – for the pure pleasure of taking action, without a goal in mind.

In *Rez* (United Game Artists 2001) – a shooting game with a rhythm-based, dance music-influenced aesthetic – the player might choose to time the lock and release of the game’s targeting and shooting mechanic to the pulse of the audiovisual rhythm which organizes the game’s presentation. Doing so does not grant the player any bonuses or achieve any concrete outcome in the game; nonetheless, the player is likely to find herself doing so ‘for fun,’ simply in order to participate in the game’s kinaesthetic unfolding. To take another example, *Just Cause 2* (Avalanche Studios 2010), an open-world action game, gives the player an extensive “I can,” particularly in terms of motility – notably thanks to a paraglider and a grappling hook which the player can, with some practice, use in combination in order to launch herself into unlikely flights across the landscape. In between taking on missions, the player might choose to forgo advancing the game’s campaign, and instead take some time off to explore the possibilities of this innovative movement system – throwing herself out of a helicopter and paragliding into a mountain valley, say, using the grappling hook to build up her momentum as she glides through a jungle canopy. The fundamental role played by goal-orientation in shaping the ludic subject-position, then, needs to be bracketed with the understanding that actions which are *not* goal-related – which are performed purely for the sake of wielding the new “I can” the player is given in the gameworld – are just as much a part of the vocabulary of ludic engagement.

### 7.2.6 *Passion*

Before I define this dimension of the ludic subject-position, a note on the usage of the term ‘passion’ is in order. The sense in which I am using the terms is a somewhat archaic one, drawing on its Latin etymology as *passio*, or ‘suffering’. In this sense, *passion* is the inverse of *action*, addressing the body in its *passive* rather than *active* dimension – that is, not as an “I can” oriented towards the world, but as a tissue upon which the world can leave the mark of its own affect.<sup>9</sup>

Here, one can recall Merleau-Ponty’s observation that the body, by virtue of extending its touch to encounter the things of the world, can itself, reciprocally, become the object of touch – the body is also *acted upon*; it exists, in one of its dimensions, as “a passive sentiment” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 133). The embodied subject, then, is not only an *agent*, but also a *patient*. Paul Ricoeur grants this dimension of embodied being an even greater role, opposing *pathos* to *praxis* as the fundamental duality around which the phenomenal lived-body is structured. *Praxis*, as the name implies, relates to action, and hence to an understanding of the embodied being as an agent within the world, determined by its actions and the “narrative identity” of the self to which these actions are subordinated (1992, 140).<sup>10</sup> *Pathos*, on the other hand, refers to “the passivity of the suffering self,” (ibid., 320) – to the body as object for the actions of an Other. I have already, in section 5.4.5, remarked upon Ricoeur’s argument for an otherness which lies at the heart of selfhood, and which takes the body as its emblem: here, pathos is revealed as one of the primary dimensions of this otherness, insofar as it accounts for that which

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<sup>9</sup> Though, in common usage, this sense of ‘passion’ might appear to be largely extinct, it does survive as an underlying dimension of its more common usage to refer to a strong emotional attachment towards a person, thing or activity – as when one says, “I have a passion for modernist poetry,” or, “I feel passionately about her.” This bears the implication of the emotion as being something beyond one’s control, something one has no choice but to succumb to – in short, to a sentiment one suffers, rather than actively undertakes. An even more clear – though more marginal – residue of this original meaning of the term ‘passion’ survives within Christian religious doctrine, where Jesus Christ’s suffering on the cross is referred to precisely as “the passion”.

<sup>10</sup> The question of the “narrative of the self” as a key element in self-awareness, in the sense of knowledge of oneself, is one that has already been hinted at in the delineation of the twofold understanding of subjectivity in section 1.4, where, following Dan Zahavi, the “minimal or core self” of experience in its first-personal givenness was opposed to the “narrative self” (2008, 8). Though so far it has been the first-order experiential dimension of the self which has held the interest of this study – for the necessary reason that this is the basic, foundational plane upon which any understanding of the subject must locate its starting-point – over the course of the remaining and concluding two chapters of this study, the narrative dimension of the self shall be brought to the forefront of the analysis.



is constitutive of 'I' as lived through no choice of my own – everything which befalls me, which I am passively subject to, which, in short, I suffer. Given the centrality of the “sharp-edged dialectic of praxis and pathos” (ibid.) to the constitution of the subject, and, hence, of selfhood, Ricoeur implores us to “never forget to speak of humans as acting and suffering” (ibid., 145).

In terms of the ludic subject-position, then, *passion* refers to the playable figure in its passive dimension, in its openness to being affected by the gameworld – an openness which, as I pointed out in the discussion on the spatial standpoint, is a result of the playable figure's encounter with things-in-the-gameworld. This is the point addressed by Klevjer, in a passage I have already made reference to in the course of developing the ontology of the playable figure in section 6.1.2, in which he declares that what is relevant about Lara Croft, as a playable figure, is “not only that she mediates the player's ability to jump or walk, but also that she embodies the player's risk of *falling down* the ravine” (2012, 18). It is on the basis of such an understanding that Bernard Perron writes, with respect to the playable figure, that “one gets as much emotion from the power to *act upon* as from the possibility of *being acted upon*” (2012, 114) – an observation he makes in the context of the survival horror genre, where the player's vulnerability is emphasized to the point of constituting the lynchpin of her experiential engagement with the gameworld, which, as a result, takes on the emotional character of fear.

The player's relation to the gameworld, then, is just as determined by the playable figure in its passivity as in its capacity as a vehicle for action. The passive dimension of the ludic subject-position is perhaps best conceptualized as a fundamental reversibility of all the aspects of the embodied ludic subject's relation to the gameworld. If the player-as-ludic-subject, as embodied in the playable figure, can be spatially positioned in such a way that things-in-the-gameworld are in proximity to her, then she, or, at least, the playable figure as her ludic body, is also in proximity to them; if she can see the other entities in the gameworld, she can also be seen by them; if she can hear them, they can also hear her; if she can act upon them, she can also be acted upon by them; and so on.

This “passive sentiment” of the body-in-the-gameworld, then, is a direct consequence of the fact that, as I observed in section 5.4.5, there are two phenomenological aspects of the body – it is “a thing among other things” and also “that by which things are revealed to me” (Sartre 1966[1943], 402). Another way of saying this is to say that it is both subject (of its own perceptions and actions as for-itself) and object (of the perceptions and actions of others), or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “there are two views of my body: my body for me and my body for others” (2002[1945], 122ff.). If the world is sensible to the body, then the body is sensible to the world: “he who looks must not be foreign to the world that he looks at. As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision [...] be doubled with a complementary vision or with another vision: myself seen from without” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 134).

By way of an illustration of how this operates in terms of the ludic subject, I shall give the example of *Thief: The Dark Project*, which includes in its interface an icon it terms a ‘light gem,’ whose purpose is to indicate to the player Garrett’s level of visibility at any given moment. If the player-as-Garrett is standing in the shadows of a darkened alcove, then Garrett is not visible to the patrolling guards, and the light gem will be dim or even completely dark. If, instead, the player ventures into a brightly-lit corridor, the light gem will glow bright to indicate Garrett’s high level of visibility.

In tandem with Garrett’s fragility compared to the playable figures in many other action games with a first-person point-of-view (two or three hits in a sword fight are likely to prove fatal), this visibility – the status of the playable figure as an object of perception, not only for the player but also for the other existents in the gameworld – conditions a particular relation to the gameworld that the player must adopt. The vulnerability to being seen – and the repercussions that Garrett as a playable figure would be made to suffer – will lead the player to adopt particular patterns of play: traversing the spaces of the game’s missions carefully, observing patrol routes from safe hiding-places, timing dashes between shadowy alcoves, and so on. As a result of Garrett’s passion, then – his liability, as an entity within the world, to suffer the effects of other entities in the world – the ludic subject-position towards the gameworld is given a particular cast.

### 7.3 Case study: *Minecraft* and *Proteus*

The 'ludic subject-position' can therefore be understood, in analytical terms, as a set of interrelated formal mechanisms that, in their disparate ways, set the parameters for the 'opening' that the player is granted towards the gameworld. However, while adopting this frame upon the ludic subject-position is indispensable from a critical perspective, it is necessary, for the purposes of an aesthetics of ludic subjectivity, to gain a picture of how these mechanism interrelate. As such, having broken down the ludic subject-position into its constituent mechanisms, it is now necessary to make a reverse movement: that is, to demonstrate the manner in which the player's engagement with the gameworld through the multiple interlocking perceptual mechanisms of the ludic subject-position structures a unified ludic subjectivity.

I shall accomplish this by means of a comparative case study of ludic subject-positioning in *Minecraft* and *Proteus*. In both cases, the player starting a new game finds herself alone in the midst of an open, natural landscape, a wanderer in the wilderness. The fact that, from this nominally identical starting-point, the games establish such radically different interrelations between the player and the gameworld, thanks in large part to their divergent deployment of the mechanisms of ludic subject-positioning I have analyzed over the course of this chapter, is what renders a comparative analysis of these two games particularly illuminating with regard to the formation of ludic subjectivity.

#### 7.3.1 *The wanderer in the wilderness*

The trope of the lone individual in the untamed wilderness is a recurrent image that, in its various manifestations, remains inevitably inscribed with the mark of divergent assumptions regarding the manner of the individual's engagement with space, place and nature. In the age of the Enlightenment, Robinson Crusoe wastes no time in exerting his rational mastery over his island, bending the landscape to his will and playing out, as it were, the first moves of colonization and industrialization (Defoe 2007[1719]). With the

advent of Romanticism, a different relationship between nature and the individual rose to prominence, one in which nature and the mind face each other as object and subject, and the resulting “direct transaction between that mind and nature”, as M.H. Abrams notes, set in motion the processes that “bring into being the phenomenal world and constitute all individual experience” (1971b, 91). In William Wordsworth’s “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (1798), for instance, “the interchange between [the poet’s] mind and nature constitutes the entire poem” (Abrams 1971, 92).

The manifestations of the trope change along with cultural perspectives on the wilderness itself. If the eighteenth century had *Robinson Crusoe*, the twentieth century had *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (Haskin 1964); and, if *Minecraft* and *Proteus* are anything to go by, now that space exploration, the dream of a technological optimism that no longer seems to hold, appears to have receded into history, the twenty-first century is forced to venture into fantasy or impressionistic generality in order to locate fresh wildernesses to subject to the explorer’s gaze. The landscapes of *Minecraft* and *Proteus* do not point towards any specific, recognizable wilderness – instead, they represent the *idea* of the unspoilt landscape, offering a new procedurally-generated landscape for every playthrough, pristine and unseen.

*Minecraft* and *Proteus* both employ open landscape topographies, “the spatial structures which afford players the most freedom for navigation” (Calleja 2011, 82). Moreover, both are identical in terms of the visual point-of-view they grant the player upon their respective landscapes. Applying Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå’s typology of perspectives described above (2003, 49), both games can be classified as adopting a vagrant perspective, where the visual point-of-view is connected to the ludic subject-position as a spatial standpoint: here, “the ego has to wander through game space in order to apprehend the spatial setting of the game space” (Günzel 2008, 174).

The first-person perspective both games adopt represents the closest possible link between visual point-of-view and the embodied ludic subject. Moreover, it is also significant for a second reason. Given that a game is always encountered in the context of pre-existing generic and formal expectations resulting from the player’s experience

with other games, the first-person perspective *Minecraft* and *Proteus* make use of might raise expectations of a generic alignment with the first-person shooter (FPS) genre. And yet, this is where the similarities stop – both games, *Proteus* perhaps somewhat more radically, position themselves in opposition to the expectations engendered by this generic association. Alexander Galloway notes that “two elements alone – a subjective camera perspective, coupled with a weapon in the foreground – constitute the kernel of the image in the FPS genre” (2006, 57). Though, as we have just pointed out, *Minecraft* and *Proteus* both adopt the first of these two elements, they both jettison the second.

This is more than a mere surface-level visual difference. In the FPS genre, the weapon pointing into the screen, with the player on one side of it and the various entities populating the gameworld on the other, represents arguably the primary line of instrumentality connecting the ludic subject to the various things encountered in the gameworld. Recalling Sartre’s image of the instrumental complex as “the correlate of the possibilities which I am [...] the enormous skeletal outline of all my possible options” (1966[1943], 425), it is not hard to see that the instrumental complex of the typical FPS ludic subject takes the form of a network of routes to be taken, targets to be shot and killed, more and better guns to be picked up, and so on. As such, the absence of the on-screen gun in these two games – in *Minecraft*, to be replaced by other affordances that are occasionally represented in the screen position where a gun would be expected to be, and in *Proteus* seemingly to mark the absence of any affordance at all – reveals the operation of a divergent ludic subjectivity defined through a different “I can,” and hence the enactment of a different mode of being-in-the-gameworld for the player to inhabit. The next stage in this analysis, then, is to look at *Minecraft* and *Proteus* individually, focusing on the instrumental complex each game establishes to give shape to the gameworld around the player’s subject-position.

### 7.3.2 *Minecraft: the landscape as standing-reserve*

In his discussion on the effects of modern, industrialized technology, Heidegger suggests that its point of divergence from other forms of technology lies in its mode of revealing

– that is, to return to the point made in section 3.5.2, in the manner in which it brings forth a ‘world’ out of the ‘earth’. Understanding technology as *techné*, Heidegger defines it as a ‘bringing-forth’, saying that “every bringing-forth is grounded in revealing [...] the possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing” (2004[1953], 318). The essence of technology, Heidegger suggests, is that of revealing that which is concealed, bringing forth potential forms into unconcealment.

Industrialized technology, however, operates through a radically different mode of revealing: through a process Heidegger terms *Gestell* (‘enframing’), industrial technology – not as a set of equipment or machinery, but as the essential impulse out of which that equipment emerges in the first place – places humanity in a specific relation to the landscape, whose operation is revealed in Heidegger’s statement that, through this enframing, “a tract of land is challenged in the hauling out of coal and ore. The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit” (ibid., 320).

Heidegger refers to this enframing as *standing-reserve*<sup>11</sup> – its result is that the things we encounter in the world are no longer perceived as things, but as sources of raw material and reserves that can be stockpiled in order to be put towards some use: “everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering” (ibid., 322). The end result of this is that the object stops being perceived as an object at all, and we become aware of it, instead, exclusively as resource – “whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as an object” (ibid.).

This certainly rings true when we consider the way in which the landscape comes to be seen in *Minecraft*. Every entity that can be perceived in the world is a potential resource, to be gathered, processed and put to use in crafting. Trees can be chopped

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<sup>11</sup> This concept has already been brought to bear upon this investigation once before, in section 4.3.3. There, in discussing the notion of recentering, and the way in which it demands a linking of the manner in which things-in-the-gameworld are perceived to the ludic subject-position *through which* they are perceived, I gave the example of a tree in *Minecraft* being perceived in the mode of standing-reserve if the player is in need of wood for a crafting project. That observation can now be contextualized within this more detailed engagement with the ludic subject-position at work in *Minecraft*.

down for wood. Rock can be quarried for building material, or mined in search of coal, iron or rarer minerals. Sheep are a source of wool; cows, of leather; pigs, of meat.

This is made possible by the double-layered ontology that applies to the world of *Minecraft*. If we adopt the frame of the ‘game as system,’ as discussed in section 3.4.3, and attempt to apply the form of game-ontological analysis whose project it is to understand, and define, the game object as a set of discrete game components organized into a logical system, it rapidly becomes apparent that *Minecraft* presents a singular challenge, in that it is possible to ontologically define the set of entities making up its world in two radically incompatible ways.

What is revealed is the possibility – indeed, the necessity – of interpreting the landscape through two superimposed frames. Through one frame – the one through which the player is likely to perceive the landscape in her initial attempts at making sense of it – the world of *Minecraft* is precisely a landscape, a topographical arrangement of hills, forests, deserts, mountains, oceans and caves, populated by various kinds of flora and fauna, all of which, as I noted in section 3.1.1 when attempting to locate the basic unit of gameworld experience, are immediately intuited as such by the player (see Fig. 8.1).



**Figure 7.1** The *Minecraft* landscape

However, nothing in *Minecraft* is only what it appears to be on this level. Its idiosyncratic, blocky visual style might provide the first hint, being strongly reminiscent of a toy building-block construction set. And this, in fact, is an apt metaphor for revealing the double-layered ontology of *Minecraft* - a tree is visibly made up of a set number of wood cubes, a rocky outcrop is so many cubes of stone, and so on. Adopting the second ontological frame, then, the world of *Minecraft* is seen, not as a landscape, but as nothing but a spatial arrangement of resource cubes – a particularly extreme case of Paul Martin’s assertion that, over the course of engaging with a game’s milieu, it gradually loses its evocative and mysterious qualities, becoming “domesticated through exploration and interaction” (2011).

If the frame through which the player is made to perceive and interpret the world can be equated with the ludic subject as embodied in the playable figure, and the range and nature of its “I can” is one of the primary mechanisms determining the parameters of the frame, then, at this stage in the argument, it would be advisable to determine what capabilities for action *Minecraft* grants the player – and, as such, how it establishes the conditions for the player to frame the gameworld as standing-reserve.

*Minecraft* seems to offer the player an uncommonly wide range of capabilities for action to direct towards the entities of its world. In effect, though – apart from the general capacity for navigation and movement – the “I can” that is granted to the player can be considered to be organized as two primary impulses, which we might call *deconstruction* and *construction*. Through the playable figure, the player has the capacity to break any entity in the game down into its constituent resource cubes (deconstruction); these resources become stockpiled standing-reserve that the player can then recombine into new arrangements (construction). All other capabilities for action that the game provides (such as the capacity to build and deploy tools) are elaborations on these two impulses.

To invoke a dimension of Elverdam and Aarseth’s typology of games which I have not yet referred to, this means that *Minecraft*’s environmental dynamics are entirely free (2007, 7), to the extent that we might even define the process of engaging with



*Minecraft* as being one of reconfiguring its landscape into a new arrangement. *Minecraft*, then, enframes the player in such a way as to lead her towards perceiving things-in-the-gameworld not primarily as distinct entities, but as stockpiles of resources standing-reserve. Still, it is not enough to stop here: next, it is necessary to ask a question regarding another dimension of the ludic subject-position – namely, regarding what function or goal these resources are to be put towards.

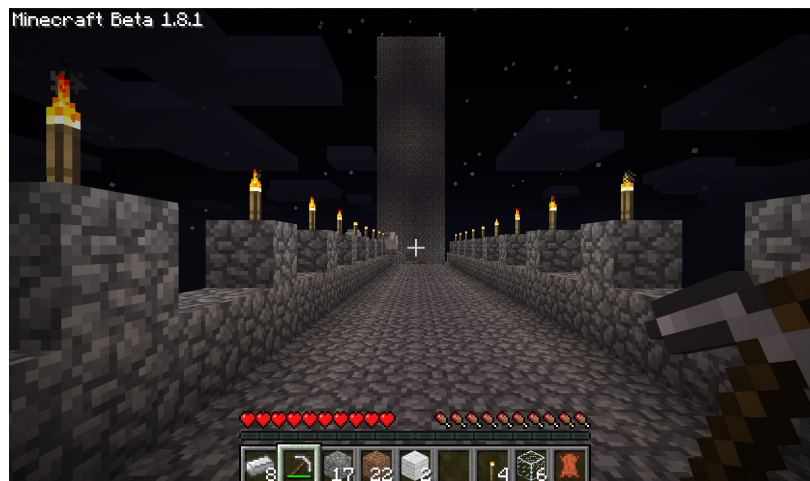
The obvious, initial answer is *building*: the player gathers resources in order to build, as in the example of the project of building a stronghold I discussed in Chapter 5. This, however, requires further elaboration: why is it that the player builds? The game does not specify any quests or objectives to be met, and does not insist that the player *must* or even *should* build. Initially, of course, the motivation is survival: the player needs shelter in order to hide from the various dangers that come out at night. This is easily achieved, however – in practice, a tiny cubicle with a single door is enough to get through the night. Yet, building projects rarely stop there – as such, the drive towards building must be attributed to some motivation other than that of basic survival.

One possible answer can be found by returning to Heidegger. The question of building is crucial to *Dasein*, and is an essential aspect of the human mode of *dwelling*, or living in a particular, meaningful place: “we attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building. The latter, building, has the former, dwelling, as its goal” (2004[1951], 347). The two, in fact, are inseparably linked: “building is really dwelling” (ibid., 350). *Dwelling* is here not understood simply in the sense of houses, or places to stay, but encompasses buildings of all forms, and, through them, the essential core of what it means, as a human, to inhabit a place. What Heidegger understands by ‘building’ is the sense of the built environment as a whole, as a world in our image that is the world in which we dwell: “man’s relation to locales, and through locales to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially” (ibid., 359).

For Heidegger, then, building is essentially tied to the question of world-disclosure. I have already discussed the importance of the question of worldness to

Heidegger’s theorization of *Dasein* – to be is to be-in-the-world, after all; and to build, Heidegger argues, is to establish a world – to literally set it in stone. His influential example, in “The Origin of the Work of Art”, of the Greek temple in the rock-cleft valley, illustrates this point: it is the temple, he argues, that gathers a locus around itself and makes the landscape a meaningful place in which the community that built the temple can map out the paths of their lives – “the temple-work, standing there, opens up a world” (2004[1937], 168). As such, “to be a work means to set up a world” (ibid., 170) against the mute material substrate of the earth (see section 3.4.2).

This, then, is ultimately the mode of being-in-the-world that the ludic subject-position of *Minecraft* establishes for the player as ludic subject. It locates the player in an initially disorientating, undefined landscape, and, granting her the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct the elements of the landscape as she sees fit, tasks her with establishing (through the act of building) a place of dwelling, and, hence, with the unfolding of a constructed world upon the face of the landscape (see Fig. 7.2).



**Figure 7.2** The *Minecraft* landscape transformed into a built environment

### 7.3.3 *Proteus*: the Romantic individual in the landscape

Once its affordances have been grasped, then, *Minecraft* provides the player with the capacity to materially engage with, and reshape, its landscape. By contrast, *Proteus* seems willfully determined to keep the player at a remove from its environment. Before arriving

at this point, however, it might make sense to take a step backwards, and consider the moments of the player's first encounter with its landscape.

*Proteus* immediately demands motion from the player. The first thing the player perceives when starting a new game is the hazy image of an island, barely visible across a short expanse of ocean. The player is driven to move forward towards the island in preference to any of the other directions she might have randomly chosen to move towards; once the player reaches the shore, a line of standing rocks might lead her towards the interior of the island; at which point a tower on a hill might catch her eye and cause her to change her path; and so on (see Fig. 7.3).



**Figure 7.3** The landscape of the island in *Proteus*

At first glance, the landscape in which *Proteus* locates its player seems considerably richer than the one in *Minecraft*, where the basic components of the landscape are established rapidly. By contrast, the landscape in *Proteus* can occasionally surprise the player even after she has thoroughly familiarized herself with the relatively limited extent of the gameworld. This is largely due to the fact that *Proteus*' island milieu is adorned with an excess of what Nitsche calls “evocative narrative elements”, referring to any entity or event in a gameworld “that is structured to support and possibly guide the player’s comprehension”: as “players encounter and read these elements”, they “learn from them as they build contextual connections between elements”, making each newly-encountered

element fit the bigger picture, and changing this wider understanding if need be in a hermeneutic circle of spatial exploration and interpretation (2008, 37).

There are visible signs of human habitation: a cabin, a graveyard, standing stones, a stone circle and a circular arrangement of totem-like statues silhouetted against the sky on the summit of a hill. All of these refer to established – in fact, practically cliché – tropes of the coexistence of humanity in the natural landscape. The log cabin might recall, specifically, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (2008[1845]), or, more generally, the Romantic, post-Enlightenment impulse of a return to nature viewed as an earthly paradise. The stone circles and the standing stones bear the distinct echo of druidic practices, while the hilltop statues recall nothing as much as Native American totems. However, to all of these the player seems to be alien: the cabin cannot be entered, and the stones and statues speak in mysterious sounds. The player, here, remains resolutely outside, alone in the wilderness.

Taking the same approach as was deployed in the analysis of *Minecraft*, and examining the manner in which the “I can” the player is granted determines the parameters of her embodied subject-position within the gameworld, one reaches a stark conclusion: apart from freedom of movement within the game space, the player is not granted any affordances. In fact, the game constantly thwarts the expectations of interaction it repeatedly sets up through the introduction of new, promising elements. I have already brought attention to one such instance in section 3.4.3, which it is opportune to return to here. The island is home to a number of creatures that the player encounters at different stages of her exploration of the island: owls, flocks of chickens, a fox that peeks out at the player from behind trees, and so on. Though their patterns of movement vary, their general behavior is basically identical: all these entities will run away when approached, and constantly remain one step ahead of the player’s reach (see Fig. 7.4).

As such, where *Minecraft*’s environment is entirely dynamic, the landscape in *Proteus* would appear to be entirely fixed. And yet, that is not entirely a correct judgment: for, although there is nothing the player can do to alter the gameworld out of her own

active agency, the landscape undergoes repeated, radical change of its own accord. At certain points in the player's explorations of the island, an accumulation of visual and aural cues lead the player towards the stone circle; when the player enters the circle, a change of seasons is triggered. Effectively, this moves the gameworld between four successive states during the course of a play-through, each corresponding to one of the four seasons: a new game always starts in spring, and will proceed through summer and autumn, before ending in winter – making *Protens*, unlike *Minecraft*, finite in its teleology.



**Figure 7.4** *Protens*: A cast of crabs frustrate the player's attempts at interaction.

Shifting for a moment into the textual-hermeneutic mode of engagement with the game associated with the external perspective, one could say that this emphasis on change and finitude highlights transience as one of the primary thematic concerns of *Protens* - the adjective 'protean', after all, ascribes to an object the qualities of mutability, adaptability, change and impermanence. The commencement of the process that triggers the changes in season is heralded by a wind that sets the foliage of the landscape in motion – and wind, as Abrams points out, is a recurrent Romantic image of change (1975). Moreover, this sense of transience is highlighted by means of the fact that every particular scene the game produces can only ever be seen once. Though every procedurally-generated island will possess many of the same features, each individual configuration is unique; the game pointedly has no save option, and once the player plays through to the end of winter, or

decides to leave the game before this point, that specific island can never be returned to.

With nothing else to do, perception and exploration take on unusually prominent roles, with the player's forward movement and traversal of the space being driven by no goal other than that of seeing everything the island has to offer. This structuring of the player's engagement with the landscape as a purely aesthetic experience, albeit one defined by the movement inherent in spatial practice, would seem to align *Proteus* with a Romantic aesthetic of nature, which, as Don Gifford notes, was not a static or picturesque approach – instead, it was founded on the idea of being emplaced and engaging in the play of a place by means of its traversal, constituting “an in-touch-with, flow-through experience of landscape” (1993, 131).

In Heidegger's terms, the objects the player encounters in *Proteus* are marked, not by readiness-to-hand, but “presence-at-hand” (2008[1927], 67[42]), objects to be disinterestedly perceived rather than actively engaged with. For Heidegger, this is, from the perspective of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world, a merely secondary mode of being-with objects; however, within the Romantic tradition, it was precisely through disinterested contemplation that the individual mind could most forcefully encounter the natural world. This is the idea expressed by Wordsworth in these lines from the Prospectus to *The Excursion*, which, as Abrams points out, plot out the idea that something approaching a state of grace “can be achieved simply by a union of man's mind with nature”:

How exquisitely the individual Mind  
(And the progressive powers perhaps no less  
Of the whole species) to the external World  
Is fitted: - and how exquisitely, too,  
Theme this but little heard of among Men,  
The external world is fitted to the Mind;  
And the creation (by no lower name  
Can it be called) which they with blended might  
Accomplish - (1971[1814]: lines 63-70)

Through encountering the objects of the natural world – not as objects that are ready-to-hand, but as objects of disinterested aesthetic perception – the individual mind is driven

to the creation of its own meaningful images. This becomes most evident in S.T. Coleridge's elucidation of the role of the primary Imagination as "the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (1949[1817], 146). The Imagination, in Coleridge's formulation, is the creative process by which the world comes into being for the individual perceiving consciousness, and which constitutes a reflection, within the subjective mind, of the ceaseless coming-into-being of the external world.

If we are to convincingly make the argument that *Proteus* positions the player in a Romantic mode of being in relation to the landscape, it is vital to locate a formal structure by which this subjective "creation" by the Imagination of an image that reflects, and responds to, the external natural object – an image, then, that is the product of the encounter of Mind and Nature – is accounted for.

It is arguable that precisely such a formal structure could be identified in one of the more unique aspects of *Proteus*: its deployment of a dynamic soundtrack that is generated by, and is reflective of, the player's exploratory movements through the landscape. Specific musical cues, aural elements and melodies are attached to particular objects in the landscape, emerging onto the horizon of the audible as the objects come into view. Thus, for instance, when approaching the tower-like structures standing on certain hilltops, a high-pitched squeal of discordant, electronic notes makes itself heard, growing increasingly dominant, and finally almost overwhelming, the closer the player approaches to the towers.

Once the philosophical outlook of the game is grasped as Romantic, it is easy to consider this synaesthetic quality as constituting an attempt at formalizing – and mediating – a sense of the reflections and images of the external world playing upon the surface of the Romantic Mind. It is for this reason that the focus in *Proteus* falls squarely on perception and exploration, and why agency – if it is to be found at all – can only be located in the player's capacity to organize the (admittedly, very rich) audiovisual output into pleasing arrangements. The player is, in fact, given a number of possibilities in terms of defining their perception of the gameworld: she can, for instance, intentionally choose

to linger near the hilltop statues in order to admire the psychedelic visual effect they produce (see Fig. 7.5), or she can choose to seek out and follow the lines of stone circles in order to ‘perform’ a scale of musical notes.



**Figure 7.5** *Proteus*: the psychedelic effect produced in proximity to the hilltop statues

Having made this interpretative leap, moreover, the occasionally frustrating lack of agency upon the landscape, the detachment this leads to, the alienation from the apparent sites of human dwelling, and even the oddly weightless feeling of the player’s embodiment in the game that led Ian Bogost to claim that “there is no ‘you’ in *Proteus*” (2013), begin to make sense. The post-Kantian Romantic subject, after all, is, as Abrams notes, the victim of “an absolute and unsalvageable division between subject and object, mind and alienated nature” (1971b, 269): it is against this background that the striving to reestablish a prelapsarian unity between mind and nature occurs.

#### 7.3.4 *A mode of being-in-the-world*

*Minecraft* and *Proteus* were chosen for close analysis due to the contrasting ludic subject-positions they establish upon a shared initial thematic foundation – the lone wanderer in the wilderness. The former, through its granting the player the capacity to deconstruct game entities into resources that could then be used to construct new structures in the



gameworld, leads the player to frame its landscape in the mode of the Heideggerian standing-reserve; moreover, in allowing the player the capacity to reshape the landscape in her own image, the game invites the construction of a built world in which to dwell. *Proteus*, by contrast, positions the player in the mode of the Romantic wanderer, perceiving the landscape through an aesthetic frame: in this regard, it is no coincidence that the game opens with the opening of eyelids, recalling Ralph Waldo Emerson's casting of himself in the face of nature as a "transparent eyeball" (1983[1836], 10) seeing beauty in the potential correspondences of Mind and Nature, but also feeling detachment due to the unbridgeable gap between subject and object that the split between the two enacts in the first place.

Neither of these subjective standpoints is explicitly prescribed to the player – in fact, both games stand out for their refusal to provide the player with any explicit instructions. Here, there is no explicit setting of any quest or goal to structure the player's traversal of the landscape (Tosca 2003a; Aarseth 2004b; 2005). Instead, the relations that are determined between the player and the virtual landscape emerge organically through the formal structure by means of which the player is embodied in their respective spaces, and which reflect the mechanisms of ludic subject-positioning categorized in section 7.2.

If what I have termed the ludic subject-position can be understood as a static frame or an enshrined perspective upon the gameworld, then what happens when the player engages with the gameworld through this frame is that she enacts the *mode of being-in-the-gameworld* that is determined by the ludic subject-position. I shall expand on what I mean by this.

Heidegger writes that, on the grounds of this basic existential structure of being-in-the-world, "Dasein's being takes on a definite character" (2008[1927], 78[53]) due to its coming to be oriented towards specific things-in-the-world in specific ways:

Dasein's facticity is such that its Being-in-the-world has always dispersed [zerstreut] itself [...] into definite ways of Being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated in the following examples: having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something,

giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining... (ibid., 83[56])

All of these represent modes of being-in-the-world, which, through their being taken on and *lived*, in an existential sense, not only cause the world to come into view in a particular form for the subject, but also cause the subject to take a particular form in view of the world. This recalls the point made in section 2.2.3, regarding Hans-Georg Gadamer's suggestion that every playing has its characteristic "comportment" (1989[1960], 107) which is the result of the player's orienting herself towards the task that is set for her by the situation of play: it is now clearer what this comportment entails, on what ontological ground it is manifested, and what phenomenological character it takes. One is also reminded of the observation made by Sebastian Möring that "games are always already existential" (2013, 50). The ludic subject, then, can be understood as *that subjective existence which has as its mode of Being the being-in-the-gameworld that is determined by the parameters of the ludic subject-position.*

#### 7.4 Conclusions

This chapter has consisted of two movements. First, against the background of a consideration of the multiple senses of 'perspective' in relation to games, I broke down the notion of the ludic subject-position, which, so far, had remained a largely unitary and monolithic concept, into a set of separate but interrelated formal mechanisms: *spatial standpoint, visual point-of-view, auditory standpoint, set of capabilities and limitations, goal-orientation, and passion towards the gameworld.*

These, I argued, interrelate around the playable figure as it is taken up by the player in the subjective relation, thereby becoming an embodied ludic subject ("I-as-figure" as a subjective existence within the gameworld). In the second part of the chapter, then, an analysis of the relation between the ludic subject and the gameworld in *Minecraft* and *Proteus* was used to bring these disparate formal structures back into a

concept of the unified ludic subject-position, and the ludic subjectivity that is enacted through it, as a determined *mode of being-in-the-gameworld*.

This, then, points towards the possibility of founding a poetics of the figure game upon a consideration of the mode of being-in-the-world in which the player is located. What such a poetics would bring to light as a fundamental aspect of the figure game form would therefore be the double movement I have described – one in which the virtual environment of the game is perceived as a meaningful lifeworld through its organization as the phenomenological sphere surrounding the player’s subjective position, while, simultaneously, the player’s in-game subjective existence, and the being-in-the-gameworld through which it is defined, emerges in relation to this meaningful lifeworld.

I have now developed the first of the two dimensions of the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity I mapped out in section 1.3. There, in introducing the theme of ludic subjectivity as the focus of this study, I argued that the ludic subject is not only *lived* by the player as a being-in-the-gameworld (which is what this chapter has analyzed), it is also brought into view as a *ludic self* that is represented back to the player as a self which is *herself*, but which also, by virtue of the distance between this self in the gameworld and the self of the player in her external standpoint, becomes the object of autoscopic perception. It is this move which allows – as I noted in section 2.3.3 – for the being-in-the-gameworld to reflect, in aesthetic terms, a being-in-the-world, and, inseparably, for the ludic subject to be taken up as an aestheticization of the self.

The remaining task of this consideration of the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity, then, is precisely that of conceptualizing the manner in which the ludic subject – which, as lived by the player as ‘I,’ is enacted as a being-in-the-gameworld – can become the object of perception. Doing so shall necessitate a shift from investigating the subjective relation of the playable figure to investigating the objective relation, and it is precisely this shift that the next chapter shall undertake.





## Chapter Eight

### From the ludic subject to the ludic self

Following on from the development of the two-axis model of the player-figure relation, Chapter 7 proceeded to expand upon the formal construction of the subjective relation to the playable figure. The structure of the ludic subject-position as a subjective ‘openness’ towards the gameworld, determining the givenness of the gameworld in ludic experience as a *lifeworld* within which the player can enact an existential praxis of being-in-the-gameworld, has now been more thoroughly conceptualized.

What remains to be done is to determine how the player’s adoption of the ludic subject-position – and, hence, of the comportment and mode of being-in-the-gameworld it sets in motion – leads, first, to the *enactment* of a ludic subjectivity, and, second, to the presentation of an aestheticized ludic self. The argument I shall work towards is one that operates according to the logic of the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement mapped out in section 2.4, as it takes the form, in the category of figure games that this investigation is concerned with, in the simultaneity of the subjective and objective relations to the playable figure. In short, the internal perspective of the ludic subject-position, which results from a subjective relation to the playable figure, leads, when inhabited by the player, to the enactment of a ludic subject as a first-personal, lived experience of being-in-the gameworld. At the same time, the external perspective frames a representation of the playable figure – and, by extension, of the enacted ludic subject – within the textuality of the game artefact; it is this textualized representation of her own ludic subjectivity as lived that makes it possible for the player to see her own in-game ‘I’ in the coherent unified form of a ludic *self*.

First, *mineness* shall be clarified as an intrinsic quality of gameworld experience as pertaining to the ludic subject-position: it is against this basic mineness of ludic-

subjective experience that the subjective relation to the playable figure shall be examined in both its aspects as a subjective relation of *self* and of *other*. On this basis, I shall consider the question of action as it relates to the ludic subject: this shall involve a recourse to the conceptual analysis of action (von Wright 1971; Anscombe 1979[1957]; Davidson 1980) and its reconciliation with the phenomenology of the embodied subject in the work of Paul Ricoeur (1992).

This chapter will then proceed to engage with the move from the subjective to the objective relation to the playable figure. This move shall be made in the context of a development of the twofold understanding of subjectivity, as already introduced in section 1.5, and which, following Ricoeur and Dan Zahavi (2008; 2010), shall lead to a discussion of the “narrative self” as it emerges as a consciousness of self against the background of lived, first-personal subjectivity – a point I shall link to Gordon Calleja’s notion of “alterbiography” (2011). Through this theoretical framework, I shall proceed to examine the formal techniques by which the player’s enacted ludic subjectivity is represented within the game’s textual presentation as a ludic self, thereby establishing an autoscopic aesthetic effect as the player is made witness to a representation of herself-in-the-gameworld. Finally, the insights gained in this direction shall be concretized by means of a close analysis of the technique of narrative as it is used in *Bastion* (Supergiant Games 2011).

## 8.1 The enactment of the ludic subject

As an interrelating set of mechanisms organized around the form of the playable figure, the embodied ludic subject-position, as laid out in section 7.2, is a static formal structure. On the other hand, the ludic subject, as the being-in-the-gameworld that results when the player adopts the subjective relation to the playable figure, taking on its ludic subject-position and engaging with the gameworld from its standpoint, is a *happening* that is set in motion in the course of ludic engagement, a *being* as verb. As a player, I pick up a game; the mechanisms of the ludic subject-position structure my perspective upon the

gameworld along particular lines, leading me to comport myself in a particular way towards the gameworld. It is the ludic subject *as lived* in the course of ludic engagement, as the playing out of this comportment, that I shall now take up as my focus.

### 8.1.1 *The mineness of ludic subjectivity*

It is necessary, first of all, to emphasize once more a point which has been central to this investigation from the very start: namely, the *mineness* of ludic subjectivity. When, as a player, I identify the playable figure as ‘myself’, as ‘I-in-the-gameworld,’ I take up the embodied ludic subject-position as my own – meaning that my experiences of being-in-the-gameworld as an embodied ludic subject, with the playable figure as my body, are experienced precisely as *my own*.

This is what is meant by what Zahavi terms the “first-person perspective” which is intrinsic to, and constitutes the basic experiential dimension of, the phenomenological subject of experience: the idea of the first-person perspective can, in fact, be “articulated in terms of a pre-reflective and non-conceptual sense of ownership or consciously experienced ‘mineness’ that accompanies bodily sensations, emotional states and cognitive contents” (2007, 4).

In the same way, it is the basic quality of ludic subjectivity that the experiences of the ludic subject are experienced, first and foremost, in this first-personal mineness. It is not the case that, as a player, I am somehow first aware of an experience of the gameworld – “There is the perception of a creeper behind the tree,” or even, “Steve, the playable figure in *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011), perceives a creeper behind the tree” – which is only *then, a posteriori*, identified as being *my* experience. Rather, I am *immediately* cognizant of the experience first-personally, as *mine*. It is for this reason that it is mistaken to speak, with Tim Marsh, of gameworld experience obtained through the ludic subject-position as being constituted of “feelings of acting vicariously – imaginatively experiencing something through another person, being, object or character” (2006, 196).

To return to a point I have already made in outlining the implications of the subjective relation in section 6.2.2, if I, as player, take on the ludic subject as my first-



personal experiential standpoint towards the gameworld, then my perspective cannot, by the same token, frame the playable figure itself, either as figure or as ludic subject. I have already mentioned Espen Aarseth's point, speaking of Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996), that "when I play, I don't even see her body, but see through and past it" (2004a, 48). If, in the subjective relation, the player looks out at the gameworld *from* the subjective standpoint that Lara represents upon it as a ludic subject, then she exists for the player as an 'opening' onto the gameworld, and hence fades from view.

Aarseth's observation here is in accordance with the phenomenological account of the embodied subject, which I discussed at some length in Chapter 5. To recapitulate, it is an explicit quality of the phenomenology of the body as it is developed from Husserl onwards that "originally I do not have any consciousness *of* my body as an object [...] when the body moves and acts, *I* am moving and acting" (Zahavi 2003, 101).

Of course, it has already become evident enough that if, as a ludic subject-position, the playable figure is an opening onto the gameworld, it cannot be said to be an entirely 'transparent' opening. In enforcing, as I demonstrated in Chapter 7, a particular mode of being-in-the-gameworld, and therefore shaping the player's existential praxis in the gameworld and determining, to within a narrow range of possibility, the comportment she is to adopt in playing out her ludic subjectivity, the ludic subject-position not only brings the gameworld into view in a particular configuration, but also brings *itself* into view as the *particular* openness towards the gameworld that it is. It is taken on by the player as a constraint, even if, insofar as I *am* the ludic subject, it is a constraint "that I am, the very one to which I must consent" (Ricoeur 1992, 119ff.). As such, despite the *mineness* of ludic-subjective experience, it cannot escape, at the same time, denoting the otherness of the playable figure in its status as a figure distinct from me:<sup>1</sup> here, the narrow, porous barrier between the subjective relation of self and of other becomes clear.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the point at which a link can be drawn between the ludic subject and the question of character, insofar as the parameters determining the ludic subject-position, as listed in section 7.2, can also be put into the service of determining the playable figure as a character. I shall expand upon this in Chapter 9.

### 8.1.2 *Action, intention and the subject*

Before tackling the point of the attribution to the ludic subject of a status as both self and other, however, it is necessary to address, in more rigorous terms, the enactment of the ludic subject: that is, determining, in more concrete terms than have been used to address it so far, what happens, from the subjective perspective of gameworld experience, when the player begins to engage with the gameworld through the ludic subject-position. The conclusion arrived at in Chapter 7, that the ludic subject-position determines a mode of being-in-the-gameworld, and, hence, a particular comportment, is a useful indication in this regard, but, nonetheless, it remains a very general, top-down perspective. It is necessary to accompany this with an understanding of the manner in which the ludic subject is enacted in the moment-to-moment praxis of ludic engagement.

It is the conceptuality of *action* that shall prove key here: the *enactment* of the ludic subject implies, very literally, a *putting into action*. The question of action has already come into view along the route this investigation has taken so far: most prominently, in the discussion of the aesthetic character of ludic action in section 2.2, and in the engagement with the notion of *agency* as articulated in the game studies discourse in section 4.4. By and large, however, in determining the phenomenological character of ludic engagement, the question of action has remained secondary to that of perception.

By way of grounding an analysis into the enactment of ludic subjectivity, I shall begin with a focus on the conceptuality of the relation between action and the subject. That action is just as fundamental to the being-in-the-world of the embodied subject as perception should come as no surprise in the wake of Jean-Paul Sartre's articulation of the "instrumental complex" of possible bodily actions that gives form to the for-itself's factual situation (1966[1943], 620), or Maurice Merleau-Ponty's argument that "I can" rather than "I think that" is the first principle of consciousness (2002[1945], 160). It bears stressing that perception and action are, in fact, portrayed as being two sides of the same coin. Sartre writes that, "perception is naturally surpassed toward action; better yet, it can be revealed only in and through projects of action" (1966[1943], 425). Merleau-Ponty would appear to agree, writing, in the same vein, that "the plunge into action is,

from the subject's point of view, an original way of relating himself to the object, and is on the same footing as perception" (2002[1945], 127).

In identifying a conceptual schema within which the question of action can be tackled, I shall again bring to bear upon this investigation the analytic philosophy of action, representing, as it does, the most sustained theoretical engagement with the matter. This does not entail a turning-away from the phenomenological perspective which has served as the primary framework for this investigation as a whole – Ricoeur's application of the problematics of action to the question of the self (which very much parallels the current investigation's analysis of action in the context of ludic subjectivity) reveals not only the possibility of an integration of the two conceptual frameworks, but also the advantages that such an integration brings.<sup>2</sup>

In section 2.2.1, I stressed the differentiation, within this tradition, between an action and an event in the general sense, a differentiation that, on one level, is made on the basis of the former being the result of an *intention*, with the latter being the result of a *cause*. The difference, simply put, is that, as I noted at that earlier stage, intention is forward-looking, in contrast to the retrospection inherent in the determination of the cause of an event. As Georg Henrik von Wright puts it, "causality is [...] contrasted with teleology, and causal explanation with teleological explanation" (1971, 83).

Accordingly, it is with the notion of intention,<sup>2</sup> in the sense in which the term is used within the conceptual analysis of action,<sup>3</sup> rather than in the sense in which it is used, in phenomenology, to speak of the "intentionality" of consciousness - that a conceptualization of action must begin. 'Intention,' G.E.M. Anscombe writes, is itself a problematic term, in that it can be used with at least three distinct senses:

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<sup>2</sup> This is in spite of the fact that, as Ricoeur notes, the form of conceptual analysis of action practiced by G.E.M. Anscombe and Donald Davidson "deliberately turns its back on phenomenology," focusing on the analysis of actions which are open to external observation, and hence being "in no way interested in the phenomenon which would be accessible to private intuition alone" (1992, 67-68). In other words – to recall the distinction made in Chapter 5 – what the analytical approach to action takes as its object is the action as it is manifest *for others* rather than as it is *for me*, in being performed. Despite this, as I have already noted, Ricoeur points the way towards a fruitful reconciliation of the disparate conceptual schemata.

<sup>3</sup> In keeping with the analytic turn away from phenomenology, as Ricoeur notes, it is necessary to note, with the analytic approach to action, that "intention, for it, is not intentionality in Husserl's sense" (1992, 67). Care must be taken for the distinction between the two senses to be kept in mind.

When a man says ‘I am going to do such-and-such’, we should say that this was an expression of intention. We also sometimes speak of an action as intentional, and we may also ask with what intention the thing was done. (1979[1957], 1)

Intention, then, can be spoken of under the heading of “expression of intention for the future”, “intentional action” – that is, determining *whether or not* a particular action was done intentionally, and “intention in acting” (ibid.). It is in the last of these senses that this investigation shall adopt the concept of intention. In this formulation, stating the intention underlying an action becomes a means of describing an action:

If an agent does *A* with the intention of doing *B*, there is some description of *A* which reveals the action as reasonable in the light of reasons the agent had in performing it. (Davidson 1980, 85)

In short, as Ricoeur puts it, “to say what an action is, is to say why it is done” (1992, 63).<sup>4</sup> This still leaves it necessary to define more rigorously the manner in which ‘intention’ should be understood as an explanation of action.

The first observation to be made is that intention is, first and foremost, a mental phenomenon. Anscombe writes that:

...if we want to know a man’s intentions it is into the contents of his mind, and only into these, that we must enquire; and hence [...] if we wish to understand what intention is, we must be investigating something whose existence is purely in the sphere of the mind. (1979[1957], 9)

To think of actions in terms of intentions, then, is to shift the plane on which the analysis of action is conducted from the ontic domain upon which the action *takes place* as an event, resulting in some manner, great or small, in a change in the state of the world, to that of the consciousness within which the mental act of intending occurs – as

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<sup>4</sup> In this regard, there exists a distinction – and, simultaneously, a relation – between *intention* and *motive*. Anscombe writes, “a man’s intention is *what* he aims at or chooses; his motive is what determines the aim or choice” (1979[1957], 18). To extend Davidson’s formula, I might do *A* with the intention of doing *B* because of a motive *C*. For example: I put the kettle on with the intention of brewing coffee because I need my morning dose of caffeine to start my day. Or, to put it differently, the intention of an action describes *what* I wanted to do, while the motive specifies *why* I wanted to do it. However, the question of motive within this conceptual schema of action – specifically in its differentiation from the notion of ‘mental cause’ – is a much greater discussion that goes beyond the scope of the current investigation.

becomes apparent in Ricoeur's suggestion that intention should be understood as "the aiming of a consciousness in the direction of something I am to do" (1992, 67). By this understanding, "the action is forming an intention" (Davidson 1980, 89).

This brings a conceptual difficulty into view – namely, how to account for the point of encounter between the subjective origins of the conscious act of intending and the physical status of an action as an event in the world? Von Wright conceptualizes this by saying that action "presents two aspects: an "inner" and an "outer"", with the former being "the intentionality of the action, the intention or will "behind" its outer manifestations," and the latter being "some event" in the world, such as "the fact that a certain handle turns or window opens" (1971, 86-87).<sup>5</sup>

Von Wright's approach to bringing these two aspects of the action together is to link them by means of a systemic logic. By his argument, an action has meaning, for its agent, within the context of a "closed system" (ibid., 78) that an agent isolates from her environment, rendered in the form of a "state-space" (ibid., 49) such that an intentional action can be understood as "interference" (ibid., 61) with the system's autonomous operation, the intent to change the organization of the system from an initial state *a* to a final state *b*. Ricoeur explains:

...it is in doing something that an agent learns to 'isolate' a closed system from its environment and to discover the possibilities of development inherent to this system. The agent learns this by setting the system in motion, beginning from some initial state the agent has 'isolated.' It is this setting things in motion that constitutes interference, at the intersection between one of the agent's abilities and the resources of the system. (1984, 135)

A conceptualization of action along these lines resonates with a number of points raised during the course of this investigation. The notion of the isolation of the domain of ludic action was discussed, by way of Eugen Fink (2012[1958]) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989[1960]), in section 2.3, under the name of the gameworld. In section 3.3, the understanding of the 'game as system' was developed in terms of how it impacts upon

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<sup>5</sup> This, as von Wright concedes, does not apply to mental acts, which have no outer aspect.

the unfolding of the gameworld as a lifeworld in the player's consciousness – and, in this regard, it is opportune to note that the way in which such a systemic understanding is drawn out of direct gameworld experience, as per Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron's "gameplay spiral" of heuristic engagement (2009, 115-117), hews very close to von Wright's arguments regarding the way in which the agents constitutes her surrounding situation into the order of a closed system by means of experimentation and observation (1971, 63-64).

One point I shall draw attention to is that, in the definition of this "intersection," Ricoeur's adoption of von Wright's action theory takes this investigation back to the phenomenology of the embodied subject discussed in Chapter 5. It is – to return to the terminology my investigation at that stage borrowed from Sartre – a being-for-itself making its subjectivity and its existential project of self-determination manifest on the ontological level of things-in-themselves. The key to this, Ricoeur argues, is the discourse of the "I can" proposed by Merleau-Ponty, which I first discussed in section 5.3.5, and which, in this context, offers:

...an ontology of *one's own body*, that is of *a* body that is also *my* body and which, by its double allegiance to the order of physical bodies and to that of persons, therefore lies at the point of articulation of the power to act which is ours and of the course of things which belongs to the world order. (Ricoeur 1992, 111).

With this insight, the conceptual analysis of action returns this investigation to the two-sided phenomenology of the body discussed in section 5.4.5.

There is one final point I wish to draw out of a consideration of the notion of intention as a descriptor of action: namely, that it requires *ascription* to an agent. As Ricoeur argues, "of *intention* we say that it is someone's intention, and of someone we say that he or she intends to do something" (1992, 95). Ricoeur's usage of the term 'ascription' warrants comment. What it highlights is not simply the attribution of the intention to the agent (in the sense of saying "this intention *A* belongs to this agent *B*"), but, more radically, its belonging to the agent in the vein of a predicate about *who the agent is*: "ascription marks the reference of all the terms of the conceptual network to its

pivotal point: “who?”” (ibid.). In ascribing an intention to an individual, we are saying something about the individual, through the definition of a mental predicate (Strawson 1959, 104): we add, to the set of predicates by which we know the individual, the knowledge that *this is someone who has this intention*. Put differently, we know the individual through her intentions, which, conversely, we can only know as her intentions on the basis of an interpretative act of ascription.

Of course, one’s own actions do not demand interpretation in the same way, given that they belong to the class of things one “*knows without observation*” (ibid., 13), due precisely to the proprioceptive ownership of these actions. As Ricoeur puts it:

I do not say that I knew that I was doing this or that because I had observed it. It is in doing that one knows that one is doing something, what one is doing, and why one is doing it. (1992, 70)

Or, in Max Scheler’s words, “it is essential to the Being of acts that they are Experienced only in their performance itself” (1973[1916], 371). This, of course, is a result of the fundamental *mineness* of intentional first-personal subjectivity, which I have just discussed in the preceding section. What role, then, does the ascription of intention play in the analysis of the *self* in action?

Ricoeur’s answer to this question is the key insight with which I shall return from this focus on the notion of action to the question of the constitution of ludic subjectivity. Given the situation of deliberation before the opportunities for action presented by one’s factual situation, Ricoeur argues that “making up one’s mind is cutting short the debate by making one of the options contemplated one’s own” (1992, 95). The decision to act – to be faced with the “skeletal outline of all my possible actions” (Sartre 1966[1943], 425) and, out of this branching multiplicity of possible actions, choose *one* action and make it *my own* – comes to be understood as a *self-ascription*. The performing of an intentional action – the aiming of my self, as being-in-the-world, in the direction of a change I wish to bring about in the world – is at the same time a *determination of who I am*. By this understanding, at the same time as a choice of action states, “I wish to bring about *this*

particular change in the world,” it also states, “I am someone who wishes to bring about *this* particular change in the world, as opposed to any other.”

Through the taking of action in the world, then, ‘I’ come to be constituted as ‘I, defined through the set of actions I ascribe to myself in performing them’. This formulation reveals the link that can be made between this conceptual analysis of action and, not only Sartre’s notion of the existential praxis of being-for-itself as a self-determination, but also, more generally, to the question of the manner in which the subject, as being-in-the-world, can accede to some form of awareness of oneself *as* a self. This point shall be taken up in section 8.2 below.

### 8.1.3 *The ludic subject in action*

Against the background of this conceptualization of action and its relation to the subject as agent, then, it is possible to discuss the question of action as it relates to ludic subjectivity, and as it aids in the constitution of the ludic self.

That action is fundamental to the understanding of ludic experience goes without saying: I have already brought up the discourse on the question of agency in game studies in section 4.4 (Murray 1998; Mateas and Stern 2005; Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009), and the discussion there can serve as a springboard for the integration of the question of action with that of ludic subjectivity. The conclusion reached by the investigation at that point was that agency must be thought of in terms of how it is determined by the player’s engagement with the playable figure. By means of the working-through, in section 5.3, of the phenomenology of embodied subjectivity, and, in section 7.2, of the mechanisms by which the ludic subject-position is shaped as an embodied one, this was concretized through the theorization of the “I can” and the instrumental complex.

It remains to be shown how action in the gameworld takes its place within the consciousness of the ludic subject alongside perception of the gameworld. The link between the two, on a phenomenological plane, is clear. Perception and action, insofar as the former refers to the aiming of consciousness in an intentional relation to actual things-in-the-gameworld, and the latter refers to the intentional aiming of consciousness



towards the bringing-about of a non-actual state of affairs, describe two sides of the same coin. In this regard, it is not surprising to note Calleja's point that the player's relation to the gameworld is "first and foremost a *disposition* and readiness to act" (2011, 41). Before the taking of action itself, it is as such a disposition towards action that the player-as-ludic-subject's being-in-the-world orients itself towards its situation.

An example might serve to illustrate this point. During a game of *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass 1998), the player, as master thief Garrett, finds herself on the upper floors of a palatial mansion. Hiding in an unlit alcove, she has a view along a corridor she needs to traverse in order to arrive at a room containing an item she is required to steal. Two torches amply light the corridor, and a pair of guards patrol the far end. Concealed in the dark, the player-as-Garrett is safe – recall here the point made in section 7.2.6, where Garrett's visibility as marked on an interface level by the light gem is a prime example of his vulnerability towards the gameworld. Conversely, Garrett would certainly be spotted if the player were to leave the safety of darkness.

Here, the player might stand, immobile, for several minutes, not taking any action – and yet, in all that time, she would be, on a subjective level, far from inactive. She might be taking stock of the situation, observing the guards' movement and trying to calculate the timing of their patrol patterns. She might be consulting her map and attempting to determine whether she might be able to avoid the guards by taking a more circuitous route. She might be looking through her inventory to find any items she could use to cause a distraction that would drive the guards from their posts. In all this, though the player does not actually perform any action, one would be amiss to state that the player's being-in-the-gameworld is not marked by an intensely active disposition, and that this is not intimately tied to her embodiment in the gameworld as Garrett.

In short – to draw on the conceptual arsenal this investigation has built up by this point – the player, on the basis of the "I can" that she *is* as an embodied ludic subject, is considering the web of possibilities of action constituting the instrumental complex which, in Sartre's existential terms, are also, as *her* possibilities, part of her being. It is in these phenomenological terms that a situation is established against which agency

can be exerted, in the form of “the satisfying power to take meaningful action”, to return to Janet Murray’s formulation (1998, 126).

In this situation, the player might decide, after her deliberation, to use two of her limited stock of water arrows to put out the torches in the corridor, thereby allowing herself-as-Garrett to proceed along the corridor unseen. Following von Wright’s theory of action, this could be put in the following way: the player perceives the system that constitutes the gameworld as being in a particular state  $A$  (the corridor is lit), and forms an intention to act in such a way as to bring about a different state  $B$  (the corridor is unlit).<sup>6</sup> She could just as easily have decided upon another one of the possibilities forming her instrumental complex, such as, for instance, using normal arrows to kill the two guards – thereby, in von Wright’s terms, actuating a different branch of the possibility space of world-states, resulting in a new end state  $C$  (in which the corridor is still lit but the guards are dead).

It might certainly be, of course, that the outcome of a player’s action does not match up to her intention: the resulting game state, in this case, would be different to the one she envisioned. The action might fail: the player, for instance, might misjudge the angle at which she launches her water arrows, and, as a result, miss the flaming torches entirely, leading to a world state  $D$  (the corridor is still lit and the guards are alive, but Garrett has two less water arrows in his inventory). Alternatively, the action might succeed, bringing about the state  $B$  that was the player’s original intention, but might set in motion a different chain of cause and effect than what the player envisioned. Perhaps the player does manage to put out the torches using the water arrows, but the torch’s being put out alerts the guards to the fact that something is amiss, causing them to break out of their fixed patrol patterns and move closer to Garrett’s location. This will, of course, result in a new world-state and, hence, a new situation within which the player-as-

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<sup>6</sup> It is impossible not to note the congruence between von Wright’s system-focused action theory and Jesper Juul’s proposal for an understanding of games as *state machines*, with the constituent components of the game system being, at any given moment of play, arranged in a particular configuration, which is linked along lines of possibility to other configurations in a branching “*game tree*” of possible states (2005, 60).

Garrett, on the basis of the same “I can” and the way in which the situation is resolved into an instrumental complex of possibilities, must form a new intention, and so on.

Despite this element of unpredictability that characterizes any translation of intention into action, what is revealed here is an essential *future-orientation* or teleological character to ludic subjectivity – at least, insofar as it relates to, and is constituted by, its capacity for action.<sup>7</sup> The action of launching the water arrows at the flaming torches is therefore intended as leading to a desirable gameworld-state. Moreover, the individual action, and the intention behind it, connects in action-chains following the overarching goal-orientation of the ludic subject, as articulated in section 7.2.5. In this regard, Petri Lankoski speaks of the intention attributed to each individual in-game action as coalescing into a granular dimension of moment-to-moment “subgoals” oriented towards the achievement of overarching “regulating goals” (2011, 297) – which, in terms of the constitution of the ludic subject as being-for-itself, represent the existential projects towards which its being-in-the-world is directed.

#### 8.1.4 *The ascription of ludic action*

In all of the above, there is no question but that the player ascribes the action that is taken to herself, not to Garrett as a playable figure or a heterocosmic individual standing apart from her. It is she who has the internal consciousness of deliberating, of perceiving the instrumental complex of possibilities as *her* possibilities. Finally, it is she who ascribes to herself the intention of putting out the water arrows and, concurrently, the decision not to kill the guards.

In doing so, following Ricoeur’s argument regarding the self-ascription of action, the player is not only choosing one of the many possible world-states that might result from the range of “I can”s available to her. At the same time, she is also determining her own ludic subjectivity through its enactment: as soon as the action is taken, it becomes part of the set of actions she recognizes as her own.

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<sup>7</sup> This should serve to recall the point made in section 2.2 regarding the teleological orientation of ludic actions, as framed through the Gadamerian notion of the task-orientedness of play (1989[1960], 107).

With respect to the particular action I have used as an example here, the decision to put out the torches rather than, say, taking one's chances and dashing down the brightly-lit corridor, suggests a meticulous, careful disposition; at the same time, the decision to avoid killing the guards might reveal an ethical decision to avoid killing unless absolutely necessary, even if, as in this case, killing the guards would eliminate the risk of being caught. This moral principle, then, is ascribed to the ludic subject 'player-as-Garrett,' which, as *her* ludic subjectivity, the player relates to proprioceptively. The taking of the action, then, is inseparable from the ascription of the qualities, "*I am someone who is meticulous*" and "*I am someone who avoids killing,*" to this ludic subject.

Here the meaning of the phrase "*enactment of the ludic subject*" becomes clear, in that it is only through the player's engagement with the gameworld through the frame of the ludic subject-position that the ludic subject comes to be determined, not only as 'life story,' but also, as the above example demonstrates, as the set of defining predicates that can be extracted from such a 'life story.'

It remains necessary, however, to account for the fact that, while playing *Thief*, the player is aware that the figure she controls is the titular thief, a man named Garrett who lives in the steampunk-tinged medieval City that constitutes the game's heterocosm. The game provides the player with an array of what Uri Margolin terms "characterization statements" (1986, 206, see section 9.3.2) allowing her to build a coherent idea of who Garrett is as a person defined through a set of predicates that, very likely, does not have a great deal of overlap with the set of predicates by which the player would define herself as a person. Between his history, his voice, his physical appearance, and the actions which the game's events lead him to perform, the player builds an understanding of Garrett as someone who is meticulous, patient, cunning, quick-thinking, courageous but cautious and far from foolhardy, with a streak of sardonic cynicism and a pronounced – but not complete – amorality.

These characteristics are Garrett's, not the player's – but to play *Thief* is to take on the subjective position delineated by these attributes as your own. Certainly, some degree of role-playing – the conscious or unconscious willingness to "inhabit the

headspace of someone other” (Bowman 2010, 8) – can be a factor in this regard. Fundamentally, however, it is the mechanisms of ludic subject-positioning that lead the player to “see as” and “play as” Garrett. As I noted in section 7.2.6, it is Garrett’s physical vulnerability that necessitates caution, the impossibility of surviving a straight-up fight with multiple assailants that demands resourceful quick-thinking if a plan goes awry and Garrett is spotted, the need to sit and observe guard patrol routes from a concealed vantage-point that requires patience, the multiplicity of possible approaches and paths of traversal that demands cunning in choosing the best option for a given situation: and so on. In these ways – and in many others – it is not simply that the player consciously decides that she is going to “play as” Garrett, but that the patterns of play – and hence, the comportment and the being-in-the-gameworld – that *Thief* establishes lead the player to adopt Garrett’s subjectivity as her own, to think of herself as Garrett – and this, in a seeming paradox, without in any way erasing his status as a character, a heterocosmic individual with an identity distinct from the player’s.

The ‘self’ and ‘other’ aspects of the subjective relation, then, are, as already became apparent in the analysis of *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013-) in section 6.4, not to be understood as alternatives. Rather, ‘self’ and ‘other’ necessarily constitute the two poles of the ludic subject, as captured in the appellation ‘I-as-Garrett.’ While attention can shift from one pole to the other, the opposite is always held in suspension – the ludic subject is both *me* and *not me*.

## 8.2 From the subject to the self

In first introducing ludic subjectivity as the theme of this investigation in section 1.3, I outlined a number of distinct senses that the notion implied. I have, over the course of the investigation so far, analyzed the first two of these senses: first, delineating the ludic subject-position as a set of formal mechanisms that determine a subjective ‘opening’ onto the gameworld, and, as a result, shape the player’s mode of being-in-the-gameworld, and second, highlighting the way in which engagement with the gameworld through the

frame of the ludic subject-position enacts a ludic subject, as the lived, first-personal ‘I’ of gameworld experience.

The consideration of the ascription of action to the ludic subject has now led the investigation to the threshold of its engagement with the third and final sense of ludic subjectivity – the ludic self. Precisely in its nature *as* a subject, the ludic subject is not, itself, an object of direct perception: I experience the gameworld through it, and, on this level, it is only available to me as the subjective pole – the proprioceptive *mineness* – of gameworld experience, rather than as an object I can know in itself. However – as has already become evident – an *individual* or *person* within the ludic heterocosm is brought into view to whom all these experiences and actions are ascribed, and who is thereby defined through them. This is the *ludic self* – the ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ that is available to me, as a player, as a coherent unity that I can frame in my own intentional consciousness – or, in other words, as the self that is the object when I speak of a ‘consciousness of self’ within the gameworld.

In this section, I shall engage with the question of how a ludic self emerges out of the substrate of ludic-subjective experience. In order to do so, I shall first return to Husserl and Sartre, considering their phenomenological accounts of the question of self-consciousness. This shall lead to the notion of the “narrative self,” as it is developed in Ricoeur (1992) and Zahavi (2008) – an understanding of the constitution of the self which, through Calleja’s notion of ‘alterbiography’ (2011), will serve as an entry-point to the theorization of the emergence of the ludic self.

### 8.2.1 *Self-consciousness and the subject of experience*

As became apparent in the engagement with Edmund Husserl’s theorization of the intentional structure of consciousness in Chapter 3, if every act of thought (*cogitatio*) has its object (*cogitatum*), it is impossible to be aware of oneself, as *cogito*, except as the subject of the perception of some external object – a formulation established in opposition to the Cartesian positing of a pure, unintended *cogito* that requires no object to achieve self-awareness: “I am present to myself continually as someone who perceives, represents,

thinks, feels, desires, and so forth; and *for the most part* herein I find myself related in present experience to the fact-world which is constantly about me” (2012[1931], 54).

However, implied in this consciousness of the world and of the objects within it – a being-in-the-world that I always already am – is the realisation that I do *find myself* in this consciousness of the world: or, at a minimum, I encounter a sense of myself as a perceiving subject. As Zahavi notes, there exists an inconsistency in Husserl’s formulation of the temporal structure for this consciousness-of-self (2008, 41). At points he appears to argue that every act of consciousness consists of two simultaneous moments: a primary consciousness (of the object captured in the intentional grasp) and a secondary consciousness through which the subject perceives its own perceptions in the moment of those perceptions, as summarized in the statement that consciousness “is not only a lived-experience continually streaming along; at the same time, as it streams along it is also the consciousness of this streaming” (2001, 320).

In this approach, Husserl would appear to argue that intentional consciousness, in its grasping of the objects of the world towards which its attention is directed, is also aware of the very same grasping: “no matter what else it may be intrinsically conscious of, [consciousness] is, at the same time, consciousness of itself” (1969[1929], 273). If I see a tree in front of me, I am clearly conscious of the tree; at the same time, I am conscious of the fact of that perception, that is, that I as a subject am seeing a tree in front of me. That is: by the same phenomenological movement by which a tree appears before me as an object of my consciousness, I come into view myself as a subject perceiving this tree.

At other points, however, Husserl argues for a different temporal structure to this double consciousness, suggesting that “our experience of an ego is the result of a *reflective operation*” (Zahavi 2008, 36). In these moments, awareness of one’s own subjective existence within an intentional act is not a constituent element of that intentional act, but a supplement that manifests itself only if we choose to reflect, in retrospect, upon our own earlier intentional acts, thereby turning those subjective acts into an object of thought:

Living in the *cogito* we have not got the *cogitatio* consciously before us as an intentional object; but it can at any time become this: to its essence belongs in principle the possibility of a “reflective” directing of the mental glance towards itself naturally in the form of a new *cogitatio* and by way of a simple apprehension. In other words, every *cogitatio* can become the object of a so-called “inner perception”, and eventually the object of a reflexive valuation, an approval or a disapproval, and so forth. (2012[1931], 71)

Here, Husserl echoes Theodor Lipps, who similarly argued for the necessity of a reflective operation that makes the first-order intentional act the object intended in a second-order act:

To be sure, my own activity may become objective to me, namely, when it is no longer my present activity but when I contemplate it in retrospect. But then it is no longer immediately experienced, but only remembered in imagination. And thus it is objective. (1962[1903], 375)

It is this latter position that would come to form the basis of Sartre’s existential phenomenology of being as being-for-itself. Sartre places the question of reflection at the centre of the structure of subjectivity and of consciousness of the self. Following Husserl, Sartre grants primacy to direct, intentional experience of things in the world. On the level of the intentional act of perception, he argues, my consciousness “does not *know* my perception [...] all that there is of intention in my actual consciousness is directed toward the outside” (1966[1943], 12). Stating that reflection is a primary structure of subjectivity, then, requires, as its foundation, the basic, externally-focused intentional consciousness of a thing-in-the-world:

...reflection has no kind of primacy over the consciousness reflected-on. It is not reflection which reveals the consciousness reflected-on to itself. Quite the contrary, it is the non-reflective consciousness which renders reflection possible. (ibid., 13)

What this means is that “there is a pre-reflective cogito” (ibid.). In perceiving the tree, I might not have consciousness of myself, but I do have a *consciousness which I am conscious of*,



in the sense of being conscious of seeing the tree: “when we investigate appearing objects, we also disclose ourselves as datives of manifestation, as those to whom objects appear” (2008, 123). This is the consciousness that Zahavi attributes to the “*minimal or core self*” (ibid., 8). In such a case, “the relation between a single experience and the ego is analyzable in terms of a part-whole relationship,” and “to do egology is to integrate the cogitationes into the ego” (Ricoeur 1967, 93). The subject, as ego, thereby comes into view “as “bundle” or interweaving of psychic experiences” (Zahavi 2008, 32-33).

However, this is not sufficient to achieve a satisfying dimension of self-consciousness: as Amie Thomasson notes, “so known, the ‘I’ logically presupposed by experiences is simply the ‘pure’ Ego, myself *qua* bearer of these experiences, not myself *qua* actual human being in the world” (2005, 133). For this reason, it is necessary, at this stage, to follow Sartre in his explanation of what happens as a result of the reflective operation of subjectivity on the basis of this pre-reflective intentionality. It is this which shall, finally, lead the discussion in the direction of the *self* which forms the object of “consciousness of the self.”

### 8.2.2 *Reflection and the self*

In taking *itself* as its intentional focus – that is, setting up its first-order acts of consciousness as the intentional object of a second-order act of consciousness – the question of self-consciousness comes face-to-face with a difficulty to which I have already alluded: that of an emerging distinction between the subject that perceives and the subject that is perceived. In this apparent duality, it is only the first that can truly be called a *subject*, in the sense of a subject of consciousness: the perceived subject takes on the status of intentional object. In Sartre’s words, “consciousness is a reflection (*reflet*), but *qua* reflection it is exactly the one reflecting (*reflechissant*)” (1966[1943], 122).

This difficulty is one which this investigation has already faced before – specifically, in the emergence of the two-sided phenomenology of the body in section 5.4.5, where it became apparent that, in Ricoeur’s words, “our body is at once a body like any other (situated among other bodies) and an aspect of the self (its manner of being in

the world)” (1992, 33). Regarding the basic reflective structure of consciousness of the self, Sartre argues that this can only be overcome by positing a mode of being of the for-itself as “a duality which *is* unity, a reflection (*reflet*) which is its own reflecting (*reflection*)” (1966[1943], 123).

Crucially for the purposes of this investigation, what this involves is the setting-up of the *self*, which Sartre defines as “an indication of the subject to himself” (ibid.). The self, then, is Sartre’s name for the image of oneself one perceives in self-reflection: “the *self* refers, but it refers precisely to the *subject*. It indicates a relation between the subject and himself” (ibid.).

Far from representing the aporia of an irreconcilable duality, Sartre argues, this is, in fact, constitutive of the core structure of being-for-itself:

The *self* therefore represents an ideal distance within the immanence of the subject in relation to himself. [...] This is what we shall call presence to itself.

The law of being of the for-itself, as the ontological foundation of consciousness, is to be itself in the form of presence to itself. (ibid., 123-124)

It is this constitution of a *self* as a reflective representation of the subject of consciousness to itself that allows consciousness to be literally available *for itself*.

Moreover, it is this same mechanism which Ricoeur approaches in speaking of an “otherness of a kind that can be constitutive of selfhood as such” (1992, 3): selfhood demands the establishment of a self which is available *to me* as an object of perception, and which therefore stands against my subjective standpoint at the same time as it is, inherently, a part of my being.

The question that remains to be answered, then, is what form does this self take, and how is it constituted as the unified image of a person against the stream of non-identical, ever-changing experience? This question sets the investigation on the path which leads to the second dimension of subjectivity which Zahavi opposes to the minimal subject of first-personal experience – this is the subject-as-object, a “self” or “identity” that the subject, whether consciously or unconsciously, sets up in order to contemplate her own nature and answer the question of her own identity.

### 8.2.3 *The 'narrative self'*

Zahavi argues that it is in the direction of a concept of the self as a narrative construct (2008, 106) that one must turn in order to find an organizing principle around which to structure the self as a coherent identity: “to answer the question “Who am I?” is to tell the story of a life” (ibid., 107).

Certainly, Zahavi argues, this can only occur on the basis of a prior self-recognition as the subjective pole of a first-personal consciousness, that is, as a minimal self: “only a being with a first-person perspective could make sense of the ancient dictum “know thyself”; only a being with a first-person perspective could consider her own aims, ideals and aspirations *as* her own and tell a story about them”(ibid., 129).

At the same time as this demonstrates a necessary dependence of the narrative self upon the subject of experience, it also demonstrates a fundamental distinction between the two. Sartre wrote of the distinction between the self as the reflection and the subject as the reflected, and, hence, of the self as a representation for the subject, which cannot be known directly; in the same way, the narrative self *represents* the existential subject, but it is an interpretation of it which is neither *identical* nor *equal* to it.

In what way, then, does the mechanism of narration mediate between the first-personal subject of existential praxis and experience on the one hand, and the fixed image of the ‘narrative self’ on the other? The first step already became apparent above, at the point at which the conceptual analysis of action led to the notion of the self-ascription of one’s own actions as predicates regarding one’s identity.

It is to Ricoeur, then, that this investigation must turn in gaining a clearer notion of the narrative self. Ricoeur himself already makes the link between action and narration. Drawing on Hannah Arendt (1958), he states that “action is that aspect of human doing that calls for narration. And it is the function of narration, in its turn, to determine the ‘who of action’” (1992, 58). Of course, it is not enough to simply stop at the level of the ascription of one action after another if a coherent unity of selfhood is to

be achieved. What is necessary, Ricoeur argues, is the identification of an aspect of the subject of experience that is constant across the temporal dimension of its stream of consciousness: “is there a form of permanence in time that is a reply to the question “Who am I?”?” (ibid., 118).

Ricoeur’s answer is to resort to the conceptuality of *character*. By thus drawing on the narrative paradigm, what Ricoeur aims to do is to apply to the stream of lived experience unified only in its *mineness* the qualities of “unity, internal structure, and completeness” (ibid., 143) that define a narrative, in the classic Aristotelian sense (2000[c.335BC]), as an ordered sequence of actions and events – and thereby to locate a “concordant discordance” in lived experience (ibid.).

As a result, Ricoeur argues, *character*, as an image of the self that ascribes to it a “set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized” (ibid., 121), results from a two-way process:

...it is formed in accordance with a twofold movement of ascending complexification starting from basic actions and from practices, and of descending specification starting from the vague and mobile horizon of ideals and projects in light of which a human life apprehends itself in its oneness. (1992, 158)

In other words, I ascribe to myself my actions and experiences, but, at the same time, I contextualize these within the more-or-less distinct overarching ideas I have regarding who I am.

#### 8.2.4 Calleja and the notion of “alterbiography”

Game studies already provides us with a way to theorize the mechanism by which ludic-subjective experience in the gameworld can serve as the foundation of such a ‘narrative self’: this is Calleja’s notion of the *alterbiography*, as referring to “the ongoing narrative generated during interaction with a game environment” (2011, 124). According to this

understanding, the sequence of actions resulting from the player's engagement with the gameworld is interpreted by the player as the coherent narrative of an active subject – literally, the writing of an alternate life.

Calleja suggests that the alterbiography resulting from the player's engagement with the gameworld can be framed in one of two ways: either as an *alterbiography of self*, with the player herself being the subject and protagonist of the narrative (“I unlocked a hidden chamber in the ancient tomb”), or an *alterbiography of an entity*, where this role shifts to the heterocosmic character being played (“*Lara Croft* unlocked a hidden chamber in the ancient tomb”) (ibid., 125-126).<sup>8</sup>

In this way, Calleja's development of the notion of alterbiography not only accounts for the cognitive mechanism by which the player apprehends her own actions as a ludic subject as cohering into a narratively organized identity. It is also aware of the double-sidedness of the identity relation between the player and the playable figure against which the enactment of a subjectivity within the gameworld takes place. In other words, the notion of the alterbiography not only offers a description of what is entailed in the objective relation to the playable figure, it also accounts for the two dimensions of the objective relation as both a relation of self and of other.

Having said that, the notion of alterbiography, as useful as it is, can only take this investigation so far. Calleja notes that “alterbiography is a cyclical process afforded by the representational, mechanical, and medium-specific qualities of a game” (ibid., 124). This is key: in the figure game form, the leap from a subjective to an objective grasp of the self does not happen through an internal act of reflection that turns the self into an object of thought. Instead, the leap is produced by the audiovisual medial apparatus of the game presenting the player with a ready-made mediation of her own ludic subjectivity, already encoded according to formal, generic and aesthetic conventions and

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<sup>8</sup> A third category that Calleja identifies, the *alterbiography of miniatures*, falls outside the remit of this investigation, in that it describes “situations in game environments in which the players can control several entities at once” (2011, 125), and, as such, does not refer to engagement with the gameworld through an embodied ludic subjectivity in the context of a figure game.

structured into a narratively meaningful form.<sup>9</sup> However, Calleja's development of the notion does not go further either in theorizing these qualities, or in offering a conceptualization of the relation between the player's first-order experience in the gameworld as a ludic subject, and the second order of experience in which this gameworld experience is re-presented in a narrative form.

In order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the objective relation – and of the presentation of a ludic self that it allows for – it is necessary to return to the notion of the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement, and to focus on the representational strategies by which the player's first-order experience of the gameworld as the ludic subject is reframed as second-order experience in the textual unfolding of the game artefact perceived from the external perspective.

### 8.3 The presentation of the ludic self

When articulating the double perspectival structure as the primary axis of ludic engagement in section 2.4, I paused to highlight the implications of this experiential structure upon the ludic subject that constitutes the theme of this investigation. The insight gained at that point was that, firstly, as embodied in the playable figure, the ludic subject constitutes the subject-position internal to the gameworld to which *gameworld experience* – that is, experience of the gameworld as an existential world *for me* – pertains. Secondly, the same ludic subject, as taken on as 'I-in-the-gameworld' and as constituting my internal perspectival standpoint, is itself framed as an object of perception through the external perspective which I, as player, inhabit simultaneously.

The question of the two-sided engagement with the ludic subject that results from this double perspectival structure was again brought to the fore of the analysis in section 6.2.2, while developing the *perspectival distinction* as a determining principle in the

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<sup>9</sup> This observation broaches the question of narrative in relation to games, which – needless to point out – has been a point of contention throughout the history of game studies. I will address this question directly in section 9.1.1, by way of clearing the ground for theorizing narrative character as the structuring principle for the textualization of the ludic self.

player's relation to the playable figure. There, a line was drawn between the subjective and the objective relation to the playable figure, which was conceptualized as intersecting with, and cutting across, the distinction between the self- and other-status of the playable figure. In tackling the second dimension of subjectivity, then, it is necessary to move from the analysis of the subjective relation to that of the objective relation. In terms of the double perspectival structure, what is entailed is a shift from considering ludic subjectivity as it constitutes the internal perspective to considering how it is itself constituted in the external perspective.

### *8.3.1 From the internal to the external perspective*

I have already discussed at length what is entailed in the notion of the internal standpoint, or, as I have termed it, the ludic subject-position. In section 7.2, I considered the formal mechanisms through which it is established. In section 7.3, through an engagement with *Minecraft* and *Proteus* (Key and Kanaga 2013), I demonstrated how these formal mechanisms coalesce into the specification of a particular mode of being-in-the-gameworld, and, hence, into a determination of the player's comportment towards the gameworld and her subjective being within it. Finally, in section 8.1, I focused on the enactment of this ludic subjectivity – detailing how, through the taking up of the ludic subject-position and the extension of its proper being-in-the-gameworld in the direction of a project of action, and on the basis of the proprioceptive ownership of the subjective gameworld experiences and actions pertaining to this ludic subject-position, the player enacts an existential praxis in the gameworld within which an oscillation between the status of 'self' and of 'other' can be witnessed.

It is now time to shift attention to the external perspective. In the light of the discussions regarding the phenomenology of subjectivity and self-knowledge, which I have just presented, the implications of this perspectival shift are hard to overstate. If, from the internal standpoint of the ludic subject, the player acts as 'herself,' performing actions within the gameworld that are 'hers,' in the full phenomenal and existential sense discussed above, then, from the external standpoint, what the player perceives is a

representation of her own actions. In other words, having taken up the ludic subject as 'I,' and therefore taken possession of her actions and experiences as the ludic subject, she now *sees herself* on screen. It is only necessary to recall Merleau-Ponty's comment that "I should need the use of a second body" – implying a second perspectival standpoint – in order to perceive my own embodied being as object (2002[1945], 104). By this understanding, the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement sets up the player's own body as the 'second body' to the 'first body' of the ludic subject as invested in the playable figure.

I shall illustrate this by returning to Aarseth's *Tomb Raider* example. In terms of the player's engagement with Lara Croft as a playable figure, this means that, on a first order of experience, by engaging in the subjective relation – thereby becoming 'I-as-Lara-in-the-gameworld' – I have the experience of *being* this ludic subject. In more concrete terms, I have the sensation of deciding that it is necessary for me, to complete my overarching goal of getting to the end of the level, to perform a jump across a ravine. I have the awareness of making a calculated comparison between the span of the ravine and the distance I believe myself to be capable of jumping – in other words, I apply the 'I can' which I have adopted in taking on Lara as my body-in-the-gameworld as the structuring principle by which I attempt to map out an instrumental complex of possible actions, and into which, then, the ravine must be brought into view as either 'jumpable' or 'not jumpable'. I am aware of weighing the likelihood of my making the jump against the "risk of *falling down* the ravine" (Klevjer 2012, 18), knowing that, in its passive aspect, my body-in-the-gameworld is *subject to* both gravity and taking damage from falls, and is therefore unlikely to survive the drop in the case of an unsuccessful jump: in other words, I know I am in thrall to the "gameplay condition," meaning that the consequences of my decisions will be upheld by the ludic materiality of the game if I were to fail to make the jump (Leino 2010, 101). Against all these considerations, finally, I am also aware of taking the decision to jump, and then performing the mental act which causes me to press X on the Playstation controller, an action I, as player, interpret not as 'pressing X' but as 'jumping'. Rendered in terms of the conceptual analysis of



action described above, I can say that, on the basis of the motive of getting to the ancient treasure in the tomb I am currently raiding, I formed the intention of jumping across the ravine, which I put into action through extending my initiative into the gameworld, thereby making one of the possibilities of bodily action forming my instrumental complex *my own*, and, consequently, adding to the definition of the ludic subjectivity I enact through my existential praxis – perhaps, for instance, as a daredevil who is not afraid of risking everything on a near-impossible jump. All of these I experience as *my* acts of consciousness – they are “*known without observation*”, to return to Anscombe’s term. “I feel *myself* active,” and the attendant sensations of *being active* belong “to no object that stands apart from me” (Lipps 1962[1903], 376)

At the same time, however, I also have the separate, but interlinked, sensation of watching a textualized presentation of this on-screen figure, in whom I am invested subjectively, hesitating at the edge of the ravine, performing the jump, nearly falling to her death but *just* managing to grab onto the opposite rim and pull herself up to safety. I witness this, not as the actions of another, but, as *my* actions, having their roots in my subjectivity and enacting my initiative upon the gameworld. In other words, I have the experience both of *performing* these actions and of *witnessing* them; I have both *internal* and *external* cognition of these actions.

In practice, what this means is that, as Bob Rehak argues, “avatars reduplicate and render in visible form their players’ actions” (2003, 107), and that, as a result, “as we play we also watch ourselves play; video games are by turns, and even simultaneously, participatory and spectatorial” (*ibid.*, 119). This observation is one that is repeated in Marie-Laure Ryan’s observation that “players are not only agents but also spectators of their own pretended actions” (2006, 190), as well as in Emma Westecott’s argument that the screen-based mediality of digital games means that “the player is always audience to her own play act” (2009, 2). Moreover, as I have already pointed out in section 2.4.4, this aligns figure games with the aesthetics of interactive digital art, in which, according to Katja Kwastek, “one’s own actions become available as an object of reflection” (2013, 163).

This is the fundamental aesthetic quality of what, in terms of the dimensions of the player-figure relation, I have termed the objective relation of self: namely, that this dimension of the relation accounts for the fact that the player is presented with a representation of her own ludic subjectivity. As such, it establishes a mechanism of *autoscopy*, to borrow, following Stephan Günzel (2013) a term from psychology and cognitive science which refers to “a loosely related complex of experiences in which one sees (or experiences) a “double” as external to one’s current vantage point” (Mishara 2009, 591).

Relating this back to the twofold understanding of subjectivity, and the opening of the first-personal subject of experience onto selfhood through the mechanisms of self-awareness in experience, it becomes evident that it is precisely through the establishment of this autoscopic aesthetic relation that the player’s ludic subjectivity can come to be constituted in her experience as a coherent *ludic self*, an object of her own self-awareness. In order to better articulate the formation of the ludic self on the foundation of ludic subjectivity, then, I shall move on to a closer examination of the formal structures determining the objective relation to the playable figure, and, hence, to the ludic subject.

### 8.3.2 *The objective relation to the enacted ludic subject*

The idea that videogames establish a mechanism by which the actions of the ludic subject may become mediated objects of perception is, of course, not a novel one. The ‘instant replay’ function, by which the player’s complete sequence of ludic actions is replayed in retrospect, has featured in videogames at least since the arcade game *Food Fight* (General Computer Corporation 1983), and is particularly common in racing games and sport simulations. As such, there is no question that playing a videogame *can* result in a representation of events that the player, or other people, can be the audience for. Already, even in this detached mode of *a posteriori* representation, a form of autoscopy makes itself apparent: in watching a replay of her performance in a race in *Gran Turismo* (Sony Computer Entertainment 1997), for example, the player will associate her

perception of the represented action with her memory of her subjective consciousness of performing the action: seeing the representation of a decisive overtaking manoeuvre through which she gained the lead, she will recall the proprioceptive sensations of performing that action – as in the example of *Tomb Raider* above, the mental acts of weighing one's option, taking a decision, exercising one's initiative, and so on.

However, the aesthetic structure which is pointed out by Rehak, Ryan and Westecott, and which, following Günzel, I have labelled with the term *autoscopy*, is not one which occurs separately from, and subsequent to, the act of playing, but is rather an intrinsic dimension of ludic experience as adhering to the double perspectival structure. Even this suggestion – that the double perspectival structure of the figure game presents the player with a mediation of her own ludic subjectivity – is not surprising: this was evident, in fact, at the very start of this investigation, being manifest in the opening sentences of *Adventure* (Crowther and Woods 1976).

Of course, the distinction between the player's actions as the ludic subject and their representation is easily made in the case of the text-based adventure game. This is due to their turn-based temporal structure: first, the player inputs a command ('takes an action'), then, subsequently, the game provides, as output, a description of the results of her action. Conversely, the near-immediate simultaneity of action and representation of action in most situations of audiovisual videogame play might tend to obscure the fundamental experiential distinction between the first-person, subjective experience of performing the action and the simultaneous, second-order experience of objectively perceiving a second-order representation of the same action.

The representation of the enacted ludic subject becomes more foregrounded when there is a more prominent mismatch between the time of this enactment, on the moment-by-moment basis of the experience of taking action, and the time in which is mediated. This is the case, to varying degrees, in games in which, as in the case of the text adventure genre, the player actions follow a turn-based temporality, where, usually, the player sees her actions being performed at a time subsequent to and separate from the time of her performing them. Battle sequences in the Japanese role-playing game

genre, such as *Final Fantasy VIII* (Squaresoft 1999), are an example of this: often the player, having selected an attack, is then at leisure to sit back and take in the sometimes quite lengthy animation by which ‘her’ action is performed.<sup>10</sup> It is also the case in certain real-time games - prominent examples of this include the special combos in fighting games such as *Street Fighter IV* (Capcom 2008), which result in attacks that are delivered through elaborate animations that extend long after the player is done inputting the sequence of button-presses that triggers the animation.

In both of these situations, the player’s perception of the mediated action is temporally dissociated from her subjective experience of performing those actions, and there is no longer any danger of the second-order objective experience of the performed actions being effaced. In fact, at the extreme which these examples represent, the experiential association of the performed action and the perceived action might be severed entirely, with the player no longer being able to associate with the action she sees the playable figure perform as being her own. In such situations, the objective relation of self gives way entirely to the objective relation of other which is always already the other side of the same coin, and the aesthetic effect is no longer one defined by an autoscopic quality, but by a relation to a *character*, as the representation of a heterocosmic individual distinct from the player (see Chapter 9).

Staying away from such extreme cases, what is established through the double perspectival structure – as, through the example of *Tomb Raider*, we have seen it manifest – is a dynamic interplay between the player’s enacted, embodied existence in the gameworld as subject and as object. Following the conceptualization of action in its phenomenological aspect, it is not simply the physical dimension of action in its externality as an event in the gameworld that is represented. Instead, what is represented to me as player is my action *for me* as ludic subject, in its springing-up from my being-for-itself in-the-gameworld as ludic subject. It is this subjectivity itself which becomes objectified in the form of a ludic self.

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<sup>10</sup> *Final Fantasy VIII* features the longest attack animation in any *Final Fantasy* game. The attack in question is the Eden summon, whose associated animation lasts one minute and forty seconds.

It has already become apparent that the formal mechanism by which this is rendered possible is the distribution of the player's experience across the two standpoints constituting the double perspectival structure – the player adopts both the perspective of a ludic subject and that of the player outside the game (see Fig. 2.2). In practical terms, then, the double perspectival structure of ludic experience as it pertains to the figure game can be understood as the simultaneous co-presence of two distinct gazes – that of the ludic subject, and that of the player – both of which can be said to belong, in different ways, to the player. The ludic subject looks out at the gameworld, and the player looks onto the ludic subject.

In some cases, as in games that use a first-person point-of-view, the two gazes are superimposed, and the distance between the two is at a minimum – which is not to say that the gap between the two is effaced. Recall the point made in section 5.4.3 in the context of Olli Tapio Leino's phenomenological analysis of the experience of the flashbang grenade explosion in *Far Cry* (Crytek 2004) (Leino 2010, 172-177). Though *Far Cry* makes use of a first-person visual point-of-view, at the point at which the flashbang grenade 'blinds' the ludic subject, it remains possible for me as a player to 'see my blindness' from the external standpoint.

In order to gain a better understanding of the interrelation of the two gazes, I shall turn to another example. In *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts 1998), the player's external perspective on the protagonist, Manny Calavera, is framed in fixed, pre-rendered third-person cinematic angles that befit the game's *noir*-influenced generic styling. At the same time, the player is invited to share Manny's own subjective gaze as distinct from this visual point-of-view. When Manny is in close proximity to an object of interest, his head will turn towards the object, leading the player to follow his line of sight, and, consequently, to see the object being highlighted through Manny's eyes, from his standpoint as a ludic subject: that is, figure out how it might be of use with a view towards the goals defining Manny as a ludic subject, which, of course, are also, in the 'self' dimension of the player-figure relation, the player's goals once she has taken on this ludic subjectivity as 'herself'. In Fig. 8.1, for example, Manny's head turns to take in the

bottle of Scotch, directing the player's attention, from her ludic-subjective standpoint, towards it, and considering its possibilities within the instrumental complex of her possible actions. Once she has oriented herself to look at the bottle through Manny's eyes, figuratively speaking, the player is engaging in the subjective relation of other, wherein the subjective perspective she towards the gameworld remains marked as being that of an other, but is nonetheless taken on as *her* subjective standpoint towards the world.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 8.1.** *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts 1999): the gaze of the ludic subject.

In order to conceptualize the experiential implications of the two interrelating gazes as shaped by the double perspectival structure of the player's intentional orientation towards the game, I shall turn to Vivian Sobchack and her development of a phenomenology of cinematic perception. Her argument is that what can be identified as the basic unit of cinematic perception operates according to a double movement. By her formulation, cinematic experience can be understood as “*the perception* (act of

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<sup>11</sup> It is instructive to recall the analysis of the ‘look at’ command in *Kentucky Route Zero* performed in section 6.4.2.

consciousness) *of* (mediation) *expression* (object of consciousness) *and/as the expression* (act of consciousness) *of* (mediation) *perception* (object of consciousness)” (1992, 18-19).

This formulation deserves to be unpacked in greater detail. The structure mapped out here is built on a fundamental reversibility in the relation between *perception* and *expression* that gives us two formulations, each the inverse of the other:

*i) the perception of expression*

*ii) the expression of perception*

The first statement positions the (viewer’s) act of perception as an intentional act, with the film as the intended object that is perceived through this act of consciousness. The second statement, on the other hand, states that film expresses a perception of the world. In other words, film establishes a phenomenological structure by which an original act of perception is expressed (through the formal and cultural codes that determine the process of mediation) and becomes itself an object of perception.

It is in this sense that Sobchack argues that film is “as much a *viewing subject* as it is also a *visible* and *viewed object*” (ibid., 21-22), and that, as a result, “cinematic vision in the film experience is articulated by *both* the film *and* the spectator simultaneously engaged in *two* quite distinctly located visual acts that meet on shared ground but never identically occupy it” (ibid., 23).

Sobchack’s unpacking of the phenomenological structure of film experience therefore restates, according to the formula of the intentional model of consciousness, the conclusion this investigation had reached in section 4.1, when investigating the noetic mode of presentation in non-ergodic works – namely, that an essential duality exists between the represented perceiving consciousness and the perspective of its presentation on the level of textual discourse.

A comparison between the scene in *Grim Fandango* and the shot from *Maniac* (Khalfoun 2012) analyzed in section 4.1.6 (see Fig. 4.2) is particularly demonstrative in this regard. There, I argued that, in the reception of the film, an absolute distinction was made between the subjective standpoint of Frank, whose perceptual focus is the dolphin-shaped ornament on the bathroom shelf belonging to Lucie, whom he has just

murdered, and the subjective standpoint of the viewer, whose focus is more likely to be Frank's reflection in the mirror.

My analysis of the sequence in *Grim Fandango* illustrated in Fig. 8.1 might, on the face of it, appear to follow a similar structure. Again, Manny's subjective orientation towards the bottle of Scotch appears to set up his subjective perception in opposition to that in which, through the fixed cinematic third-person point-of-view, the player is located. However, while the phenomenological structure of two distinct visual acts resulting from two different subject-positions is identical, the difference is that, in *Grim Fandango*, it is the player who inhabits both positions. As such, in Sobchack's terms, the player is both the one whose perception is expressed, and the one who perceives the expression of (her own) perception.

There is another point to be made regarding the objective relation to the enacted ludic subject, and it is hinted at in Sobchack's usage here of the term "expression". I have so far discussed the basic phenomenological structure of the mechanism of autoscopy which is the result of the objective relation. However, in doing so, I have taken for granted the givenness of ludic subjectivity as an object in the external perspective. Such an approach omits a vital aspect of the process, as Sobchack's formulation highlights. Applying her insight to the double perspectival structure of the figure game form, it becomes evident that, for the perception of the ludic subject to *itself* be perceived, it must be expressed in the form of a textualized representation – it is this representation which is the object of the player's external perception. The next step, then, is to focus on the representational mechanisms by which the ludic subject – not just as a figure, but in its subjectivity as enacted – is represented to the player in the external perspective.

### 8.3.3 *The mediation of the enacted ludic subject*

When first articulating the double perspectival structure and its importance to the aesthetic form of the figure game, I made the point that, in addition to its other conceptual advantages, the organization of the aesthetics of the figure game form according to this structure allows the question of ludic subjectivity to neatly sidestep the



trap of the “immersive fallacy” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 450). This is due to the fact that, while the sense of being-in-the-gameworld resulting from the adoption of the internal standpoint of the ludic subject might indeed operate according to “the perceptual illusion of non-mediation” (Lombard and Ditton 1997, 9), and thereby conveys a sense of being-there that, as I noted in Chapter 4, has been discussed in terms of notions such as immersion and presence, it is, at the same time, ‘bracketed’ through being itself framed in the external perspective, and, as a result, is caught up in the signification of the game as textual artefact.

This results in what might appear to be something of a paradox. In constituting the ludic subject-position as a cognitive ‘opening’ onto the gameworld for the player, the internal perspective, almost by definition, operates according to a logic of mediation that falls under Jay Bolter and David Grusin’s notion of *transparent immediacy* (1999, 23), according to which the medium of presentation engages in an effacement of its own mechanisms of mediation in order to provide the illusion of an unmediated ‘window’ onto the domain of representation.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the external perspective, as I argued in section 2.4.3, frames the game, and the presentation of the player’s own enacted ludic subjectivity, as a textual artefact. On this perspectival dimension, the game does not operate through an illusion of transparency – on the contrary, in many cases, the mode of mediation at work is that of *hypermediacy*, “in which representation is conceived of not as window on to the world, but rather as “windowed” itself” (ibid., 34), being foregrounded through the self-aware deployment of established and recognized formal and stylistic modes of representation.

This was already apparent in the scene from *Grim Fandango* I considered above, where, as I have already mentioned, the external perspective the player is granted upon her ludic subjectivity as Manny is constructed according to the visual tropes of *film noir*, including a preference for “oblique and vertical lines” and “expressionist lighting” that

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<sup>12</sup> This inevitably recalls Marie-Laure Ryan’s observation, discussed in section 3.3.5, that, in the mode of heterocosmic representation, “the text is apprehended as a window on something that exists in time and space well beyond the window frame” (2001a, 93). At the same time, it should not obscure the fact, acknowledged in section 4.3.1, that ‘immediacy’ or ‘realism’ are always inevitably codified functions of textuality and representation, rather than a denial or an escape from mediation.

falls into the frame “in such odd shapes – jagged trapezoids, obtuse triangles, vertical slits” (Schrader 1972, 10-11).

Retracting my steps further, to the first example I gave in the preceding section – that of replay modes in racing games such as *Gran Turismo* – the same observation becomes apparent, albeit with a different cultural frame of reference. Rather than making use of the limitless visualization and perspectival possibilities inherent in representing events in a virtual environments, the default presentation of these replays is constructed around a sequence of fixed camera positions that are clearly intended to be received ‘as if’ they were an actual televised broadcast of a motorsports event. From playing the role of a racing driver during the course of the race, the player switches, while watching the replay, to the role of a sports fan viewing the race on TV from home – with the difference, of course, that it is her own being and actions as ludic subject, as represented, that she spectates upon.

Examples of this phenomenal structure, and its attendant aesthetic effects, abound. In his analysis of the *Silent Hill* series, Bernard Perron demonstrates the games’ adherence to the conventions of the survival horror genre as inaugurated by *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames 1992). In this regard, one of the primary formal characteristics of the genre, which the *Silent Hill* games exploit to the hilt, is the organization of the player’s visual point-of-view as a sequence of discrete third-person camera positions selected for cinematic effect. In an in-depth analysis of the scene in *Silent Hill* (Konami 1999) in which the playable figure, Harry Mason, follows the non-player character Cheryl into a dark alley, Perron examines the way in which the player-as-Harry’s traversal of the confined space is framed through a sequence of mobile high-angle camera positions (2012, 81-83). Not only does this have an effect on the player’s internal perspective on the gameworld – in that, as I noted in section 7.2.2, it narrows the field of this perspective and limits the player’s knowledge of her surroundings – it also frames the visual presentation of the external perspective as “remediated cinematic” one (ibid., 21), which also has the added effect of framing the player in the relation of a cinematic viewer towards her own ludic subjectivity: “you actually see your player character [...] being

(b)eaten to death in a corner and being dragged along the ground by a zombie” (ibid., 22).

Nor is this in any way an isolated case, or limited to the survival horror genre. To return to a game I have already referred to in Chapter 7, in *Ico* (Team Ico 2001), the third-person camera angles favour distant long shots that not only emphasize the smallness of the titular ludic subject against the vast architecture of the crumbling castle in which he is trapped, but also suggest the watching presence of the ancient spectral forces haunting the castle: another example of what the film theorist Carol J. Clover terms the “*predatory gazing*” that is a common formal technique of horror cinema (1995, 193).<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, it is also possible to identify examples that aim at a completely different aesthetic effect. In *Jet Set Radio* (Smilebit 2000), the player takes the role of a member of a rebellious skater gang fighting oppressive police forces in a colourful, cel-shaded heterocosmic representation of Tokyo. The primary objective in each level is that of spraying a graffiti tag at fixed strategic points. Whenever the player reaches one of these points, she must successfully complete a minigame involving precise directional movements of the Dreamcast controller’s analogue stick to simulate the movements of the spray can. These sequences are presented as a rapidly-edited montage of swooping camera angles, timed to the player’s movements of the analogue stick and accentuated by musical flourishes, inevitably bringing to mind the hyper-kinetic visual language of the contemporary pop music video.

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<sup>13</sup> Illustrative examples of this trope at work in horror and science-fiction cinema – where it is often wedded to a monstrous or otherwise inhuman subjective point-of-view – include the machinic vision of the titular android in *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984), the infra-red vision of the alien hunter in *Predator* (McTiernan 1986), the extreme wide-angle vision of the xenomorph in *Alien<sup>3</sup>* (Fincher 1993) or the fast-motion tracking shots that send the camera flying through the streets of Victorian London before arriving at Mina Murray’s bedroom window to signal the vampire’s supernatural presence in *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (Coppola 1992). So familiar are the visual properties of such shots that they can be used to imply an observing presence even when none has been otherwise established: the lurking, low-angle shot that creeps up on Betty (Naomi Watts) and Rita (Laura Elena Harding) when they arrive at the Club Silencio in *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch 2001) is a perfect illustration of this point. The examples from *Silent Hill* and *Ico* would seem to adhere to this latter example, adding to the general atmosphere of dread by making the ludic subject an object of predatory vision without directly specifying a particular subject of this vision.

In all of the examples covered above, then – *Grim Fandango*, *Gran Turismo*, *Silent Hill*, *Ico* and *Jet Set Radio* alike – what is noteworthy is not only the fact of the establishment of a perspective upon the enacted ludic subject that is distinct from the ludic subject’s own perspective upon the gameworld, but also the fact that this external perspective encodes the representation of the ludic subject within a textuality that foregrounds its organization according to the formal, stylistic and iconographic codes of existing genres and cultural forms – in the examples I have presented, *film noir*, live TV motorsports coverage, the horror film and the music video. Moreover, this appropriation and foregrounded reference to recognizable modes of presentation also extends to borrowings from within the videogame form itself – the analysis of *Kentucky Route Zero* in section 6.4 highlighted the indebtedness of its representation to the visual and formal techniques of a number of distinct historical videogame traditions.

To return to Bolter and Grusin, it might be concluded that the interplay between the internal and the external perspectives of ludic engagement thereby enshrines “the tension between regarding a visual space as mediated and as a “real” space that lies beyond mediation” (1999, 41). At the same time as the internal perspective of the ludic subject-position creates an ‘opening’ through which the player has access to first-order experience of the gameworld – and hence to the sense of being-in-the-gameworld that forms the core of ludic subjectivity – her enactment of this same ludic subjectivity is encoded, as, in Sobchack’s terms, an “*expression of perception*,” on the level of textual artifactuality in which the game appears to her from the external standpoint.

#### **8.4 Case study: Narration in *Bastion***

The action role-playing game *Bastion* (Supergiant Games 2011) presents us with a situation in which the textual representative strategies by which the autoscopic aesthetic function is established – and a presentation of the player’s ludic self is constructed – are foregrounded to an exceptional degree. Having said that, it must be stressed that its exceptionality lies not in kind but in degree, with *Bastion* simply laying an added emphasis

on a dimension of ludic experience which, as I have argued, is intrinsic to the double perspectival structure of such experience. As such, in providing an analysis of the ways in which *Bastion* constructs a presentation of the player's enacted ludic subjectivity, my aim is to shed light on the fundamental formal and phenomenological structures determining the aesthetics of subjectivity at work in the form of the figure game.

#### 8.4.1 *Narration and the playable figure*

*Bastion* opens with an image of the Kid, the otherwise-unnamed playable figure, asleep on a mattress in what appear to be the remains of a small room, floating in mid-air against an indistinct backdrop (see Fig. 8.2). The scene is viewed from the isometric perspective used throughout the entire game, about which I shall make two observations. First, recalling the discussion on visual point-of-view in section 7.2.2, it is easy to observe that the point-of-view here is not coterminous with the spatial standpoint of the ludic subject,<sup>14</sup> and that, as such, the separation of the two gazes resulting from the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement is foregrounded to a greater degree here than it would be in, say, *Minecraft* or *Proteus*.

The other observation to be made regarding this point-of-view is that it adheres to the formal conventions of a videoludic tradition that stretches back to the arcade game *Zaxxon* (Sega 1982), and that has grown into a firmly established visual trope of videogame presentation. More specifically, through its usage in games such as *Diablo* (Blizzard Entertainment 1996), *Titan Quest* (Iron Lore Entertainment 2006) and *Torchlight* (Runic Games 2009), this particular isometric mode of visual presentation is one which, within the contemporary gaming landscape, is particularly associated with the action role-playing game genre (ARPG) to which *Bastion* belongs. As such, the mode of visual presentation of the gameworld – and of the player's subjective actions within that gameworld – is instantly familiar as a conventionalized one that adheres to generic expectations.

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<sup>14</sup>Having said that, it is certainly, to return to Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå's term, a vagrant perspective, in that the camera is fixed on the Kid and follows him as he traverses the gameworld, rather than revealing the entirety of the gameworld at any given time.



**Figure 8.2.** *Bastion* (Supergiant Games 2011): the opening scene.

As this opening image comes into view, a voice-over narrator sets the scene:

Proper story's supposed to start at the beginning. Ain't so simple with this one.  
Now here's a kid whose world got all twisted, leaving him stranded on a rock in  
the sky.

At the end of this brief introductory sequence, the player is given control. With the Kid starting off asleep in bed, the only action the player can perform is to get out of bed, an action performed simply through the player's inputting a command for the figure to move in any direction. Of course, this apparently simple action is significant on a number of levels. In purely ludic terms, it is the moment of the player's taking control of the figure, and, hence, it represents the coming-into-being of the ludic subject 'I-as-the-Kid'. On a narrative dimension, it is the first step in the hero's journey. On the level of the analysis of action and the subject, it represents the first statement of initiative, and the first self-determining ascription that begins the constitution of the ludic self that will be played out in the player's engagement with the game.

As soon as the action has been performed, however, the player does not only, as she would expect, see the Kid on-screen get out of bed and take a first step. This would constitute the baseline mode of representation of the player's action that she would

expect to encounter, and that, in its conventionality, barely registers as an act of representation. What actually happens in this case is that, at the same time as the player sees the Kid, now identified as ‘I’, perform the action on-screen, the same narrator who introduced the scene describes the action: “He gets up.”

This is the point at which it becomes apparent that *Bastion* makes use of a second, simultaneous avenue of mediation, translating the ludic subject’s gameworld actions into an ongoing, on-the-fly verbal narrative. This unfamiliar mode of representation draws attention to the basic, underlying fact of the autoscopic form inherent in the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement – foregrounding the fact that, simultaneously with the player’s performing of an action as ludic subject, she is also the audience for a re-presentation of these actions, in this case structured into a coherent narrative along codes familiar from cinematic voice-over conventions.

Though the use of voice-over narration is not common in games, it is not unheard of - a roll-call of games making use of voice-over narration during ludic engagement would include, among others, *Duke Nukem 3D* (3D Realms 1996), *Thief: The Dark Project*, *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment 2001) and *No More Heroes* (Grasshopper Manufacture 2010). The games listed here all feature vocal interjections of varying frequency on the part of the playable figure in its dimension of character, effectively acting, in each case, as – to refer to Gérard Genette’s taxonomy of narrative voice – an *autodiegetic* narrator (1980, 245) recounting their own story. In none of these cases is the first-person narrator engaged in describing the actions the player performs as a ludic subject. Instead, their speech, in general, is geared towards providing either background context or idiosyncratic commentary upon the events the player-as-ludic-subject is either witness to or participating in – in other words, specifying their own perspective as distinct from that of the player.

One could also note that what all these games have in common is that they invite the player to take on ludic subjects that are particularly strongly determined in their character dimension, and that, to varying degrees, are, at a minimum, questionable on moral grounds – the list above features, in order, a hyper-violent, misogynistic parody of

the self-absorbed male action hero, a professional thief, a renegade, drug-addicted detective and a would-be hitman. Against this observation, it might be surmised that the function of the autodiegetic narration in each of these cases is that of keying the relation as a subjective relation of other, thereby allowing it to be placed at a safe, ironic distance from the player.<sup>15</sup>

*Bastion's* narrator, on the other hand, is a third-person narrator, speaking of the Kid from an external perspective, and therefore more transparently establishing a perspective *upon* the ludic subjectivity of the player-as-the-Kid – though, to refer back to the discussion on focalization in section 4.1.2, the narrator also grants the player insights into the Kid's inner life, crossing over into, in Genette's terms, internal focalization (ibid., 190).

An hour or two into the game, the narrating voice is revealed to belong to a non-player-character the Kid encounters – the Stranger (later in the game, his name is given as Rucks). An important point to note regarding the attribution of this narration to this heterocosmic figure is that his constitution as a character – both in terms of his vocal delivery (deep, gravelly voice, a terse but poetic manner of speaking) and in his appearance (his costume, handlebar moustache, and so on) – mark him out as a familiar figure, a trope of the Western genre in cinema. In fact, he recalls one character in particular: the narrator in *The Big Lebowski* (Coen Brothers 1998), played by Sam Elliott, who is also referred to as the Stranger, and who has been acknowledged as an influence on the design of *Bastion's* narration by the game's creators.<sup>16</sup> What should be noted, of course, is that the Stranger in the Coens' film is already a character that is presented as a conscious pastiche of an instantly recognizable cinematic type. *Bastion's* narrator, in other

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<sup>15</sup> There is also another situation in which *Bastion's* usage of on-the-fly narration is anticipated. The reference being made here is to sports games: taking EA Sports' *FIFA* series as an example, every instalment since *FIFA 97* (1996) has featured such a commentary. What makes the parallel interesting is that, in both cases, the player's actions are re-mediated according to the established formal and cultural conventions of a pre-existing mediality. Just as *Bastion* references the formal conventions of cinema, *FIFA* references the conventions of the televised live sports broadcast. However, given that, in the *FIFA* games, the player takes on a transcendent ludic subjectivity incorporating, under its wing, the whole eleven-man football team, it falls outside the remit of this investigation's engagement with the aesthetics of embodied ludic subjectivity.

<sup>16</sup> In an interview, the game's sound director, Darren Korb, makes the influence explicit (*Indiegames.com*, 2011).



words, is a pastiche of a pastiche – he brings a whole generic context along with him. In aesthetic terms, having such a narrator verbally represent the actions constituting the player’s enacted ludic subjectivity places this subjectivity within a familiar, and immediately meaningful, generic context, with the result that their significance can be reinterpreted according to the iconographies and cultural codes by which this context is defined.

#### 8.4.2 *The formal functions of the narration and the ludic self*

As the player continues her engagement with *Bastion*, venturing out of the Kid’s bedroom into the world which, in a striking visual trick, constitutes itself beneath his feet as he travels through it,<sup>17</sup> the narrator continues to present, and to give meaning to, the player’s ludic-subjective actions. The next step, then, is to lay out, by means of a textual analysis, the functions by which this narration structures its presentation of the enacted ludic subjectivity of the player-as-the-Kid in such a way as to grant it the coherent unity of a meaningful ludic self.

i) First is the simple *representation* of the ludic subject’s actions. When the player successfully defeats the first enemy encountered in the game, delivering a fatal blow with the Cael Hammer the Kid has just picked up, the narrator offers a simple: “Kid pops him good.” It is in this dimension that the narration is most purely engaged in setting up an objective relation of self – presenting to the player her own enacted ludic subjectivity.

ii) Next, the narration also attributes *character emotions* to the player’s ludic-subjective actions. Right after obtaining the Cael Hammer – the first weapon in the game – the Kid is presented with a clearing full of piles of rubbish that can be satisfyingly smashed with the hammer. At this point, the player might busy herself with doing precisely this – her motivation might be that of getting used to the game’s attack controls, or it might be simply that of taking joy in smashing things for no particular

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<sup>17</sup> It is tempting, in the context of this investigation, to read this as a literalization of the phenomenological tenet, which I have stressed throughout, regarding the status of the world being constituted in the subject’s perception of it. This, however, would almost certainly be a case of over-reading.

reason. However, the narrator has something to say even about this: if the player keeps it up long enough, he will interject by saying, “Kid just rages for a while.”

This is different from the first example, in that an emotional motive is attributed to the action which the player cannot identify as her own: as such, the register shifts into that of the objective relation of other. Even if the player were to relate to this emotion, it would still represent a case in which one has to “refer to game characters as Others or resort to the second-order structure of empathy when describing emotions in play” (Leino 2010, 219): as Zahavi puts it, “the experience you empathically understand remains that of the other” (2010, 291). The player might empathize with the Kid’s rage, but its ascription remains to the Kid: there is no self-ascription of the emotion by way of the ludic subject.

Of course, given the interrelation between the four aspects of the player-figure relation, it is entirely possible for such character emotions to be adopted in the vein of “vicarious experiences through character” (Marsh 2006, 197), and thereby to “bleed” into the ludic subjectivity of the player (Waern 2010, 5) – in this way, coming to influence the player’s own subjective standpoint towards the gameworld. Having heard the voice-over narration describe the Kid’s rage – and, putting herself in the Kid’s position, understanding his anger at seeing the world he knows destroyed – the player might elect to continue her destructive rampage under the influence of this empathetic rage. This is an equally essential dimension of ludic subjectivity, and highlights the hybridity inherent to the ludic subject, which – as I have already noted in section 6.2.1 – Kelly Boudreau has identified under the name of “hybrid-identity” (2012). However, for analytical purposes, it is necessary to keep this phenomenal structure distinct from that in which the player acts upon the gameworld on the basis of an intention she can ascribe directly to herself.

iii) At other points, the narration works to establish an *alignment of field*. When the player-as-the-Kid arrives at a fountain in a plaza, the narrator says, “Kid’s worked up quite a thirst by now, so that fountain looks real inviting.” Again, this would appear to be saying something relating to the perspective of the Kid as a distinct heterocosmic

individual, rather than the player's standpoint as a ludic subject. However, the case is different here: what the narration is doing in this instant is alerting the player to the Kid's subjective perception in order for the player to align her own perspectival focus with it.

'Alignment' is here being used here in the sense in which Petri Lankoski uses the term to refer to a paralleling of the player's perspective to the player-character (2011, 302).<sup>18</sup> Much as in the case of the example from *Grim Fandango* discussed above, where Manny's gaze directs the player's attention to follow it to the bottle of Scotch, this narratorial insight into the Kid's subjective perspective will orient the player's own gaze towards the fountain, highlighting it as a significant feature and thereby bringing it into the frame of her own ludic-subjective perspectival standpoint, and, as a result, into her construction of the game-as-lifeworld.

iii) Finally, the narrator also gives *narrative context* to the player's actions and experiences. Arriving at an impressionistically-drawn scene of ruin, the player hears, "He sees what's left of the Rippling Walls. Years of work undone in an instant. In the Calamity." This category of narrative statements does not directly act to represent the enacted ludic subject; in fact, it provides information which is not available through any other channel to the ludic subject. In doing so, it establishes the context within which these actions are granted narrative significance.

Bringing these together, then, the narration in *Bastion* performs four formal functions. It offers a representation of the player's actions, presents character emotions, establishes an alignment of field between the player's perspective and that of the playable figure, and offers narrative context to the player's actions as ludic subject. As a textual technique, then, the narration in *Bastion* highlights, in a particularly foregrounded manner, the representational strategies by which the player's enacted ludic subjectivity – in its first-personal mineness as a stream of experience – is incorporated into the textual presentation of the game's unfolding. Not only is the player's enacted ludic subjectivity represented to her as an object of perception, but this representation is incorporated into

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<sup>18</sup> Lankoski's usage of the notion of alignment has already been used once in this investigation, in the context of the analysis of *Kentucky Route Zero* in section 6.4.

a generic, cultural and iconographic context, presented, in aesthetic terms, as an intrinsic element in the unity of the game's textual presentation.

## 8.5 Conclusions

This chapter has performed two of the most crucial tasks at the heart of this investigation. Firstly, taking up the insight obtained in Chapter 7 regarding the nature of the ludic subject-position as the determination of a mode of being-in-the-gameworld, it has demonstrated how the player's taking-up of the ludic subject-position leads to the enactment of a ludic subjectivity, as a stream of direct, first-personal experience resulting from the player-as-ludic-subject's engagement with the gameworld.

Secondly, this chapter also laid out the presentational mechanisms by which this enacted ludic subjectivity is represented to the player as an object of her own perception, thereby establishing a relation of *autoscopy*, or self-perception. This autoscopic structure results directly from the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement: it is this which allows the player an external perspective on her own subjectivity. As such, what the formal structure of the figure game offers is a literalization of the subjective processes of self-consciousness: the self here does not emerge through a reflective inward turn on the part of the subject, as per Sartre, or through a hermeneutic engagement with the discordant totality of one's own actions and experiences, as Ricoeur would argue. Instead, the formal establishment of an external perspective does this work for the player, presenting her with a very literal image of herself-in-the-gameworld: one that, moreover, through being constructed in the language of the game's stylistic

The final chapter of this study shall now take precisely this meaningful textual and aesthetic unity of the represented ludic self as its object of focus. Following Ricoeur, I shall argue that it is the schema of 'character' that serves as the organizing principle by which the ludic self, as the autoscopic representation of the player's enacted ludic subjectivity, is granted unity and coherence. As such, it is to the question of 'character'

and the bearing of the notion upon the question of ludic subjectivity that I shall now turn.





## Chapter Nine

### Character and the ludic self

In Chapter 8, this investigation arrived at a crucial juncture, and crystallized a theoretical understanding of a number of the key formal structures of the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity. In previous chapters, I had focused on the development of the phenomenology of ludic subjectivity as a determined mode of being-in-the-gameworld shaped by the mechanisms of ludic subject-positioning and taken on by the player. On that basis, I was then able to demonstrate, firstly, how the engagement with the gameworld through the frame of the ludic subject-position takes the form of the enactment of a ludic subjectivity, and secondly, how this enacted ludic subjectivity is represented to the player as a ludic self.

The conclusion that was reached was that this establishment of a ludic self – an ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ that the player is able to perceive as ‘herself,’ in a relationship of autoscopy or self-perception – depends upon the representation of the player’s enacted ludic subjectivity on the textual level of the game’s presentation. There is one final task, then, that remains to be done in bringing this theorization of the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity to a close: namely, that of determining the form that is taken by this ludic self as a textual representation of the player’s enacted ludic subjectivity that is made available to her as an object of perception.

In section 8.2.3, I noted that it is to the notion of *character* that Paul Ricoeur turned when faced with the difficulty of accounting for the unity of the image of the self in self-perception (1992, 118). Accordingly, in this chapter, I shall make the same move: my argument is that it is in the notion of the ‘player-character’ that it is possible to identify the logic by which the ludic self is organized into a coherent unity as an element of the textual presentation of the game’s unfolding – thereby establishing an objective relation of self, and, as a result, an autoscopic aesthetic function.



Before embarking on this final stage of the investigation, however, an important caveat needs to be made. At the start of this investigation, in section 1.2, I rejected both ‘avatar’ and ‘character’ as terms to refer to the entity under the player’s control in the gameworld, opting instead for the neutral term ‘playable figure,’ as being able to encompass the multiple ontological aspects of this entity, subsuming the aspects addressed by ‘avatar’ and ‘character’ to a single concept. It might be objected that my taking up the term and the conceptuality of ‘character’ at this concluding stage of the analysis would seem to represent a pointed disavowal of this neutral stance by coming down, in the final analysis, on the ‘character’ side of the fence.

This is not what the arguments presented in this chapter are intended to convey. Firstly, the conceptuality of ‘character’ – as referring, as I shall argue below, to the textualized representation of a heterocosmic individual – is being invoked here not with respect to the playable figure, but to the ludic subject: the arguments I have presented regarding the distortions inherent in considering the playable figure solely through the conceptual lens of ‘character’ continue to hold. Secondly, this adoption of the terminology of character should not be understood as replacing, at the last minute, the conceptuality of ludic subjectivity which has been constructed throughout the course of this investigation. Rather, the point I wish to make is that it is according to the textual logic of ‘character’ that the representation of the player’s enacted ludic subjectivity – which was the focus of Chapter 8 – can be made to cohere into the unity of a ludic self. In other words, the conceptuality of ‘character’ as a formal device is being put in the service of clarifying the final movement of the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity – that of its textualization within the game’s multimodal presentation.

## 9.1 “Character” in games

The notion of ‘character’ is one that has been brought to the fore at several stages of this investigation. In section 6.1.3, *player-character* was discussed as one face of the two-sided ontology of the playable figure, in opposition to *avatar*. There, I made the point that *player-character* describes the playable figure in its significance on the dimension of the

ludic heterocosm, that is, as discussed in section 3.4.4, understood through the interpretative frame of the ‘game as heterocosm,’ while *avatar* describes the playable figure as a game component, that is, as laid out in section 3.4.4, in the meaning it holds within an understanding of the ‘game as system.’

The conceptuality of ‘character’ surfaced again, in a very different context, in section 8.2.3, where, as I have noted, it was employed by Ricoeur to define the logic by which the “discordance” of one’s moment-to-moment stream of experience can be resolved into a “concordance” on the basis of the identification of “the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized” (1992, 121).

This chapter shall bring together, and build upon, these earlier insights into the notion of character as it applies to ludic subjectivity, specifically, in order to answer the question: *in what way does the textual form of character give shape to the representation of a ludic self?* However, this question can only be tackled on the basis of an understanding of the manner in which the conceptual schema of narrative – upon which the concept of ‘character,’ after all, takes its place – applies to the form of the figure game that is this investigation’s domain of study. This, then, shall have to be the first step of this concluding analysis in my investigation.

### *9.1.1 The narrative question*

Though this investigation has had recourse to narratological concepts on occasion – such as the deployment of the notion of focalization in section 4.1.3 (Genette 1980, 189; Bal 1985, 102-110; Margolin 2009), and the tangential approaches to the subject of character which I have just discussed – I have, so far, largely sidestepped the direct addressing of the question of narrative as it applies to games, and the bearing it might have upon the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity. However, the shift of focus onto the question of character brings the discussion squarely onto the conceptual plane of narrative – as such, while a complete engagement with the debates surrounding the question of narrative in games (cf. Eskelinen 2001; 2012; Juul 2001; Aarseth 2004b; 2012; Ryan 2006; Calleja 2011) is beyond the scope of this investigation, it is nonetheless necessary to devote

some space to the matter. The basic question that needs to be answered, then, is: in what way can the concept of narrative be brought to bear upon games as experienced in the process of ludic engagement?

This is clearly a question which can only be answered on the basis of an understanding of the term ‘narrative,’ or, rather, of the specific meaning with which the term ‘narrative’ is to be employed. In this regard, the first thing that needs to be noted is that perhaps the dominant definition of ‘narrative’ within narratology – the field of the study of narrative, but one whose origins in literary theory often grants its approach a necessarily medium-specific slant – cannot be unproblematically applied to games without considerable modification. Gérard Genette, for instance, suggests that *narrative discourse*, which he takes as his object of study, is composed of three elements, which he refers to by the terms *story*, “the signified or narrative content,” *narrative*, “the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself,” and *narrating*, “the producing narrative action,” that is, the act of telling (1980, 25). This is a framing of narrative which defines it as a purely verbal phenomenon: “any narrative [...] is a linguistic production undertaking to tell of one or several events” (ibid., 30).

In the same vein, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes that “the term *narration* suggests (1) a *communication* process in which the narrative as message is transmitted by addresser to addressee and (2) the verbal nature of the medium used to transmit the message” (1983, 2-3). Again, in very similar terms, Gerald Prince defines *narrative* as:

The recounting (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or fictional events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narratees. (1987, 58)<sup>1</sup>

Marie-Laure Ryan terms this the “speech-act approach to narrative” (2006, 5), being founded upon an understanding of narrative that requires an actual or implied *narrative situation* as an act of linguistic communication between the narrator and the receiver(s) of

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that, in the 2002 update to his dictionary of narratological terms, Prince rescinds this position and adopts a more general understanding of the concept of narrative. Nonetheless, it is this earlier definition which has continued to prove influential.

the narrative. Clearly, this restricted understanding of the term would exclude its usage, not only with respect to games, but also other media, such as comics, film and drama, which, in most cases, do not feature such an explicit narrative situation.<sup>2</sup>

Instead, Ryan, following H. Porter Abbott (2002, 16), adopts a model of narrative which understands its constitutive elements as being *story* and *discourse* (2006, 7). *Story*, for Ryan, is “a mental image, a cognitive construct that concerns certain types of entities and relations between these entities” (ibid.) – which she further elaborates on by arguing that a story has a spatial dimension (it “must be about a world populated by individuated existents”), a temporal dimension (“this world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations”) and a mental dimension (“some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life”) (ibid., 8).

*Discourse*, on the other hand, refers to the textualized presentation of this story, whether the medium of this presentation is verbal, visual or anything else. In other words, discourse refers to a unity of semiotic content (usually, but by no means necessarily, organized as a temporal sequence), which, in its aesthetic reception, is concertized in the form of a story. As per Ryan’s definition, this is a mental construct of a textually represented world, populated by existents that are granted implied subjective interiorities, and changing over time through undergoing a sequence of events. Moreover, as such a mental construct dependent upon the unity of its discursive presentation, ‘story’ itself implies an organization of its elements into a coherent, ordered unity, thereby fulfilling the criterion of the formal unity of the aesthetic object specified in section 2.1.3.

Such an approach to the question of narrative has been employed with game studies – it is the foundation for Gordon Calleja’s notion of alterbiography (2011, 145), which I discussed in section 8.2.4, and also underlies Espen Aarseth’s development of a theory for a “shared ludo-narrative design space” (2012, 2). Moreover, it is necessary for me to make clear, at this stage, how much this investigation up to this point has implicitly

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<sup>2</sup> It is, of course, possible for all these media to *make use of* the structure of the narrative situation – for instance, through the usage of voice-over narration in film. It would not ring true, however, to suggest that it is only in such situations that one can speak of narrative in non-literary medialities.

been leaning upon precisely such an understanding of narrative, without bringing the matter to the fore.

Firstly, in deploying the notion of the ludic heterocosm (see section 3.4.4) to refer to the gameworld in its representational dimension – or, more accurately, to the represented world referred to by the game system and the complete set of semiotic information whose presentation it structures – what I have been talking about is precisely what Ryan identifies as the spatial dimension of story.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, in the discussion of the ludic subject and its enactment within the gameworld, including in its heterocosmic dimension, I have of course been discussing the consciousness of at least one “intelligent agent”. Finally, even the temporal dimension has come into view in the consideration, in Chapter 8, of the enactment of the ludic subject as being the result of the sequence of the player’s actions in, and experiences of, the gameworld.

A final point needs to be made regarding the question of narrative, understood in this way, and its relation to the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement discussed in section 2.4 – it is in this relation that the vital role to be played in this investigation by the notions of narrative, and, more specifically, of character, can come into view. From the internal perspective, the player, as a ludic subject phenomenologically embodied as a member of the gameworld, has first-personal experience of playing out a subjective existence within that domain – framing its objects in intentional acts of perception, exercising her “I can” in view of her existential projects, and so on. From the external perspective, on the other hand, what the player perceives is a translation of the events, actions and situations to which her first-order subjective consciousness of being-in-the-gameworld relates into discourse,<sup>4</sup> in the form (most commonly) of a temporal sequence of audiovisual presentation.<sup>5</sup> The result of this is that the textual *discourse* in which the game presents itself to the player in her external

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<sup>3</sup> This, of course, was already evident in my usage of Ryan’s theorization of the narrative world (2001a, 91) in defining the ontology of the ludic heterocosm.

<sup>4</sup> Here, one could recall Aarseth’s theorization of the surface-level production of the cybertext, in any single given actualization or traversal, as a semiotic sequence of “scriptons” (1997, 62).

<sup>5</sup> Though, of course, it could also be, as in the case of text-based adventure games, such as *Adventure* (Crowther and Woods 1976) translated into linguistic discourse.

standpoint outside the game constructs the player's enactment of a ludic subjectivity in the gameworld as the *story* it refers to, meaning that the conceptual framework of 'story' – implying, as Ryan notes, an ordered unity on the levels of spatiality and temporality, a “unified causal chain” of events leading to some form of “closure,” and so on – is superimposed upon the player's first-order experience of being-in-the-gameworld as a ludic subject, granting it the same qualities of order, unity and meaningfulness.

### 9.1.2 *'Character' as the unity of representation of the ludic self*

As I argued in section 6.1.3, though the notion of character is one that is frequently encountered in game studies' engagement with the playable figure, there is little agreement, either on the relevance of the term in this context, or even on what it should mean when applied to the playable figure. For every theory that player agency can be made to cohere to the nature of a predetermined character through the shaping of “dramatic agency” (Murray 2005), one finds a counter-reaction stating that the nature of the figure as a vehicle for player agency renders notions of character irrelevant: it “just becomes a “cursor” for the player's actions” (Frasca 2001, 2), being understood purely in instrumental terms as a set of tools to be deployed by the player (Newman 2002). To this, in turn, is opposed the objection that “the steerable thing being discussed is a character, with an anthropomorphic nature and a character's place within the interactive fiction world” (Montfort 2007, 141). More recently, the discussion has taken new inflections in Kristine Jørgensen's outlining of the conflict between player agency and the constraints of a fixed, predetermined character (2010), or Clara Fernández-Vara's signaling of a radical split between player and character (2011).

By and large, in the cases where the term 'character' does bear a specific, defined meaning in the conceptual schema of the playable figure (rather than simply being used to define the figure itself), it is located as one side of the duality Rune Klevjer highlights between avatar and character (2006, 116; 2012, 17). By this definition, then, 'character' would refer to the status of the playable figure as “an entity constituted separately from the player” (Bayliss 2007a, 2): the distinct identity of the character “sets them apart from

the player, emphasizing the gap between character and player” (Fernández-Vara 2011, 13). It is worth recalling here the consternation faced by players of *Crysis* (Crytek 2007) in Kristine Jørgensen’s study – already mentioned in section 6.1.1 – when the playable figure suddenly begins to speak in his own voice, thereby giving “the impression of suddenly turning from being completely controlled by the player into being an individual and autonomous being with a will of his own” (2009, 3). In order to contextualize this discussion within the schema of the player-figure relation which has been concretized in the model proposed in section 6.3, then, I shall note that the notion of ‘character’ has tended to be used to refer to the attribution of an identity status of ‘other’ to the playable figure: it is a character insofar as it is not myself.

Against the background of the understanding of narrative as it relates to the double perspectival structure of ludic engagement, however, the usage of the notion of ‘character’ here must diverge on a fundamental level from this dominant usage. According to this understanding, ‘character’ refers to the textualized representation of my being-in-the-gameworld as a ludic subject: it is the objectification, on the level of discourse of the game’s semiotic presentation – whether this is audiovisual, or verbal, or otherwise – of my first-order subjective consciousness of the gameworld, which, by this very act of discursive presentation, becomes available to me as a meaningful unity.

In other words, ‘character’ refers not to the playable figure, but to the unity into which the representation of the player’s ludic subjectivity is shaped as seen from the objective, external perspective. It is the representation, in the game’s textual discourse, of an individual in the gameworld, whether I take this individual to be ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ (the objective relation of self) or a heterocosmic individual who is distinct from me (the objective relation of other) – or even, as is more likely, if these two perspectives interrelate and bleed into each other, giving rise to composite entities that are both self and other, such as (to give some examples I have focused on in earlier chapters) *I-as-Conway*, *I-as-Garrett*, *I-as-Manny-Calavera*, or *I-as-the-Kid*.

Thus, the approach I shall take in applying the question of character to ludic engagement must differ from Calleja’s argument – with respect to the two dimensions of

the *alterbiography of self* and the *alterbiography of an entity*, which I discussed in section 8.2.4, that “the generation of alterbiography can feature the character as a separate entity controlled by the player *or* can be considered as being about the player in the world” (2011, 125, emphasis added). The textual representation of an individual in the game’s presentation is not a character *if and only if* I do not identify him or her as myself; the figure as available in the game’s textualization of my enacted ludic subjectivity is a character even if I identify him or her as myself.

I shall give an example. A player of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011) might choose to create a playable figure who bears as close a physical resemblance to her as possible, giving it her own name and granting it statistical attributes that match up to her own self-perception: considering herself to be intelligent but not in particularly good physical shape, for example, she might create a magic-using figure with a high intelligence value, but low strength. She might, then, fully embrace the resulting figure as ‘herself-in-the-gameworld’, proceeding to perform actions within the gameworld that are consistent with the habits and “lasting dispositions” (Ricoeur 1992, 121) that constitute her own answer to the question, “Who am I?”

However, even in a case such as this, what the player sees on-screen is no less a *character* than Lara Croft or Manny Calavera. It is still the representation of an individual in the heterocosm, composed within the sequence of audiovisual presentation the player is witness to from the external perspective as a textual entity – that is, as an organized accretion of semiotic cues that is gathered up in its reference to a distinct, individuated figure.

Conversely, even when the player is engaging with a playable figure with a rigidly determined identity distinct from her own – as in the case of Lara Croft or Manny Calavera, it is still the case, as I argued in section 8.1.1, that, in the moment of ludic engagement, the player takes proprioceptive ownership of her actions in the gameworld as the playable figure. She still has internal consciousness of the actions and experiences pertaining to the embodied subjectivity of the playable figure as *her* own; as such, in



subjective terms, the being-in-the-gameworld she sees represented on-screen remains *her own* at the same time as it bears the mark of a distinct identity.

Thus – insofar as what the objective relation frames is the *same* playable figure to which the player engages in a subjective relation – what is at play is always, to some degree, an objective relation of self. This is the core insight that brings into view what I have termed, following Stephan Günzel (2013), the *autoscopie* aesthetic function established by the form of the figure game, which allows the player’s lived and enacted ludic subjectivity to be represented as the image of a *ludic self* that is organized according to the logical principles of narrative, on the levels of both story and discourse, within which its status as a character locates it.

## 9.2 The two senses of ‘character’

If the notion of ‘character’ therefore constitutes the unifying principle of the textual presentation of the ludic self, then the importance of more fully theorizing what is involved in the notion becomes apparent. However, the theorization of character presents a particular difficulty. At first glance, characters – those represented individuals routinely encountered, not only in games, but also in novels and short stories, on TV, on stage or at the cinema – are “so familiar a phenomenon that they do not seem to require closer inspection” (Eder et al. 2010, 3).

On the other hand, literary theory in particular has, for some time, recognized that “once they are subject to closer scrutiny, characters prove to be highly complex objects” (ibid.) – and this is before we consider the additional levels of complexity resulting from the idiosyncrasies of the familiar notion of character operating within the aesthetic form of the figure game, and, particularly, from the entanglement of the player-character in the multi-dimensional lines of influence that constitute the player-figure relation. In order to highlight the implications of the notion of character upon the constitution of the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity, then, it is necessary to develop a more rigorous theory of what the notion implies.

### 9.2.1 *Character as a heterocosmic individual*

As is often the case, there is no better starting-point than the common-sense understanding of the term. In this sense, as I have just noted, ‘character’ refers to the lifelike, possibly extremely engaging people we ‘encounter’ in our reading of a novel, our viewing of a film, our playing of a game, in much the same way as we would encounter a person in the street or at a café. By this understanding, ‘character’ designates a person – a human<sup>6</sup> individual endowed not only with the outward appearance of personhood, but also with the “mental dimension” Ryan attributes as being necessary to the existents in a story (2006, 8).

It is this understanding of character that is invoked when James Phelan writes that “characters are images of possible people” (1989, 2), and when Uri Margolin defines a character as a “possible non-actual individual” (1990, 844).<sup>7</sup> The implications of this deceptively simple definition are more fully unpacked in Margolin’s earlier explanation:

“Character” or “person” in narrative will be understood as designating a human or human-like individual, existing in some possible world [...] a Narrative Agent (=NA) to whom inner states, mental properties (traits, features) or complexes of such properties (personality models) can be ascribed on the basis of textual data. (1986, 205).

However, at the same time as these formulations highlight the fact that, in the reception of the work, a character appears first and foremost as a *person*, they also complicate this basic understanding of the nature of character. This is revealed in Phelan’s statement that characters are not simply “possible people,” but “*images* of possible people” (emphasis added), and likewise, in Margolin’s point that the properties of an individual can only be perceived “on the basis of textual data”.

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<sup>6</sup> Or, at any rate, to some degree anthropomorphic, in consciousness if not in physical form.

<sup>7</sup> “Non-actual” in this case refers, of course, to the position of the work’s recipient in an external standpoint. Recalling the notion of recentering discussed in section 4.3, it is pertinent to note that, once the recipient of the work adopts a subjective standpoint internal to the heterocosm, then the character-as-heterocosmic-individual is, from her standpoint, very much actual.

The problem presented by the constitution of character, then, takes its shape from the gap that opens up between the impression received by the reader, viewer, audience or player of a living, breathing individual, and the reality that, if one were to attempt to pinpoint any concrete ontological existence for this individual, one would come up only with a limited set of textual signs.

### 9.2.2 *Character as textuality*

This duality in the meaning of the term ‘character’ has, unsurprisingly, led to a duality in theoretical approaches. As Henriette Heidbrink writes, there exists:

...a continuum between ›abstraction‹ and ›concretion‹, whereas the first pole stands for the medial material, the text, the signs, or the structures of the medial product and the second pole stands for the character that is *via reception* perceived as a humanlike entity with a coherent self including an individual personality (2010, 72).

Heidbrink argues that a debate has taken shape along the lines of this dichotomy, between what she terms “humanistic” positions that focus on the analysis of characters as individuals that can, for critical purposes, be considered independently of the text, and those grouped under the banner of “formalists, structuralists and semioticians” (ibid., 73), who dismiss this impression of a human individual as an extraneous accretion to a set of semiotic data, and, as a result, develop a perspective according to which characters “dissolve into textuality”, in Rimmon-Kenan’s phrase (1983, 31).

This dichotomy can be summarized, in semiotic terms, as one between an idea of character as a signifier and as a signified. Rimmon-Kenan puts it succinctly when she says the distinction is between understanding characters as “words” or as “people” (ibid.). It is in the apparently paradoxical co-presence of both understandings that the true ontological nature of character is to be found. The irreducible individuality of character as a possible non-actual individual, marked out by the proper name as its symbol, as well as by the essential nature that name stands for (Genette 1980, 246), is an illusion constructed through an accumulation of textual signs, and, in understanding the nature

of character, its “verbal surface” is as crucial as the “suggestion and imitation of human life” it establishes (Price 1983, 57).

As such, it is in the apparently paradoxical co-presence of both understandings that the true ontological nature of character is to be found. The impression of a human individual can only be understood in the light of the system of signifiers out of which it is generated, and the same set of signifiers only makes sense with reference to the total impression towards which it is oriented. Put in a different way, and to return to Heidbrink’s terms: a hard-line humanist position cannot hope to get very far in its consideration of the human individual that emerges from the text apparently fully-formed and walking on its own two feet without considering the semiotic foundation on which this impression is built. Equally problematically, a dogmatic structuralist-semiotic approach runs the risk of missing the wood for the trees. Given that a set of semiotic elements within a text can only be grouped under the unifying aegis of a ‘character’ if the individual signs are, in the first place, recognized as pointing towards the same figure, then such a figure (to which one can only apply the label of a human individual, albeit not necessarily an actual one) must have been posited, and kept in mind, during the act of reading. A purely semiotic approach would thus be guilty of the *a posteriori* erasure of a unified figure that must necessarily have been already established in the act of reading for that reading to have taken place. It is in this light that, to use the terms suggested by Phelan, a character is both mimetic, a (re)presentation of a possible person, and synthetic, a textual construct constituted of signs (1989, 2).<sup>8</sup>

### 9.3 A semiotic-structural model of the player-character

It is apparent enough, however, that in its basic constitution, a ‘character,’ if one were to adopt a bottom-up textual-analytical approach, is a semiotic construct, a figure that emerges through the accretion of a set of textual signifiers. It is necessary, then, to found

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<sup>8</sup> Phelan also introduces a third quality – thematic – to refer to character’s status as textual elements performing a signifying function within the work as a whole – but this is less directly relevant to our current concerns.

an ontological understanding of the player-character, at the most radical level, on an identification of the signifying elements out of which it is accrued.

### *9.3.1 Two existing approaches to the theorization of the player-character*

It is hard to locate, within game studies, a rigorous theoretical framework by which such a task can be achieved. As with any rule, of course, exceptions exist: a survey of the relevant literature reveals two models that can be employed in orienting this investigation towards the task of achieving such an ontological understanding of the player-character. These are the approaches to the player-character proposed by Fernández-Vara (2011) and Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman (2003); I shall consider these below.

Fernández-Vara suggests a list of the “identity markers” of the player-characters as being “name, image, animation, speech, backstory” (2011, 10). While this is a start in determining the constitution of the player-character as a textual entity, it does not go far enough in taxonomizing the various avenues by which characterization might occur, nor does it account for the specificities of the character in question in its association with a playable figure under the player’s control.

This was precisely the difficulty tackled by Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman in their attempt to analyze the constitution of player-characters (2003). Starting with reference to Rimmon-Kenan’s discussion of the nature of literary characters, their model attempts to expand the understanding of the methods by which the determination of character can also occur through game-specific means, suggesting the ways in which the ‘player’ side of the dual term ‘player-character’ must reshape the understanding of ‘character’. In this regard, their insights are invaluable, and shall be drawn upon throughout the course of this chapter. At the same time, however, non-ludic modes of characterization are bracketed and set aside from the main thrust of their analysis, missing the potential to arrive at a unified understanding of the specification of player-characters that fully integrates all possible avenues of characterization available to games as a hybrid form that also incorporates non-ludic medialities.

What is necessary, then, is a model that weds Fernández-Vara's taxonomical approach towards the semiotic aggregation of the character's textuality to Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman's acknowledgment of the player's role in the constitution and determination of this textual whole. It is with this aim in mind that I propose a new semiotic-structural model of the player-character in its textual dimension.

### 9.3.2 *Margolin and the taxonomy of "characterization statements"*

The model of characterization that I shall use as the foundation and starting-point in this endeavour is that proposed by Margolin (1986). According to his model, the basic building-blocks of character, on the textual level, are what he terms *characterization statements* (ibid., 206). A characterization statement (hereinafter CS) is a textual cue from which some attribute or trait pertaining to a character can be inferred. As the reader engages with a text, she will encounter a sequence of CSs for any given character, and will interpret each CS as an insight into some aspect or trait of the character in question. Margolin refers to this process of "the ascription of individual mental traits" or factual attributes to a textual individual on the basis of an inference from a CS as *characterization* (ibid.).

A character is therefore always a product of a second-order process of signification – Margolin notes that a "character or person is a signified, for which some other textual elements serve as signifiers" (ibid.). Moreover, the inferential nature of characterization reveals a considerable level of ambiguity at work. Most CSs accommodate multiple readings – different, perhaps even directly contradictory, character attributes can be inferred from the same CS depending on how it is interpreted by the reader. This is the point made by Roland Barthes in his influential reading of Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*:

To read is to struggle to name, to subject the sentences of a text to a semantic transformation. This transformation is erratic; it consists in hesitating among several names: if we are told that Sarrasine had '*one of those strong wills that knows no obstacle*', what are we to read? *will, energy, obstinacy, stubbornness, etc.?* (1974, 92)

Since character is not explicitly given by the text, but must instead be constructed by the reader out of a potentially scant aggregate of semiotic cues, it makes little practical sense to speak of the character existing *as* a character – that is, as a possible individual – *in* the text. It is better to conceive of character as a mental construct arrived at by the reader, built up piece by piece, in puzzle-like fashion, through the gradual accumulation of CSs – to return to the discussion on aesthetic theory in section 2.1, a “concretization”, in Roman Ingarden’s term (1985).

This is the process that Margolin terms *character-building*, which “consists of a succession of individual operations of characterization, together with second order activities of continual patterning and repatterning of the traits obtained in the first order operations, until a fairly coherent constellation or trait paradigm has been arrived at” (1986, 206). As Rimmon-Kenan puts it, “if a common denominator, e.g. ambivalence, emerges from several aspects, it can then be generalized as a character-trait, and in a similar way the various traits combine to form the character” (1983, 38). The result of this is that “character can be seen as a tree-like hierarchical structure in which elements are assembled in categories of increasing integrative power” (*ibid.*, 37).

Margolin’s next step is to offer a taxonomy of the possible categories of CSs, thereby mapping out the semiotic foundations upon which the hierarchical signifying structure of character is established. A caveat is necessary: the very term Margolin chooses – character *statement* – implies a linguistic frame of reference. It describes a mediality of character according to which information about the non-actual individual in question is to be gleaned from linguistic propositions, whether this is in the form of direct statements of a character’s attributes, or – as would be much more often the case – through making inferences regarding the character’s nature on the basis of statements regarding their actions. As such, Margolin’s taxonomy must be modified to fit the specificities of the player-character – not only through taking into account the fact that games, as “integrated crossmedia packages” (Aarseth 2012, 2), set in motion a polymodal semiotic presentation that can include visual, verbal, aural as well as purely ludic signs,

but also, as Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman do, taking into account the role of the player in the determination of the textual unity constituting the player-character.

Nonetheless, Margolin's basic distinction between three categories of CSs – *static mimetic elements*, *dynamic mimetic elements* and *formal textual patterns* – provides this investigation with a solid initial stepping-stone in coming to terms with, and attempting to arrive at a comprehensive categorization of, the complete span of modes of CSs games afford in relation to their player-character/s and, therefore, of the expressive capacity of the player-character as an aesthetic figure.

It is to the task of formulating such a categorization that I shall now turn. Though reference will also be made to a range of other games and player-characters, this categorization shall be framed through a close analysis of the player-characters in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) and *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013). *The Last of Us* was chosen as an example of a game whose high production values and adherence to the medial and generic conventions of audiovisual narrative result in a highly specified player-character constituted of a dense, multi-medial network of CSs. By way of contrast, *Gone Home* was selected in order to provide an opposite case, where the player-character is minimally specified and, if it is to emerge as a character at all, requires far more in terms of reconstruction on the reader's part. As such, these two case studies will allow for the development of a structural model in the light of radically divergent approaches towards the semiotic construction of the player-character.

#### 9.4 Static mimetic elements

In Margolin's classification of CSs, *static mimetic elements* refers to statements regarding fixed (or relatively fixed) facts regarding a character, including "name, appearance, customs, habits, man-made and natural setting or environment" (1986, 206). Of course, with respect to a literary character, these elements might change drastically over the course of a narrative. How much that is true of Jane Eyre at the start of Charlotte Brontë's novel, as a ten-year-old living in the Reed household, remains true of Jane Eyre,



the experienced, financially independent woman at the novel's end? The same is true of player-characters in games, who are capable of undergoing radical transformation over the course of a playthrough while remaining, recognizably, the same character. For example, Jodie Holmes in *Beyond: Two Souls* (Quantic Dream 2013) is glimpsed (and played) at various stages in her life: as a toddler, a young girl, a teenager and a young woman. In between these scenes, many of the static mimetic elements undergo radical shifts: her appearance changes, her costumes are different, her environment – and the role she plays within it – vary, and so on. Moreover, with specific reference to the category of static mimetic elements that are termed “ludic elements” below, we can note that “character development” as a game mechanic is a defining feature of the role-playing game genre. This demonstrates the fact that the mutability of player-characters is itself an accepted trope, and that the usage of the term *static mimetic elements* no more implies a rigidly unchanging nature for player-characters than it does for literary characters – contrary to Frasca's suggestion that “most videogame characters would be flat” (2001, 1), a reference to the novelist E.M. Forster's definition of flat characters as those that “do not change throughout the course of the work” (2002[1927], 104).

With that caveat out of the way, I shall propose a subdivision of static mimetic elements associated with the player-character into three categories. *Represented elements* shall refer to CSs delivered through audiovisual or linguistic signs attached to the figure in question. The category of *contextual elements* covers CSs that convey information regarding the character's place in their environment. Finally, *mechanical elements* describes the set of CSs which can be inferred from the properties of the figure as a game component, that is, as an entity within the game system.

#### 9.4.1 *Represented elements*

##### i) *Name*

A player-character's name is often the first CS a player encounters. It can reveal the individual's gender and, to a considerable extent, their socio-cultural background – “Mario”, for instance, signals the iconic plumber's Italian ethnicity. A character's name

can also bear symbolic significance, being used to highlight important traits or attributes, or to reveal the character's function in the narrative – think of how Gordon Freeman's surname in *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004) signals his role as the “free man”, striving for humanity's freedom in the face of the oppressive Combine occupation.

In *Gone Home*, the name Kaitlin Greenbriar (or its shortened form, Katie) lets us know that the character is female, and probably of Anglo-Saxon descent – an ethnicity that, in the context of the US in the 1990s, suggests, at the very least, the strong possibility of a life of upper- or middle-class privilege. As a derivative of “Catherine”, Katie's given name shares the Greek etymological root καθαρός (*katharos*), meaning “pure” – a fact which, if one were etymologically minded, might colour one's initial impression of the kind of person she is. By contrast, in *The Last of Us*, the given name Joel – no surname is ever provided – seems to purposely reveal little about the game's protagonist, apart from a down-to-earth everyman quality. The lack of a surname – a quality which extends to all the non-player characters in the game, all of whom are referred to only by their first name – can also be interpreted as communicating the dissolution of societal structures in the game's post-apocalyptic setting.

ii) *Physical appearance*

Along with the name, the player-character's physical appearance is often what constitutes the first impression of the textual individual that the player is encountering. With regard to our case studies, physical appearance plays a greater role in *The Last of Us* than it does in *Gone Home*. Given the latter's first-person perspective, combined with the slightly disconcerting lack of mirrors in the Greenbriar family home, the only images of Katie that the player receives are her passport photograph (see Fig. 9.1) and the family portrait hanging in the entrance hall (see Fig. 9.2). Apart from locating her, thanks to her hairstyle, in the game's period setting, these two images are most notable for their pointedly mundane quality, which aligns with *Gone Home*'s general stylistic direction. In *The Last of Us*, Joel's appearance – full beard, weathered features, slim but muscular build, slightly graying hair, hard, clear eyes – gives the player more to go on (see Fig. 9.3). It is



easy to detect an earthy, no-nonsense, stereotypical masculinity. It is just as easy to gain the impression of an individual who bears the mark of long suffering, who has been shaped by having to survive in his harsh, post-apocalyptic conditions, and whose best years are behind him.

iii) *Costume/s*

Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Pajares Tosca have applied fashion theory to their study of players' choices when clothing their avatar in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2003), noting that "the way our characters look is important to us," being able to signal the player's status, group allegiances and individual style (2008, 4). Though this study was focused on the social role of costume in *WoW*'s multiplayer environment, its central insight – that the outfit worn by a playable figure can serve (indeed, can hardly choose but function as) a rich layer of signification – is one that can be extended to the playable figures of single-player games. Costume can signal the character's belonging to a particular social group, nationality, organization or historical period – whatever gender, race and appearance the player chooses for Shepard in *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007), for instance, he or she wears the uniform of the *SSV Normandy*. Clothes can also highlight a character's adherence to a particular subculture – Ben in *Full Throttle* (LucasArts 1995), with his biker's leather jacket and boots, is the perfect example – or associate a character with a familiar set of cultural or generic iconography, as, for instance, Manny's white smoking-jacket and black tie in the Year Two passage of *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts 1998) makes specific reference to Rick (Humphrey Bogart)'s outfit in *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1942).

Joel's plain, utilitarian work clothes associate perfectly with the masculinity of his physical appearance, adding to the impression of an individual who is oriented towards manual labour and physical action, and who gets his hands dirty: their worn, stained nature also suggests having lived through hard times. Finally, his clothes also associate him with the Western genre, further adding to the conglomerate of CSs which mark him out with such familiar – indeed, cliché – attributes as "masculine", "tough" and "stoic". On the other hand, what little we see of Katie's outfits in *Gone Home* – in the family

portrait, she is wearing a plain, formal black dress – provides us with little on which to base a CS.

*iv) Voice*

If a character speaks, independently of what they say, the nature of their voice – its physical qualities, any traces of an accent, vocal tics or habitual mode of speaking – can constitute a CS. Mario’s cheerful disposition and Italian accent, at least since he was first voiced in *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 1996), are major elements in his characterization, even on the basis of only a handful of phrases; meanwhile, in *Thief: The Dark Project* (Looking Glass 1998), it is Garrett’s frequent, characteristically gravel-voiced interjections that constitute one of the primary avenues of characterization.

Katie’s only vocal utterance in the game is the message she leaves on the family’s answering machine: this message is played at the start of the game, and is played again if the player chooses to listen through the messages stored on the answering machine. Her voice seems upbeat – she speaks rapidly and confidently. With *The Last of Us*, Joel’s gruff, often mumbled vocal delivery emphasizes a reserved, somewhat introverted disposition – and we might be tempted to also detect a resigned weariness, which would chime with Joel’s haggard appearance.

*v) Animations*

As Westcott notes, player-characters possess a pre-determined “constrained gesture set” (2009, 5), and the nature of this gesture set can affect the player’s perception of the character to a great degree. The same action can be interpreted as revealing radically different character traits depending on how it is animated. Mario’s joyful leap in *Super Mario 64* and Nathan Drake’s athletic but desperate, edge-grabbing scramble in *Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune* (Naughty Dog 2007) might animate what is, at heart, the same ludic action, but the difference in the attendant animation results in the action registering as a very different CS in the respective cases.

Once again, animations are not a factor at all in *Gone Home*. However, in *The Last of Us*, Joel’s animations serve to reinforce many of the characteristics suggested by his physical appearance. His movements are heavy and deliberate, revealing a steady,

meticulous character, but also one who performs actions swiftly, decidedly and forcefully. The gruesomeness of the animations whenever Joel performs a violent action – such as strangling a human enemy, or smashing a clicker’s face in with a brick – are equally significant. One can read “confidence” and “experience” in the efficiency of the actions, and, in their cold brutality, also an indication of a character who has grown desensitized to the violence that is necessary for his survival.

#### 9.4.2 Contextual elements

##### i) Possessions

The generally strictly-delimited set of objects a player-character has in their possession – either at the start of the game, or later on – can also be used as the vehicle for CSs. In *Beyond Good & Evil* (Ubisoft 2003), for example, Jade’s possession of a camera metonymically indicates her journalistic professional background. This applies both to objects that are modeled as meaningful components within the game system, that can be picked up, used, carried in the character’s inventory or be otherwise interacted with (what Aki Järvinen would term “components-of-self” (2008, 64)), and also to objects which are not part of the game system, and would, in Espen Aarseth’s terms, be considered “*extra-ludic*” (2012, 3): as I argued in section 3.4.4, both categories of objects gain equal footing on the ontological plane of the ludic heterocosm, and, since this is the plane upon which an ontology of character is founded, both can convey CSs as long as they are in some way associated with the character in question. In *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal 2011), for example, the books lining the shelves of player-character Adam Jensen’s apartment, even though they are, in game-systemic terms, little more than a texture on the wall, act as a particularly effective exposition for Jensen’s interests and preoccupations.

At the beginning of *Gone Home*, the only objects in Katie’s inventory are her passport and her flight ticket. Both items – together with the travel bag laid on the porch in front of her feet at the game’s opening – serve to contextualize her arrival at her family’s new home after a long period of absence, filling in the details of a year spent

traveling around Europe. We might also wish to read these as indications of an adventurous, open-minded personality. Joel's possessions, on the other hand, are comparatively scant, and constitute only what is necessary for survival in the hostile post-apocalyptic environment – a flashlight, a gun, a limited supply of ammunition. Again, the indication here is of an individual who, whether by natural inclination, by the demands of his situation, or by some combination of both, eschews anything but the bare necessities of survival.

ii) *Environment*

Much can be gleaned regarding a character based on the physical setting in which, by necessity or by choice, they find themselves. The idyllic, Arcadian milieu of Hyrule reveals as much about Link in *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (Nintendo 1991) as the opening tour of the Black Mesa Research Facility in *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) tells us about the kind of life led by Gordon Freeman. This is particularly true of games which allow the player to explore their character's home: *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), for example, uses domestic spaces as an efficient means of conveying its player-characters' lifestyle, habits and preoccupations. Ethan Mars' personal crisis following the death of his son and his separation from his wife is expressed through a contrast between the bright, airy, clean-lined home he lives in at the start of the game, and the dingy, disorganized tenement he moves into after the incident.

At face value, *Gone Home* is a game entirely about Katie returning home – however, due to her family having moved house during her time in Europe, the house she is returning to is not, strictly speaking, her own. The room prepared for her is still un-lived-in, full of stacked-up boxes still to be unpacked. This frames Katie's traversal of the house as an exploration of an unknown milieu, rather than as the titular homecoming. Importantly, this aligns her unfamiliarity and curiosity about the space with the player's own, making it easier for the player to inhabit the subject-position she represents. At the same time, this dissociation from her family home can also itself be read as a CS, revealing her traveler's alienation from the once-familiar setting she has returned to.

At the start of *The Last of Us*, the environment Joel has to exist in – the military-policed quarantine zone, with its strict rations and regulations, and the dangerous ruined city that surrounds it, ridden with armed bandits and with the infected – contextualizes much of what we have read into Joel’s own representation, making more sense of his weathered appearance, his utilitarian clothes and possessions, his weary voice and his determination.

iii) *Role*

What is the character’s role in their environment? Here we might consider such factors as a character’s job or profession, their belonging to organizations or groups of any kind, and the relations between the character and non-player characters (NPCs).

As a college-age young woman from what appears to be a reasonably affluent family, Katie’s decision to take a gap year and travel around Europe instantly frames her – however right or wrong this framing might be – as a recognizable stereotype. It signals “adventurousness”, but in a predictable, conventionalized gesture. More interesting are her relationships to the members of her family. I have already touched on Katie’s alienation from her family resulting from her time away – though the postcards found throughout the house mark an effort to retain contact, and the personal comments addressed to individual members of the family suggest intimacy and a keen observer’s eye. Moreover, Katie appears to play the role of a confidant to her younger sister Sam, who trusts her enough to share her deepest secrets and feelings with her, even while she conceals these same feelings from their parents.

At the start of the game, the player learns that Joel is a smuggler, working within a criminal underground to deliver goods through the borders of the quarantine zone. Later, when Ellie and he arrive in Pittsburgh and are ambushed by a gang of desperate bandits, Joel reveals that he had been involved in such ambushes on unsuspecting survivors himself in the past. This might lead the player to ascribe to him traits of amorality, unscrupulousness or – more mildly – opportunism driven by necessity. However, during the course of the game, against the background of this shadowy past, Joel is, to a considerable extent, defined by his relationship with Ellie once she is placed



under his care. It is on the ambiguous implications of the relationship – which can be called paternalistic and protective, but also, less charitably, possessive and obsessive – that Joel’s characterization is founded.

#### *9.4.3 Ludic elements*

The sub-category of static mimetic elements I am terming “ludic elements” warrants a preliminary elaboration. In the analysis of the ontology of the playable figure in section 6.1, I noted a crucial distinction between the figure as avatar, that is, as viewed through the frame of the ‘game as system,’ as a game component under the player’s control, and the figure as avatar, as perceived through the frame of the ‘game as heterocosm’ to refer to a represented heterocosmic individual implied through a network of signification. Given this double-layered ontology of the playable figure, it should not be surprising to note that the attributes of the figure as a game component – its capabilities and limitations in relation to the other entities in the gameworld, the procedures by which it functions within the game system – can themselves become a vehicle for characterization. As such, unlike the other categories of CSs we have considered so far, CSs based on ludic elements, as the name suggests, operate through a mediality that is strictly unique to games.

There is a crucial point to be made here. As shall become apparent, the ludic elements which contribute to the shaping of the playable figure as a character, being defined as the mechanical composition of the playable figure as a game component, are, to a great degree, very much the same mechanisms I investigated in section 7.2 as being responsible for the constitution of the ludic subject-position. This should not be surprising: after all, as I am arguing, the player-character is the textualization of the enacted ludic subjectivity resulting from the player’s engagement with the gameworld as determined by the frame of the ludic subject-position. Given that the ludic subject-position constitutes the disposition that is taken up by the player as the ‘I-in-the-gameworld,’ it is not surprising that it is precisely in the parameters of the ludic subject-

position that many of the “lasting dispositions” (Ricoeur 1992, 121) by which a character is defined as an individual can be identified.

*i) Capabilities and limitations*

During the course of this investigation, I have already discussed, at more than one point, the “I can” of bodily capabilities that the playable figure grants the player, and its centrality in determining the frame of the ludic subject-position (see sections 5.4.4 and 7.2.4). At the same time, these capabilities can also be put in the service of characterization: what the player-character can and cannot do in the ludic heterocosm constitutes an especially direct and revealing form of CS, both in itself and – as shall become evident on the level of dynamic mimetic elements – in terms of the range of actions it renders possible and attributable to the character. Though she does not specifically invoke the question of character, this is what Janet Murray hints at when she writes that, for interactive drama to be successful, “participation in an immersive environment has to be carefully structured and contained [...] the range of allowable behaviors should seem dramatically appropriate to the fictional world” (1998, 106). In this regard, Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman state that “limiting a player’s freedom is an effective and frequently used method of creating personality to [sic] the protagonist character” (2003, 2); Nick Montfort writes that the player-character should be understood as “a constraint and possibility defined by the author, within which the interactor is bound to a particular perspective and a particular set of capabilities” (2007, 145); and Peter Bayliss argues that the limitation of the playable figure to a predefined set of action possibilities “highlight that the avatar is also a character” (2007a, 2).

In a later paper, Lankoski expands on this point, engaging in an analysis of the fighting game *Dead or Alive 3* (Team Ninja 2001) that takes as its starting-point the observation that “each selectable PC [player-character] attacks differently” (2011, 298). This leads, he argues, not only to a ludic differentiation between the various playable figures, each of which, in the fighting game tradition, grants the player idiosyncratic tactical advantages and disadvantages – with some, for instance, having slow but powerful attacks, while others are defined through nimble movement. Lankoski’s

argument is that *Dead or Alive 3*'s “predefined functions and possible and impossible actions (i.e., the kinds of attacks a character is able to do)” allow it to “distinguish different PCs from each other,” (ibid., 300) not only as game components, but also as characters. The reason for this is that it is the actions available to her through the particular playable figure she has chosen that will determine:

...whether a player will try to fight using counterattacks, powerful attacks, or faster and weaker attacks. Consequently, a player will project intentions to the character, and those projected intentions are likely to influence the perceived personality of the character. (ibid., 298)

Lankoski's insight here is indispensable, not only insofar as it highlights the manner in which the playable figure's capabilities and limitations act as meaningful CSs, but also in paving the way for a discussion I shall soon move on to: namely, that of accounting for the way in which actions performed by the player can be taken up in the service of characterization.

In mechanical terms, Katie's capabilities in *Gone Home* do not go far. Apart from the basic spatial abilities of looking and moving conventionally associated with the first-person perspective, the only capabilities she has are picking up and examining objects in the environment, and interacting with household objects by means of a single, context-sensitive “use” command (for instance, turning light switches on or off). Where Katie's abilities go beyond this basic set is in her capacity to scrutinize objects: when Katie picks up an object, she can zoom in to examine its details, and rotate it to view it from every angle. With progress in the game depending on scouring mundane items – crumpled notes and receipts, old magazines and school assignments – for clues, this close scrutiny becomes a major aspect of Katie's character, as we perceive it in the game: one might deduce from this a CS defining Katie as a good observer, or as a meticulous personality.

Joel's capabilities in *The Last of Us* are largely defined by the game's adherence to the third-person action-adventure genre. As such, the ability to walk, run, move stealthily, take cover, use firearms and engage in melee combat constitute the standard set of capabilities for this genre. If we are to identify any meaningful CSs here, they must lie

either in idiosyncratic emphases or nuances within this conventionalized set, or in the way(s) in which these affordances are contextualized. In the first case, the two additions to the generic action-adventure set of capabilities are Joel's "listen mode" – effectively similar to x-ray vision, allowing the player to identify the locations of enemies hidden behind walls – and his ability to pick up the discarded bottles or bricks littering the gameworld and put them to a variety of uses, throwing them to create a distraction or using them as projectile or melee weapons. Taken together, these affordances emphasize a strong sense of spatial and environmental awareness, privileging careful, studied planning. In the second case, the orientation of the essentially violent set of affordances towards a setting which, as we have described, is almost constantly life-threatening, frames the violence, at least initially, as necessary, desperate self-defense rather than as unwarranted aggression – though, as these acts of violence accumulate and escalate throughout the course of the game, the player might be forced to reconsider this initial assumption about Joel's attitude towards his own violent acts.

ii) *Passion*

It is not enough to consider what the player-character can and cannot do in its relation to the other entities in the gameworld. As I noted in section 7.2.6, the ludic subject is determined by its passions as much as its actions; by its vulnerability and openness to be acted upon as much as by its capacity to act. The same remains true once the focus is shifted to the level of character: as such, player-characters are also defined by what we might term their *passions* – the ways in which they are passively open to the influence of other entities in the gameworld.

Once again, Katie appears to be quite limited in this regard: she is not physically affected in any way by any other entity in the gameworld. Joel, on the other hand, is vulnerable to a great number of threats presented by his post-apocalyptic milieu and its inhabitants. A face-to-face encounter with the more dangerous types of infected frequently results in instant, unavoidable death. There are also numerous environmental threats: areas infected by fungal spores require Joel to put on his gas mask or risk infection, and he is also liable to drown in the occasional sections where he must venture

underwater to clear a path ahead. This fragility in the face of an extremely hostile environment further contextualize Joel's affordances, framing them even more clearly as the necessary way of life he has had to adopt in order to survive

iii) *Goals*

The player-character's capabilities and limitations are not meaningful in isolation: they gain their significance through being set to work towards a goal or set of goals. The same is true of its passive dimension, which only gains meaning through being understood as hindering or facilitating the achievement of the goal/s in question.<sup>9</sup>

These goals – whether set by the game or self-imposed by the player – are, by definition, the player's own, ludic goals. At the same time, however, they can also be attributed to the player-character as a heterocosmic individual: this mirroring results in what Lankoski termed a “goal-related engagement” between the player and her character (2011, 297). More importantly for our current purpose, this means that the ludic goals assigned to the player, when grasped as the player-character's goals within the gameworld, can serve as yet another CS layer – “goals are a very powerful tool of presenting the nature of a character” (Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman 2003, 5).

Katie's goal in *Gone Home* is to be investigative: she is placed in the detective role in a textbook example of an embedded narrative structure (Ryan 2007; Vella 2011, 8), piecing together events that took place before her arrival on the scene. Her intention, then, is that of deducing the events that have taken place in her family's life during her time away. As a CS, this is open to being read in a number of ways: it could be interpreted as connoting nothing more than an idle, detached curiosity on Katie's part, or it could be read as her displaying worry and concern for her missing sister.

Joel's overarching goal is to protect Ellie, and to escort her safely to the end of the game: this frames his capabilities for action and violence in a very different perspective compared to if these capabilities were employed towards ensuring only his own survival. Where these capabilities – and the actions that result from putting them to

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<sup>9</sup> In this regard, it is instructive to recall the meditation on the example of the crag first developed by Jean-Paul Sartre (1966[1943], 620), and later elaborated on by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002[1945], 507), which I have already discussed in section 5.3.

use – could have been read as simply demonstrating a fierce hunger for survival and a drive for self-preservation, they are instead recontextualized as demonstrating paternal care and protectiveness.

*iv) Attributes*

In addition to being defined by their capabilities to act upon the world, their passive vulnerability to be acted upon by it in turn, and the goals towards which their actions are oriented, player-characters are also determined, in a perhaps even more direct manner, by means of their statistical attributes. These can be made available to the player as direct statistical values – as in the case of most RPGs – or they may only become evident to the player ecologically, by witnessing the character interact with the gameworld and drawing conclusions. In the fighting game *Soul Calibur* (Project Soul 1999), for example, the player can note that Taki moves around the arena much faster than Astaroth: thus, while the underlying statistical values that define each character as a game component remain at the level of the unseen game system, simple observation of the game in progress is enough to reveal the presence of these values.

This last example reveals an important point to be made here. Unlike the other categories of ludic elements, attributes only have the possibility of serving as meaningful CSs if they can be compared to those of at least one other (player or non-player) character. Their significance, in other words, is relative rather than absolute. The player might realize she has been playing a character with a particularly high strength value only when she switches to playing a character with a much lower value for this particular attribute, which provides her with a point of comparison she would not have had otherwise. Since the figure's statistical attributes address its relation to the game system in the computational language of the game system, these values only refer to that system and cannot meaningfully be compared to an external frame of reference, hence necessitating an internal one if they are to have any meaning. A character's slow movement might simply be a function of the given game's general slow-paced nature: it can only become the basis for a meaningful CS ("This is someone who moves slowly") if a character who moves around the world faster makes the first character's sluggishness

significant by contrast. In practical terms, while Taki's speed is a meaningful CS when contrasted with Astaroth's relatively unwieldy movement, it makes little sense to compare Taki's movement to that of Chun-Li in *Street Fighter IV* (Capcom 2009), since the attributes of the respective characters address entirely different game systems.

There are significant exceptions to this general rule: visible statistical attributes might provide the basis for an internal comparison between an individual character's strengths and weaknesses. Imagine the situation of encountering an RPG player-character about which nothing is known expect that he possesses a Strength value of 18 and an Intelligence value of 6; or, conversely, a player-character with the reverse of those values. Even without knowing how these values compare to those of other characters in the game, a player with even a passing knowledge of the conventions of the genre will have no trouble finding ready stereotypes to draw on in order to flesh out this basic level of information into an image of a possible individual. Based only on this information, the player might guess that the first character belongs to some form of melee-combat-focused warrior class, such as a barbarian, while the second would be likely to be a magic user, possibly a wizard. Given that each of these stereotypes brings with it a whole range of assumptions regarding, for instance, the physical appearance, dress, habits and behaviour of the individual in question, the power of attributes as a vehicle for CSs becomes particularly evident.

The second exception by which statistical attributes might become meaningful CSs even with no other characters present upon which to base a comparison is in the situation where a character development system – a point I shall examine below – allows the player-character's set of attributes to change over time. As such, the present configuration of the player-character's statistical attributes might gain significance in contrast to an earlier configuration, or to possible choices along the branching tree of character-development options that were not selected.

So established have statistical attributes become as an efficient means of specifying character that they have transcended the boundaries of the ludic form, having been borrowed – albeit always in self-conscious quotation marks – by works in other

medialities. Thus, Bryan Lee O'Malley's graphic novel *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* (2004) – a work which borrows extensively from videogames for its iconography and structural properties – is able to use explicitly-given statistical attributes as an efficient means of providing the information required to establish its characters in its first pages.

Katie in *Gone Home* has no visible attributes, and, with no other characters present in the game, no points of comparison are available by which her attributes might be brought into relief: as such, no CSs can be identified for Katie in this category. In *The Last of Us*, meanwhile, Joel is defined through a number of attributes: maximum health, listen mode distance, crafting and healing speed and weapon sway, as well as mastery of the various categories of weapons available to use in the game.

v) *Development*

Changes in the ludic aspects of the playable figure – for instance, through a change in their statistical attributes, or in their set of capabilities – can become a vehicle for CSs expressing the way in which a character might change over time. One could reasonably observe that it is strange to list 'development', which, by definition, implies mutability, under the category of static mimetic elements. This complaint can be answered by making the point that, while character development in this sense does indeed refer to diachronic changes in the constitution of a character's ludic elements over the course of a game, the *capacity* for development, or the lack of this capacity, is itself a static element.

In almost all cases where development is a property of a player-character, this development is structured as an incremental improvement in the character's capabilities and statistical attributes. This is the model to which the standard levelling-up character development mechanic of the role-playing game genre subscribes. However, it is also possible to think of examples where character development goes along a different route. In *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle 1999), for example, if the Nameless One is being played as a mage, the player can choose to permanently lose a number of hit-points in exchange for learning a set of powerful fire spells from Ignus, a mage who joins his party. Interpreted as a CS, the resultant shift in the Nameless One's attributes as a playable



figure would imply a character who has been consumed and rendered physically frail by the powerful magic he wields.

There is no development in Katie's ludic aspects throughout the course of *Gone Home*. Joel, on the other hand, follows the standard mode of improvement. While exploring the game's environments, it is possible to find pill-like 'supplements' that can be accumulated and used to 'level up' a number of Joel's attributes – for instance, his maximum health, or the speed with which he can craft items.

## 9.5 Dynamic mimetic elements

In Margolin's model, CSs addressing dynamic mimetic elements are those which refer to "verbal, mental or physical acts" performed by that character (1986, 206): actions serve as indexical signs for particular traits in the individual personality by which they are produced. Margolin argues that this is true not only of physical acts, but also of verbal ones – referring not just to the linguistic content of a character's speech, or even to paralinguistic elements such as tone of voice, but, rather, subsuming both to an understanding similar to John Searle's speech-act theory (1969). If we are also made privy to the character's inner life through an internally focalized mode of presentation, then purely mental acts (what a character thinks, decides, plans, wonders, etc.) can also constitute meaningful CSs.

A conceptual formulation for this category of CSs must therefore be built upon a consideration of the role played by action in the process of characterization. Of course, Margolin was far from the first to link action explicitly to character – I have already noted, in section 2.2.1, that Aristotle wrote that "imitative artists represent men in action" (2000[c.335BC], 59), at one go determining character to be the object of art *and* specifying representation of action as being the means by which representation of character may be achieved. Henry James famously argued that character and action – or, in his term, "incident" – in narrative are essentially two sides of the same coin, saying:

“what is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” (1956[1884]).

Naturally, this dimension of characterization reveals the entry-point by which the analytical framework for the ascription of action (see section 8.1.4), as it is taken up by Ricoeur as the primary mechanism for the characterization of the self (1992, see section 8.2.3) can be brought into the current discussion. This is a move that, with a view to the final achievement of an understanding of the textual unity of the player-character as the image of a ludic self, has two advantages. First, the conceptual analysis of action and its terminus in the ascription of intentional action to the agent grants an added incisiveness to the analysis of dynamic mimetic elements as a mechanism of characterization. It becomes clearer that listing an action as a CS pertaining to a character reveals more than simply, “This character has done *A*,” but, at the same time, also ascribes that quality to that character – “This character is defined as someone who does *A*”. Possible extenuating circumstances and justifications aside, a character who commits a murder is a murderer, and the predicate “is a murderer” becomes one of the set of “distinctive marks” (Ricoeur 1992, 119) by which the character is defined. Second, in the reverse direction, the incorporation of the analytical framework of the ascription of action into the wider frame of Margolin’s semiotic model of character allows it to take its rightful place among all the other avenues by which a character is determined.

With regard to the player-character, an important theoretical distinction needs to be drawn between two categories of action: those that, whether in the form of off-line sequences or through some other technique, are performed independently of the player, and those which are performed through player input. These shall be termed, respectively, *character actions* and *player actions*.

### 9.5.1 *Character actions*

This constitutes the less conceptually problematic of the two sub-categories of dynamic mimetic elements. In most games, there is some set of actions which the player-character is observed to perform without any input from the player. These might include actions

the player sees the character perform when she is, to use Newman's terminology, "off-line", not actually playing: for instance, during a cutscene, or in the form of an idle animation that is triggered if a certain amount of time elapses without player input – Sonic's impatient foot-tap in *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sonic Team 1991) is a particularly iconic example of the latter. The verbal acts that constitute a character's voice-over – such as Garrett's vocal interjections in *Thief: The Dark Project* – would also be considered under this category. This can also include actions taken by the character during play – that is, to use Newman's term, during the player's "in-line" engagement (2002); while exceptional, cases exist where the player-character refuses to follow the player's input, perhaps performing a different action of their own accord. Guybrush Threepwood in *The Curse of Monkey Island* (LucasArts 1997) is representative of this, frequently refusing to perform dangerous or unpleasant instructions – such as insulting a gang of fearsome pirates – and instead performing an entirely different, unexpected action of his own accord. Such actions are unequivocally to be attributed to the character rather than the player, and, as such, can easily be taken as strong CSs whenever they occur. In this regard, in terms of the dimensions of the player-figure relation, such actions – which the player can, in no way, ascribe to 'herself,' can clearly be taken to fall within the domain of the relation of other.

With no cut-scenes or other form of off-line sequence, the instances in *Gone Home* in which Katie performs an action of her own accord are few – in fact, precisely six in total – but revealing. Mostly, these fall under the category of mental acts, representing Katie's thoughts on the situation at hand by means of short text interjections on-screen. One of the first objects found in the course of the game, concealed in a trunk on the porch, is a duck-shaped festive ornament. When the player picks it up, we read Katie's thought on the matter, which is simply, "Good ol' Christmas duck" – a throwaway statement that reveals Katie's nostalgic relief at returning home after her time away.

Her remaining character actions build a clear, linked pattern. When searching her father's library, the player-as-Katie finds pornographic magazines hidden in a box beneath copies of his novel. Here, Katie's thought, marked with, the player might

imagine, embarrassment or disapproval, is, “Gosh, dad.” The situation is repeated, to cumulative, even comic, effect, when a *risqué* magazine is found hidden at the bottom of the wardrobe in Sam’s room (“Gosh, Sam”). Later, if the player decides to look through the drawers in Katie’s parents’ bedroom, a condom is discovered in the underwear drawer (“Gross”) and a self-help guide to improving one’s married sex life is found in the ensuite bathroom (“Ugh”).

Already there is enough in the form of characterization here to establish a distinct character trait – though, of course, to return to Barthes’ point about the fundamental elusiveness of character, the player might construct this trait in different ways: as a sign of a general discomfort about sexuality on Katie’s part, for instance, or, perhaps, more specifically, as embarrassment at coming across her family’s intimate secrets. The most forceful case of a character action on Katie’s part, however, is the final one, occurring when a torn-out page from Sam’s diary is found crumpled up in a waste-paper basket in the basement. When the page is picked up, it is displayed on-screen in the usual manner; however, the player is barely given enough time to skim the first few sentences, and get an idea of the subject of the page – in which Sam describes her erotic feelings towards Lonnie as their relationship grows more intense – before the page is automatically closed, with Katie’s comment, “Okay, that’s enough of that.” If the player tries to “use” the note again to continue reading, Katie flat-out refuses to do so, giving only the comment: “I...no.”

Where *Gone Home* is minimal in terms of character action, *The Last of Us* is maximal. Thanks to a wealth of cut-scenes, as well as to Joel’s numerous pre-scripted in-line conversations with Ellie and other NPCs, many of the actions that prove most crucial to Joel’s characterization are character actions that are not the result of player input. As a result of this, there are far too many individual character actions for us to present an action-by-action analysis on a similar level of granularity for the game as a whole. Instead, to provide an illustrative example, we can focus on a sequence of crucial character actions which occur in the game’s closing moments.

In the final sequences of *The Last of Us*, rather than allowing Ellie to be killed in a medical procedure to extract the source of her immunity, Joel violently infiltrates the headquarters of the Fireflies organization in order to rescue her, finally killing Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies, in cold blood to prevent her from ever attempting to track them down. Subsequently, he lies to Ellie about these events, leading her to believe the Fireflies let her go because there was no way of using her immunity as the basis for a vaccine. This sequence consists of a number of distinct acts which are crucial to the determination of Joel's character, and which are performed without any player input:

i) *Joel decides saving Ellie's life is more important than a chance to obtain a cure for the fungal epidemic that is driving humanity to extinction.* This mental act can be read as the final indication of his fatherly devotion to Ellie – a devotion which can be linked to the loss of his own daughter in the first days of the plague. Less positively, it can be read as the sign of his obsessive need to atone for his perceived failure to protect his own daughter, being willing to potentially put the entire future of humanity at risk in order to fulfill his own emotional need to care for Ellie. Viewing this mental action in the light of the traits that have already been established in Joel's characterization makes such interpretations of the act more likely than, for instance, attributing Joel's decision to his adherence to a moral perspective determined by a Kantian categorical imperative that forbids murder even in the case where such an act might prevent greater loss of life.

ii) *Joel shoots Marlene.* This physical act, while, superficially, no different from the many murders Joel has committed during the course of the game in order to ensure his own survival and to protect Ellie, bears a pronounced dramatic effect. Through Marlene's own characterization, she has been framed as far from a villain – she is level-headed, sympathetic, and idealistic; we learn that her decision to allow Ellie to be operated on was agonized over, leaving her wracked with guilt and self-doubt. In her confrontation with Joel, she is determined, but reasonable, conciliatory, and non-violent. Moreover, as the leader of the Fireflies, Marlene appears to embody one of the main hopes for the establishment of an alternative post-epidemic social arrangement to the military's totalitarian rule. Joel's decision to kill Marlene in cold blood when he realizes

he cannot sway her therefore serves to reinforce the traits of obsession and ruthlessness that have already been suggested.

iii) *Joel lies to Ellie about what happened.* This verbal act can be interpreted as a final instance of Joel's paternal attitude towards Ellie, shielding her from the guilt she might feel if she knew the truth. On the other hand, we might just as validly read this final action – with which the game ends – as a means for Joel to avoid confrontation with Ellie and to keep her enmeshed to him in a paternal relationship on which he has become emotionally dependent.

### 9.5.2 *Player actions*

In the vast majority of games, however, character actions in the sense described above constitute no more than a very small sub-set of the complete set of actions that can be attributed to the player-character. Much more numerous are *player actions* – those actions which are dependent on player input and, as such, unlike character actions, being perceived by the player as being her own as much as they are the character's.

The fact that this category of dynamic mimetic elements is labeled “player actions” is not in any way meant to insinuate that these actions are to be considered less relevant to characterization. It is only meant to differentiate these actions from those character actions which are performed independently of the player. As Rehak (2003, 107), Ryan (2006, 190) and Westecott (2009, 1) point out, and as I discussed at length in Chapter 8, games re-present to the player a mediation of the actions she herself performs within the gameworld; as such, player actions themselves become signs in the semiotic textuality of the game, and, in the process of characterization, are weighed just as much as character actions: “as the player controls the character, the actions the player takes in the game also define what the character is like” (Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman 2003, 3).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, to a great extent, the sequence of actions performed by the player in the course of playing a game – and, as a result, the aggregation of player actions that will ultimately be integrated into the set of dynamic mimetic elements determining the player-character *as* a character – is itself defined by the parameters of the “I can” that the player is granted through the playable figure. This was discussed in section 7.2.4 as one of the primary aspects of the ludic subject-position.

Of course, to a great extent, the sequence of actions performed by the player in the course of playing a game – and, as a result, the aggregation of player actions that will ultimately be integrated into the set of dynamic mimetic elements determining the player-character *as* a character – is itself defined by the parameters of the “I can” that the player is granted through the playable figure. This was discussed in section 7.2.4 as one of the primary aspects of the ludic subject-position; moreover, the set of capabilities and limitations linked to the figure as a game component has already been discussed as, in itself, a potential avenue for CSs. The set of player actions, it can be said, is an actualization of the set of the character’s capabilities and limitations: out of the set of possible actions available to her, the player, in the enactment of her ludic subjectivity, actualizes a particular sequence of actions.

Even if there is some room for the player to choose which actions to perform and which to avoid, she is always inescapably enacting one out of a limited set of actualizations of a given player-character. Here, it might be useful to recall Murray’s prescription that “participation in an immersive environment has to be carefully structured and contained,” in the sense that “the range of allowable behaviors should seem dramatically appropriate to the fictional world” (1997, 108). A crucial point needs to be made here: if a coherent character is to be the result of the processes of characterization taking place during the duration of a game, then the actions performed by the player, as CSs, have to match up, not only to the actions performed by the character, but to the complete set of CSs that define the character. Situations where the mechanical nature of the figure – and, as a result, the actions that the player is driven to perform through the figure in the act of playing – do not match up to the patterns established through other channels of characterization can potentially give rise to a dissonance between the on-line and off-line manifestations of a character, with it requiring more effort, or even becoming impossible, to connect the CSs available from both channels into a coherent set of character traits and attributes.

Arguably, in both *Gone Home* and *The Last of Us*, the set of available player actions firmly entrench the impressions we have already built of their respective player-

characters. Katie is primarily receptive, as befits someone fulfilling the role of an investigator unearthing an embedded narrative (Ryan 2007; Vella 2011). Essentially, the part she plays is a second-order narrative built around the investigation and gradual uncovering of a temporally-precedent first-order narrative – as such, she searches, she reads, she moves from room to room trying to piece clues together. It could be argued that, being located within this narrative structure, absent and temporally distanced from the events with which she is concerned, what is further emphasized is the sense of estrangement and alienation she feels towards her family after her time away, and her desire to reconnect with their lives.

Meanwhile, the player's actions as Joel – with play following a pattern of exploration of a sequence of environments in search of supplies, alternating with encounters with enemies that can be approached with stealth or with brute force – again play into the set of character traits already identified: his methodical, structured awareness of the situation, his ruthless efficiency and his level-headed approach to dangerous situations are all enacted in play. Furthermore, in the player's constant need to be aware of Ellie's location and status during combat – initially in order to ensure her safety, but, as the game progresses, also, increasingly, as a tactical ally – one can read both an underlining of Joel's protective, paternalistic attitude towards Ellie, and also the gradual (but never complete) shift in his attitude towards her as he begins to trust her with more responsibility.

## 9.6 Formal patterns

This is the most vaguely-defined category in Margolin's taxonomy, covering “grouping of [narrative agents]; the analogies, parallels or contrasts between them created by such groupings; repetitions or gradations, and various stylistic features associated with their introduction or occurrence” (1986, 206). As vague a delineation as this may be, it is nonetheless clear that this category involves a shift in focus. From looking at *what* about a character is represented, here the focus of analysis shifts to *how* it is represented, paying



attention to formal techniques and the deployment of aesthetic, generic and medial codes rather than to the extraction of nuggets of information.

A couple of examples of the kind of formal techniques which might be included in this category might suffice as an illustration. One could consider, for instance, the extent to which Katie's characterization is driven by a sustained contrast between her and Sam. This is most evident in the juxtaposition of their images in the family portrait: aspects of Katie's appearance which appeared neutral or unremarkable in isolation gain semiotic relevance through contrast with Sam. Katie's stylistically conservative black dress stands in contrast to Sam's flannel shirt, which aligns the younger sibling with the grunge and, more specifically, riot grrrl subcultures. Sam's androgynous outfit also serves to make the relative femininity of Katie's dress semiotically relevant.

Nor is the contrast between the siblings limited to the family portrait. Other explicit compare-and-contrast parallels are made throughout the game. At different points in the game, the player finds copies of the same school homework assignment – a biology exercise in which sentences have to be placed in the right order to give an account of the female reproductive cycle – filled in by both sisters. Katie's assignment is filled in correctly; Sam's, on the other hand, incorporates the given sentences into a Second World War narrative in which the protagonist's fiancé is killed in a bombing raid, drawing a parallel between the protagonist's grief and subsequent resilience and the biological process of menstruation and ovulation. The CS that is implied in the contrast between the two assignments – Katie as straight-laced, Sam as artistic and rebellious – does not need to be spelled out.

In the opening scene of *The Last of Us*, a common formal technique for introducing the player-character is exemplified in a particularly striking fashion. In general, it is an established technique for the player-character to be introduced in a cut-scene, thereby allowing the player an external perspective on the character before she is asked to step into the ludic subject-position the figure represents. The introductory cut-scene for *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (Naughty Dog 2007), for instance, economically reveals protagonist Nathan Drake – before handing control of him over to the player –

in a brief but action-packed scene of off-line engagement. While witnessing Drake in conversation with the journalist Elena Fisher, and then fighting off a pirate assault, the player learns that he is a descendant of the explorer Sir Francis Drake, a man of action who is not reluctant to get his hands dirty, a confident, somewhat brash, quick-witted individual who is never short of a quip to lighten the mood, and someone who is not above bending the rules to get things done.

*The Last of Us* follows the same pattern – providing the player with an initial experience of Joel from an external perspective – but does this through initially giving the player control of (hence, asking the player to inhabit the ludic subject-position of) Sarah, Joel’s young daughter. This prologue plays a vital role in Joel’s characterization – not only because Sarah’s death at the end of the sequence allows us to consider long-gestating sentiments such as grief and guilt as being central to Joel’s character, but also because it presents Joel to the player in the mode in which, once the player takes control of him, he will adopt towards Ellie: paternal, protective, resourceful. In essence, before the player picks up Joel’s controls, he has already been established as a character through being framed from an external perspective – an effect similar, if more pronounced, to that which is often achieved in games through an introductory cut-scene.

We can also identify another formal arrangement in *The Last of Us*: at a later stage in the game, and then again in its downloadable add-on, *Left Behind* (2014), the player is given control of Ellie, and hence has the opportunity to compare how the same actions are performed differently by the two player-characters. By necessity, Ellie’s actions are similarly violent, but instead of forceful determination, what we see in her movements – apart from the lightness of youth – is raw, undisciplined force, motivated not by efficiency but by fear and desperation. Thus, certain actions that Joel is capable of are impossible for Ellie: while Joel can sneak up on human enemies and kill them soundlessly, by grabbing hold of them and snapping their neck – thereby gaining a crucial stealth advantage – Ellie lacks either the physical strength or the hand-to-hand combat practice to pull off the maneuver.

To break this down according to the model I am in the process of establishing, Joel and Ellie, as player-characters, are determined through a broadly similar range of dynamic mimetic elements – whether this is player or character actions. However, thanks to much more drastic divergences in the static mimetic elements through which they are constituted – in this case, particularly thanks to the different animations through which the same actions are enacted – the same actions convey very different CSs.

This does not only illustrate the important point that one cannot take any category of CSs in isolation without considering how all the avenues of characterization we have outlined interrelate in a dense network of mutual influence and re-contextualizing. More crucially for our current point, the contrast that is created between Ellie and Joel as player-characters in the sequences in which player control switches to Ellie (a contrast which, as we have seen, is primarily founded on a minimal difference in the set of static mimetic elements associated with the respective characters) further serves to highlight Joel's own characterization. The contrast might therefore be resolved into CSs such as, "*Compared to Ellie, Joel is desensitized to killing others,*" or, "*Compared to Ellie, Joel moves more assuredly in combat situations.*" (Of course, the contrast also works, simultaneously, in reverse, providing CSs that define Ellie in relation to Joel at the same time as Joel is defined in relation to Ellie.)

## **9.7 From the player-character to the ludic self**

By means of this adaptation and elaboration of Margolin's semiotic-structural model of characterization, then, the notion of 'character' as a textual construct has been rendered concrete. The semiotic-structural model of the player-character that I have developed therefore provides a toolset for the textual analysis of player-characters across the multiple semiotic dimensions of their presentation. Such an analysis, in rendering the player-character into a defined semiotic *corpus* of CSs, is the necessary first step in a critical engagement with such characters as textual entities. Moreover, as I shall argue below, in the openings it allows for the player's own ludic-subjective actions to be

incorporated into this *corpus* of CSs, the mechanism is revealed by which the enacted ludic subject, in the disparate actions by which it is lived, can be gathered up into the representational unity of a character.

However, stopping simply at the proposition of this semiotic-structural model of the player-character, essential though it is, leaves us short of a complete understanding of the question of character as it relates to the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity. In this section, having laid down the understanding of character in its semiotic and textual dimension as the necessary baseline from which any rigorous approach to the analysis of character must start, I shall first proceed to consider how this semiotic substrate is overtaken in the formation of an impression of a heterocosmic individual. I shall argue that the key point in this process is the attribution of a subjectivity, and, hence, an interiority and a perspective, to the character. Upon this basis, I shall then proceed to return this understanding of the player-character back into the fold of the investigation of the ludic self, thereby drawing this investigation to its conclusion.

### *9.7.1 Reading the subjectivity beyond the textuality*

By their very nature, characters – much like the heterocosms of which they are members – are never available to the recipient of the work as figures whose outlines are completely shaded in. As Price notes, “fictional characters are only partially specified” (1983, 57).

Having completed both games and seen the processes of characterization through to the end, there remains much the player does not know about Joel and Katie. This applies not only to background biographical detail – say, where Joel was born, or what Katie’s favorite food is – but also to aspects of the respective characters that are crucial to the events occurring in the course of the game. It is never specified, for instance, whether Katie, in piecing together the details of Sam and Lonnie’s relationship, shares their parents’ disapproval of the same-sex relationship, or whether she holds a more open-minded attitude on the issue.

To a great extent, of course, this is due to the inevitable fact that characters are, by their very nature, “ontologically ‘thin’ and not maximal, having only a limited number

of properties and relations” (Margolin 1990, 847) – in other words, they share the ontological ‘smallness’ which, following Umberto Eco (1994, 85), I described as being an essential characteristic of the heterocosm in section 3.4.5. Fundamentally, this is also due to the basic duality of character, as articulated by Price (1983), Rimmon-Kenan (1983), Phelan (1989) and Heidbrink (2010): a character is a textual construct, but it is *also* the superseding of this construct in the form of the impression of an individual.

What shape, then, is taken by this impression of an individual that goes beyond the accumulation of textual data? It would not simply take the form of a mental addition, on the part of the recipient of the work, of more defining predicates to fill in the “gaps” left in by the work: for instance, by deciding, on the basis of no evidence in the work itself, that a particular character has red hair, or kept a pet basset hound as a child, and then adding these two ‘new’ CSs to the existing *corpus* to enrich the image of the character at hand.

Instead – and to return to Ryan’s setting-out of the dimensions of story – the crux of the leap from the textual dimension of character to what Phelan calls the “mimetic dimension” of character (1989, 2), and what Price calls the “suggestion and imitation of human life” beneath the “verbal surface,” is the leap into the mental dimension: that is, the assignation, to this figure concretized out of an accretion of textual data, of a subjectivity and a perspective on the world. It is this interiority that constitutes the purest indication of the irreducible, individual interiority that constitutes the essence of a character – the “precious remainder” that Barthes identifies (1974, 190) once the simple accumulation of textual signs have all been taken into account. With all the categories of CSs examined in the structural-semiotic model above, this opening onto the mental inner life is the direction in which each CS, once taken as a statement or predicate about the character in question, opens. To give just one example, the analysis of dynamic mimetic elements – that is, the character’s actions as CSs – involves the interpretation of action in the form of intentions, and hence, as I demonstrated in section 8.1.2, into mental predicates (Anscombe 1979[1957], 9; von Wright 1971, 86; Davidson 1980, 89).

At the end point of this move from textuality to the individual subject that is inscribed within its representational codes, the question of character opens onto that of perspective. Virginia Woolf observed that a textual character “has the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes” (1924, 19); this idea can also be seen in James’ notion of the character who acts as a “reflector,” through whose eyes a story is framed (1972[1908], 247), and, later, in the development of the notion of focalization (Genette 1980, 189, see section 4.1.3), particularly as it results in Mieke Bal’s notion of the focalizing character, in which “we [as readers] see through the eyes of the character” (1985, 104).<sup>11</sup>

This concretizes the ontological duality of character that was alluded to earlier: in this sense, then, a character is both a textual exteriority and a subjective interiority, with the former acting as a representation of the latter – or, conversely, with the latter only emerging in an interpretative concretization on the basis of the former.

### 9.7.2 *The player-character, the ludic self and the player*

In the analysis of the player-character as a specific *kind* of textual entity, however, there is an additional factor at play which accounts for an ‘incompleteness’ of the player-character that is entirely different to the incompleteness of character identified by literary theorists like Margolin, Price or Alan Palmer, who writes that a character only exists as a character once the reader “collects together all of the isolated references to a specific proper name in a particular text and constructs a consciousness that continues in the spaces between the various mentions of that character” (2004, 176).

It is on this crucial point that a player-character does not exist as a fully-determined *corpus* of CSs until actualized by player input that the ontological nature of the player-character is set apart from other formulations of character; crucially, it is also on this point that the discourse of character returns this investigation fully into the

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<sup>11</sup> This should, of course, serve to recall the discussion on the noetic mode of presentation in section 4.1.1, where, without thematizing the matter of ‘character,’ this investigation paused to consider the situations in which the textual heterocosm is framed through the subjective perspective of a member of the heterocosm.

territory of ludic subjectivity. In formal terms, this difference is predicated on the ergodic nature of game textuality (Aarseth 1997, 1): since the user function of the player is configurative, the complete set of CSs that constitute a player-character's textual substrate is not present and accounted for from the start, but is only fully determined once the player's selections and ludic actions have traced out a path of traversal through the network of possibilities offered by the game and, in the case of *The Last of Us*, for example, actuated a specific 'Joel' out of the network of possibilities afforded by the game. One player might favour Joel's affordances for stealth and spatial awareness, patiently assessing every situation and avoiding confrontation and violence where possible. Another player might instead make a point of eliminating every hostile individual encountered. The ludic subject-position *The Last of Us* establishes allows for both styles of play, but the ludic self – and, hence, the character – that is enacted in the first playthrough is different from the character that results from the second, even with all the other CSs that go into his constitution remaining unchanged.

However, for the purposes of this investigation, what is even more important is what this highlights on the level of ludic subjectivity. In section 6.4.5, I discussed the presentation, in *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer 2013), of the player's dialogue choices in the format of a screenplay. In section 8.3.1, I demonstrated how the player's subjective experiences relating to the taking of a difficult jump over a ravine in *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996) are subsequently accompanied by the experience of *watching herself* perform the jump. In section 8.4, I considered at some length the aesthetic mechanisms by which the voice-over narration in *Bastion* (Supergiant Games 2011) not only represented the actions constituting the player's enacted ludic subjectivity, but also granted them significance through placing them within a generic, iconographic and narrative context.

Recasting these observations in the light of the conceptualization of the player-character as a textual unity, it becomes possible, finally, to outline the *ludic self* as a formal structure that lies at the core of the aesthetics of subjectivity set in motion by the figure game. To the observation, which I have already stressed, that the game's textual

presentation offers the player a representation of her own ludic-subjective actions (Rehak 2003, 119; Ryan 2006, 190; Westecott 2009, 2), I can now add a second insight. What gathers the representation of these actions into a meaningful textual unity that is comprehensible, to the player, as the image of herself, as an ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ – a self-image she can hold up as an object of perception – is the fact of their being gathered up within the signifying unity of the player-character. As a result, these represented actions are given meaning through their context within the set of CSs by which they are surrounded, incorporated into the presentation of an ‘other’. At the same time, however, the constitution of this other through the set of actions the player identifies, proprioceptively, as *hers* (see section 8.1.1) recasts the whole into a form the player can simultaneously recognize, and grasp, in the completeness of its textual unity, as a representation of ‘herself’ – a ludic self that gives shape, form and unity to her enacted ludic subjectivity.

The end-point of the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity, however, is not the sublimation of this image of the ludic self out of the experience of ludic subjectivity, which, once this image has been achieved, ceases to be important. Instead, it is precisely in the interrelation between the ludic subjectivity, as it is lived in its first-personal experiential dimension, and the ludic self as the textual representation of this ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ on a second-order level of experience, that the primary mechanism of the aesthetics of ludic subjectivity can be identified. This returns the investigation, again, to the question of the double perspective: from the internal perspective, I *am* my ludic subjectivity, while, from the external perspective, this ludic subjectivity which I *am* becomes available to me in the form of a textualized character. As such, ludic subjectivity, on an aesthetic level, is a subjective interiority and an objective exteriority reflecting each other – the two dimensions cannot but interrelate.

I shall draw, one last time, on Ricoeur in order to conceptualize this duality. In developing his understanding of ‘character,’ he argues that what is designated by the term should be understood as belonging to:



...two orders, that of objectivity and that of existence. A portrait painted from outside? But also a manner of being that is one's own. A combinatory of permanent features? But an indivisible style. A type? But an unsubstitutable singularity. A constraint? But a fate that I am, the very one to which I must consent. (1992, 119ff.)

My 'character' is, on an external level, a conscious self-ascription born of a reflective movement - a consistent 'self' I hold out before me which, through being so held out, is *not* me, and which, on a moment-by-moment basis, I can succeed or fail in living up to. At the same time, 'character' refers to the "limited openness of our field of motivation taken as a whole" (1986, 60), or that being which *I am* without being able to choose otherwise. In the same way, the 'character' of my ludic subjectivity is both the organized, unified image that is presented to my external perspective as the image of a ludic self, and, at the same time, also the attributes and parameters which structure the disposition of my first-personal experience as a being-in-the-gameworld.

## 9.8 Conclusions

This consideration of the question of character has therefore led this investigation to its end point. By way of identifying where the notion of character fits into the conceptuality of ludic subjectivity – and also by way of offering a recap as this investigation draws to a close – I shall go through the primary steps that have been identified in the aesthetics of subjectivity of the figure game:

- First, the player adopts an embodied *ludic subject-position* in the gameworld by taking on the playable figure as her body in the gameworld. This allows her, in existential terms, to organize the gameworld around her standpoint as a factual situation.
- The parameters of the ludic subject-position will structure her being-in-the-gameworld into a particular mode, granting it its specific disposition and comportment.

- By engaging with the gameworld in the existential shape it has been given by her embodied ludic subject-position, the player enacts a *ludic subjectivity*. The ludic subject, on this level, is, as its name implies, a purely internal, first-personal construct. It is the 'I' to which the complete set of the player's intentional acts towards the gameworld (perceptions, intentional actions, etc.) pertain: it is what allows the player to experience her actions as a ludic subject proprioceptively, as her own. It is, as such, an operation on the dimension of the subjective relation: the ludic subject is not itself an object of view; instead, it is what brings the gameworld into view.
- At the same time, the investment of the ludic subject in the playable figure, as an entity the player stands apart from, establishes a dimension of otherness within this fundamental selfhood of the ludic subject. It is 'I-in-the-gameworld,' but it is an 'I' that I-as-player can, if I wish to, distance myself from.
- This is possible due to the player's retaining of an external subjective standpoint *as* a player outside the game – a standpoint which is supported by the game's audiovisual presentation of the player's own enacted ludic subjectivity back to her. Thus, this external standpoint frames a perspective the player can adopt upon her own enacted ludic subjectivity, resulting in a mechanism of autoscopy. Here, an image can be grasped of the *ludic self*, that is, the player's own enacted ludic subjectivity as it appears to her as an object of perception from an external perspective.
- Finally, this image of the ludic self, as textualized within the game's audiovisual presentation, is organized according to the logic of character, granting it aesthetic unity, coherence and significance.

The textualized form of the player-character, then, provides the player with an image of her enacted ludic subjectivity organized according to the laws of order, finitude, internal structure and cohesion of narrative, and encoded within the iconographic, generic and

formal systems of the game's textuality, and therefore available to her own perception as an aestheticized ludic self.





## In conclusion

*“We are who we pretend to be, so we must be careful who we pretend to be.”*  
- Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

In the Philip K. Dick short story “We Can Remember It For You Wholesale” (1997[1966]), the protagonist, Douglas Quail, visits Rekal Incorporated, a company that offers the service of implanting “extra-factual memories.” Quail, desiring to visit Mars but knowing he is unlikely to ever be able to afford the trip, wishes to at least have the memories of *having had* the experience.

Once at Rekal’s premises, he learns of an optional extra to the experience. Should he so desire, he can choose, not only to be implanted with the memory of having been on another planet, but, over and above that, to have been to Mars *as someone else*, namely, as a secret agent on a mission. As the Rekal employee McClane says in the story’s cinematic adaptation as *Total Recall* (Verhoeven 1990):

What is it that is exactly the same about every single vacation you have ever taken? [...] You! You’re the same. No matter where you go, there you are. It’s always the same old you. Let me suggest you take a vacation from yourself.

As a narrative trope, the idea of ‘becoming someone else’ that this invokes is couched in the language of escapism or wish-fulfillment. As I noted in the introduction to this study, it is precisely with this language that the emergence of the figure game as an aesthetic form was announced, and it was precisely these same two dreams that were held out to potential players. *You can travel to marvelous worlds*, these games professed – other planets, monster-ridden dungeons and fantastical landscapes. *You can be someone else*, they added – usually, of course, a heroic figure of some description, a brave knight, a powerful wizard or a space marine.

As has become evident, the answer to the first of these promises is the establishment of a gameworld – a self-contained ontic domain that is distinct from the player’s own world and that represents a ludic heterocosm. This world being established,

it is still necessary for the player to be given an existence within it, in order for her to have the experience of *being in the gameworld*. For this reason, the player is given a playable figure within this world, which, in an act of interpellation, she is asked to identify as “you” – that is, as *herself-in-the-gameworld*.

Through a set of formal mechanisms gathered around the form of this playable figure, it comes to represent, for her, an *embodied ludic subject-position*. In other words, the playable figure becomes her subjective standpoint in the gameworld. It allows her to meet the things in the gameworld on their level, as an ontic equal, a member of the same world. It serves as the centre of her spatial organization, allowing her to describe things-in-the-gameworld as ‘near’ or ‘far’ based on their position relative to the playable figure. It grants her a visual point-of-view and an aural standpoint. It provides her with a particular “I can,” a set of capabilities for action she can direct towards the things-in-the-gameworld, and it also gives her a set of goals towards which to orient herself, and in the light of which her actions will take on the shape of existential projects. By the same token, it also allows her to, in turn, be affected by the things of the gameworld, to, for better or worse, be acted upon by them.

In all of these ways, this ludic subject-position that the playable figure grants the player structures her being-in-the-gameworld into a particular mode, giving her a specific disposition towards the gameworld and determining her comportment within it. If the playable figure is a lithe, agile but vulnerable young boy, as in *Ico* (Team Ico 2001), the player is likely to clamber all over the game’s architecture, making full use of the athletic “I can” she has been granted in order to explore every nook and cranny of the gameworld; conversely, she is likely to be wary in a fight, knowing how frail the form she has been given is. On the other hand, if the playable figure happens to be Batman, as in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady Games 2009), then the player – having been granted an “I can” that includes, within its range, “I can beat up five thugs in a brawl” – is much more likely to engage with the gameworld from a position of power, and to not be afraid of a fight.

By engaging with the gameworld through the frame of the ludic subject-position, the player enacts a *ludic subject* – the first-personal bearer of a subjective stream of experiences relating to being in, and acting in, the gameworld. The term ‘first-personal’ here addresses the proprioceptive character of these experience: the player recognizes all of these experiences as *hers* – meaning, also, that she *recognizes herself in them*. She is likely to say, “I climbed up to the highest tower to admire the view,” or “From there, I could see the bridge to the mainland,” or, “I beat up the five thugs in the alley.” The player’s ludic subjectivity, then, is a being-in-the-gameworld she experiences, and recognizes, as her own.

I have spoken about the first of the two promises that the figure game makes the player – that of *being in another world*. This still leaves the second of the two promises to be answered – the promise that the game will let you not only *be in the gameworld*, but *be someone else*. However, I need hardly point out that this has already been addressed in meeting the first promise. In order for the player to have the experience of being in the gameworld, she is placed in a relation to the playable figure: this playable figure structures her ludic subject-position, and, as a result, determines her experience of, and in, the gameworld on every level: in terms of how the gameworld is given form and meaning in her experience as well as in the character of the ludic subjectivity she enacts in this gameworld.

In other words: the playable figure comes with its own identity that is distinct from the player’s, and, as a result, the ludic subjectivity the player enacts in the gameworld will bear its mark as much as the player’s. In the examples above, it might have been the same player engaging with *Ico* and with *Arkham Asylum*. However, she was not the same ludic subject in both games: engaging with the respective gameworlds through the embodied ludic subject-positions of Ico and of Batman leads her to enact ludic subjectivities that bear the distinctive identities of these playable figures. Playing *Arkham Asylum*, she is *both* herself *and* Batman: more to the point, her being-in-the-



gameworld can best be described as ‘herself-as-Batman,’ a wavering between the pole of *self* and *other* that constantly retains both in suspension.

The ‘I-in-the-gameworld,’ then, is already revealed as a complex entity, containing within it poles of identity and difference, selfhood and otherness, all while being taken up by the player in the first-person, as ‘I’.

Nor do matters end there. In all of this, ‘she’ – the implied player addressed in all of these cases – does not disappear into the ether: she is still present as the bearer of the experience of *being someone else*. In playing *Arkham Asylum*, she takes up the playable figure of Batman. In doing so, as I have shown, she takes up the ludic subject-position he represents, and sees the gameworld, as it were, through his eyes. However, at the same time, there is still someone *here*, on this side of the screen – someone she recognizes as ‘herself’ – who is conscious of *having the experience of being Batman* at the same time as she *experiences the gameworld as Batman*.

This observation brings into view the fundamental double perspectival structure of the figure game, and the distribution of the player’s subjectivity that it structures. In the course of ludic engagement, the player occupies two subjective standpoints – a perspective internal to the gameworld, from which the gameworld appears to her as an experiential world, and a perspective external to the gameworld, from which the game is seen as a ‘mere’ artefact, one among the things in the player’s world.

In a sense, then, the player enacts two ‘I’s while playing the game. The first is the ‘I-in-the-gameworld,’ what I have termed the ludic subject, to whom the internal perspective belongs. The second is the ‘I-as-player,’ the individual sitting on the couch holding the controller in her hand, watching the game unfold on her TV screen. These two ‘I’s, and their two subjective perspectives, exist concurrently, in constant suspension, throughout the course of the player’s engagement with the figure game.

This distribution of the player’s subjectivity becomes particularly striking when taking into account what it means in relation to the ludic subject – the ‘I-in-the-gameworld’. In being taken up as a ludic subject – that is, when it is related to

subjectively – then this ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ is not itself an object of perception: rather, it is the player’s first-personal pole of experience of the gameworld, that is, the subjectivity *through which* she sees the gameworld. As the ludic subject ‘I-as-Batman,’ the player beats up five thugs in an alley; the attendant acts of consciousness – seeing the thugs, taking the decision to attack, choosing to punch the leftmost one first, and so on – are *hers*, and she relates to them proprioceptively.

At the same time, from her external standpoint, the player *sees herself-as-Batman* beating up five thugs. More accurately, what she sees is a representation of her own enacted ludic subjectivity, incorporated into the textual presentation unfolded by the game’s medial apparatus. Thanks to the distancing standpoint of the external perspective, then, the player is able to stand, not only in a subjective relation to the playable figure, but also, simultaneously, an objective one. She sees the gameworld, as the ludic subject, through the frame of the ludic subject-position, but, at the same time, she sees the ludic subject as an object of perception through the game’s mediation.

To sum up the mechanisms at work in the aesthetics of subjectivity that have emerged: the player relates to the playable figure as both *self* and *other*, both identifying it as ‘I-in-the-gameworld’ and retaining an awareness of its distinct identity as an other. At the same time, the player relates to the playable figure both *subjectively* and *objectively*: she adopts it as her ludic subject-position internal to the gameworld, while, at the same time, relating to it as an object of perception from the external perspective.

There is one more point to add. What is framed through the external perspective is not simply the playable figure as an other. Instead, as I have already suggested, it is the player’s own enacted ludic subjectivity – the player sees *herself* fighting the thugs, sees *herself* climbing the tower, sees *herself* seeing the view. The formal structure of the figure game form, then, provides the player with an aestheticized representation of her own, in-game subjective existence: an image of her *ludic self* that is available to her aesthetic contemplation.

It is opportune to note that the narrative trope of ‘being someone else’ rarely ends well. A cursory survey of such fictions would suggest that this is so for two distinct, almost diametrically opposed, reasons. First, there is the danger that the lines between the individual’s original subjectivity and her new one grow blurred – that the mask burns itself into the face, that we can so surely become another subject that we lose our grasp of who we ‘are’ ourselves. In “We Can Remember It For You Wholesale,” the implanted memories of the ‘other’ resonate unexpectedly with concealed memories of Quail’s own, leading to a cognitive breakdown as he is rendered unable to tell which experiences were his and which were not. In another example of the trope, Marghanita Lanski’s novella *The Victorian Chaise-Longue* (1999[1953]), this is taken to an extreme of existential horror: falling asleep on the item of antique furniture described in the title, the protagonist, Melanie, wakes up in the body of its previous owner, Milly, a Victorian-era woman dying of consumption. Horrified, she realizes, at one point, that she can no longer remain certain of the boundaries of her phenomenal subjectivity: feeling Milly’s bodily sensations as her own, she can no longer tell what, in the stream of her own consciousness, is ‘her’ and what is Milly.

In *Seconds* (Frankenheimer 1966), the opposite danger is highlighted – that the face shows through the mask, that we are too fundamentally ourselves to ever be able to escape our subjectivity and play out a different one. Arthur Hamilton (John Randolph), a middle-aged banker in an unhappy marriage, meets a mysterious organization who give him the chance of a new life in a new skin. After extensive cosmetic surgery and coaching, he re-emerges as Tony Wilson (Rock Hudson), an artist with a beach house in Malibu. However, what soon becomes apparent is that he has remained the same person beneath his new skin: that, despite having all the trappings of a glamorous new life and a privileged subject-position prepared for him at its centre, his dispositions, his mode of being, his *character* have remained fundamentally unchanged, and he is unable to comport himself in the way his new skin demands.

However, things do not always turn out so badly. In *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze 1999), Craig Schwartz (John Cusack) discovers a portal which, when entered, transports

one's consciousness into the subject-position (to keep to the terminology I have been using throughout this investigation) of the actor John Malkovich, seeing the world through his eyes *as* him. The experience proves so intoxicating that people are soon queuing to *be* John Malkovich for a few minutes – to have the experience of, as Schwartz puts it, “thinking differently, moving differently, feeling differently.” People who have this experience return to their own skin, and their own subjectivity, transformed: in the case of Lotte Schwartz (Cameron Diaz), for example, taking up a standpoint in a male subject-position, embodied within a male body, reveals a dimension to her *own* gender identity she had not previously been able to articulate.

The relations of self and other, and of subject and object, that constitute the formal structure of the aesthetics of subjectivity set in motion by the form of the figure game are unlikely to go as far as they do in any of these fictional examples. Nonetheless, what I have hoped to demonstrate through the set of interlocking analyses constituting this investigation is that the play of ludic subjectivity bears striking, and aesthetically rich, resonances with the phenomenological and existential structures by which subjectivity and selfhood are constituted. As such, in letting us engage with a self that is also another, and giving us the means to *live* this self, in an experiential and existential sense, at the same time as we can hold it before us at the distance of aesthetic contemplation, the form of the figure game foregrounds and aestheticizes the play of selfhood and otherness, identity and difference, and subjectivity and objectivity by which, as subjects and as selves, we constantly know ourselves, construct ourselves and, at the same time, escape our own grasp.



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