Feel the Force Around You: Haptic Narratology and the Problem of Focalization

Alexander Vandewalle
Ghent University
Department of Literary Studies
Blandijnberg 2 – 9000 Ghent (Belgium)
alexander.vandewalle@ugent.be

Keywords

haptics, narratology, focalization, games, film, virtual reality, *Star Wars*

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Video games, and other digital media, are not only seen and heard, but also felt (Keogh 2018; Swink 2009). While haptic technologies such as controller rumble date back to the 1970s, they became integrated into mainstream video games around the late 1990s, with the release of the Rumble Pak for the Nintendo 64 and PlayStation's DualShock controller in 1997 (Willumsen & Jaćević 2019, 5). Academics have often discussed haptic feedback in relation to its impact on user experience, such as potential increases in enjoyment, presence, or performance (e.g., Gibbs et al. 2022; Maggioni et al. 2017; Stach & Graham 2011). The most common dictum around haptic feedback – academically, colloquially, and industrially – is that haptics increase players' sense of immersion.

Much less researched, however, is how haptic feedback shapes not just ludic performance, but also narrative experience. Adding a tactile layer to audiovisual and verbal signs, haptics carry the potential to communicate narrative information through tactile means, from character emotions like stress, anger or infatuation to the weight and texture of objects, or the impact of explosions and earthquakes. Only a handful of narrative haptics analyses exist in game studies, usually in the area of character research: Willumsen & Jaćević (2018) discuss the controller rumble in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017, Guerrilla Games) as a way to kinaesthetically characterize the game's playable character, while Vandewalle et al. (2024) point to *Marvel's Avengers*' (2020, Crystal Dynamics) use of haptics to convey the protagonist's trembling fear when kidnapped. In this presentation, I investigate how haptics can be theorized more deeply in narratological terms.

To explore the narrative integration of haptics, I focus on three pieces of digital media from the *Star Wars* franchise (1977–present): *Vader Immortal: A Star Wars VR Series* (2019, ILMxLAB), *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor* (2023, Respawn Entertainment), and a 4DX film screening of *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* (2005, George Lucas), re-released in select theaters in 2025 for its twentieth anniversary ('*ROTS*-4DX'). 4DX cinema

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

complements the film's audiovisual experience with multi-sensory seats that move, rumble, and emit water and scents in tandem with on-screen events. I focus on *Star Wars* for various reasons: its transmedial nature allows to assess variations or consistencies across different media (VR, flatscreen gaming, and 4DX film); its immense blockbuster popularity means I can focus on widespread cultural media; and as a franchise centered around the mystical power of 'the Force', the series can diegetically incorporate haptics to enhance supernatural abilities like telekinesis, tele-choking, or tele-electrocution, which can all be expressed tactilely through rumble.

Specifically, I analyze haptics in relation to the narratological category of focalization, or – broadly speaking – the perspective from which a story is told. Genette (1972/1980) distinguished between internal focalization (the audience receives access to a character-focalizer's thoughts), external focalization (no access to character thoughts), and zero focalization (an omniscient narrator tells the story). These terms have subsequently been adopted by transmedial narratologists (e.g., Thon 2016) and adapted specifically to film (e.g., Branigan 1992) and games (e.g., Arjoranta 2017). In our context, haptics can be said to be focalized internally if the rumble scheme follows the bodily experience of a playable character ("body rumble"; Willumsen & Jaćević 2019, 12), whereas zero or external haptic focalization also reflects tactile elements beyond the character (e.g., many forms of "environmental rumble"; *ibid*.).

The *Star Wars* texts show how haptic focalization operates in different ways across different media (see Table 1). In *ROTS*-4DX, haptic focalization aligns mostly with the external perspective of the camera: in the scene where Chancellor Palpatine electrocutes the Jedi Mace Windu, the seat rumbles to tactilely imitate Windu's sensation of being hit with lightning. However, the rumble pauses when the film then cuts to the onlooking Anakin Skywalker – despite Windu still being electrocuted – only to resume when the screen returns to the battle scene. This type of 'camera-focalization', where the audience feels anything the camera sees, is also found in *Jedi: Survivor*, although the controller haptics also follow the sensory experience of the player-character, Cal Kestis: this includes his exertion of Force powers or being hit by enemy weaponry. In the embodied context of VR, where 360° imagery replaces the camera (Dooley 2017), there is (almost) no camera-focalization, and instead predominantly character-focalized haptics: the player feels what the character feels and, generally, no environmental features.

Virtual reality (*Vader Immortal*)	Character-focalized	Player feels what their character feels
Flatscreen gaming (*Jedi: Survivor*)	Character-focalized + camera-focalized	Player feels what their character feels + rumble in the shot, regardless of character
4DX cinema (*ROTS*-4DX)	Camera-focalized	Player feels rumble in the shot, regardless of character

Table 1. *Haptic focalization across media.*

While VR and flatscreen gaming use haptics more intensely for character-driven purposes, 4DX film struggles with this to a larger degree: different from *Vader Immortal*, it did not restrict haptics to one particular character-focalizer, due to its own employment of camera-driven external/zero focalization. Had haptics been used solely in relation to the film's protagonist, this would have made the seat ineffective in any scene without the character, thus limiting the experience. In flatscreen games, too, the expansion of rumble beyond the immediate perception of the character reduces its potential for tactile characterization, but makes for more constant haptic sensations. This, then, leads to what I consider haptics' problem with focalization: the more they connect to a specific focalizer, the more sparingly they seem to be used, and *vice versa*.

This study reveals how haptics impact narratives, on a variety of diegetic levels. Narrative experience is increasingly more than an act of seeing, listening, or performing, but also of feeling – while playing as a Jedi Knight, players are involved in a developer's tactile imagination of how such supernatural powers could feel. While this paper is an initial foray into haptic narratology, I hope to spark further narratological interest into these evolving technologies, especially as we stand on the cusp of what has been called a coming "haptics revolution" (Parisi et al. 2017, 1514).

REFERENCES

Arjoranta, J. 2017. "Narrative Tools for Games: Focalization, Granularity, and the Mode of Narration in Games." *Games and Culture*. 12 (7-8), 696-717. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015596271

Branigan, E. 1992. *Narrative Comprehension and Film*. New York, NY, USA: Routledge.

Crystal Dynamics. 2020. *Marvel's Avengers*. PC and console game. Square Enix and Crystal Dynamics.

Dooley, K. 2017. "Storytelling with virtual reality in 360-degrees: a new screen grammar." *Studies in Australasian Cinema*. 11 (3), 161-171. https://doi.org/10.1080/17503175.2017.1387357

Genette, G. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY, USA: Cornell University Press. (Original work published in 1972)

Gibbs, J. K., Gillies, M. and Pan, X. 2022. "A comparison of the effects of haptic and visual feedback on presence in virtual reality." *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*. 157, 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2021.102717

Guerrilla Games. 2017. *Horizon Zero Dawn*. PC and console game. Sony Interactive Entertainment.

ILMxLAB. 2019. *Vader Immortal: A Star Wars VR Series.* VR game series. Disney Electronic Content.

Keogh, B. 2018. *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*. Cambridge, MA, USA: The MIT Press.

Lucas, G. 2005. *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*. Motion picture. Lucasfilm.

Maggioni, E., Agostinelli, E. and Obrist, M. 2017. “Measuring the added value of haptic feedback.” 2017 *Ninth International Conference on Quality of Multimedia Experience (QoMEX).* 1-6. Erfurt, Germany: IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/QoMEX.2017.7965670

Parisi, D., Paterson, M. and Archer, J. E. 2017. “Haptic media studies.” *New Media & Society*. 19 (10), 1513–1522. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817717518

Respawn Entertainment. 2023. *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor*. PC and console game. Electronic Arts.

Stach, T. and Graham, T. C. N. 2011. “Exploring Haptic Media in Exergames.” In *Human-Computer Interaction – INTERACT 2011* edited by P. Campos, N. Graham, J. Jorge, N. Nunes, P. Palanque and M. Winckler, 18–35. Berlin, Germany: Springer.

Swink, S. 2009. *Game Feel. A Game Designer’s Guide to Virtual Sensation*. Boca Raton, FL, USA: CRC Press.

Thon, J.-N. 2016. *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture.* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Vandewalle, A., Malliet, S. and Demoen, K. 2024. “Playing with Character: A Framework of Characterization in Video Games.” *Games and Culture*. 19 (6), 722–742. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231179496

Willumsen, E. C. and Jaćević, M. 2018. “Avatar-Kinaesthetics as Characterisation Statements in *Horizon: Zero Dawn*.” *DiGRA ’18 – Abstract Proceedings of the 2018 DiGRA International Conference: The Game is the Message*, 1–4. https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2018i2.979

Willumsen, E. C. and Jaćević, M. 2019. “A Typology of Rumble.” *DiGRA ’19 – Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2019i1.1069