Making Sense in Ludic Worlds. The Idealization of Immersive Postures in Movies and Video Games

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ABSTRACT

In the ongoing efforts to theorize the interactive experience proposed by video games, it is common to make a distinction between fictional elements and the gameplay in itself. E. Adams distinguished between tactical, strategic and fictional immersions. In *Half-Real*, J. Juul has notoriously declared that video games encompass two things: fictional worlds and real rules. Many approaches stress the distinct nature of the immersive experience in games on account of their participatory nature. By contrast, M. Csikszentmihalyi's model of flow – a common foundation to discuss immersion in sports and games – has been applied without any modifications to art appreciation, an "activity" that many would argue doesn't propose clear goals and retroactions. Is there any common ground between games and fictional forms that can help us understand the cultural magnitude achieved by their synthesis through the video game medium? Building on current doctoral research and on Jean-Marie Schaeffer's effort to theorize our involvement with digital worlds as a continuation of the fictional immersion experienced in other media, this contribution seeks to evaluate the relevance of a general framework to discuss immersion. The optimization of experience in both video games and fiction films, and the various strategies that seek to shape an ideal immersive posture for us to inhabit, serves as foundation for the discussion.

Keywords
Immersion, Fictional worlds, Simulation, Optimization of Experience

Absorption, identification, transportation, engagement; immersion in fictional worlds has been discussed in literary and cinema studies through a great variety of interrelated concepts. The surge of academic literature on virtual worlds has vivified discussions on immersion, yet the conclusions are often paradoxical: as a continuation of illusion-making apparatuses, virtual reality interfaces seek to immerse the user evermore completely in a mage space (O. Grau [12]); new media are highly immersive by virtue of their spatial and encyclopedic nature, but the immersion proposed by narratives is more sustainable (J. Murray [16]); the poetics of interactivity – especially the highly self-referential interfaces of video games – are at odds with the poetics of immersion developed in narrative media (M.-L. Ryan [20]); the attempts to merge games and narratives are rather awkward, inefficient, or would require the development of procedural authorship (M.-L. Ryan [21]); through its participatory nature, engagement with game worlds is quite different from the fictional immersion experienced in movies or novels – it feels closer to reality (J. Juul [14]; E. Aarseth [1]). Depending on the accounts, immersion in games supposes something more (real rules, real participation) or something less than its fictional counterpart (a mimetic model of reality).

In their purest forms, it is rather easy to distinguish between the experience of a game – say, chess – and the experience of what we call fiction, and ludology has been quick to point out such a discrepancy. If both experiences are so distinct, why do they seem to merge with such insistence in the development of video games? How do we explain the intense fascination associated with popular JRPGs, such as the *Xenosaga* series (Monolith Soft), an "awkward" mix of game and long narrative segments that nonetheless seems to captivate otaku boys and girls for dozens of hours? The majority of contemporary video games propose rich mimetic worlds, and this aspect has been a major argument to theorize our involvement with these worlds within the encompassing theoretical framework of fictional immersion. The relationship between games and fictional forms is far from being explained thoroughly. While it is certainly impossible to resolve such a complex issue in this short paper, we will try to better understand how the experience of mimetic gaming worlds relates to the experience of fictional worlds. To do so, we will present some theoretical propositions that stress the distinctions and others which underline the continuity between the two experiences. Throughout this discussion, it is the validity of

Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009

an encompassing framework based on the concept of immersion that will be put up to scrutiny.

GAMES VS. FICTION

This paper is not the place to thoroughly sum up the debate between the early proponents of ludology and other positions associated with narratology (for such an account, see chapter 8 of *Avatars of Story* [21]). What Espen Aarseth refers to as "descriptive ludology" makes an essential point: some video games rely on purely arbitrary rules, much like the quintessential gaming experiences. The issue, however, is that purely arbitrary games in the vein of *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984) are clearly outnumbered by richly mimetic gaming worlds, where the player's input is translated into imaginary actions, and the goal of the game is to influence a set of imaginary events in a satisfactory manner. This development, which Juul sees as a major turning point in the history of games [14], raises an important question: even though they are not discovered with the same narratological means, are the imaginary events portrayed in video games of a similar nature than those experienced in fictional forms?

Some accounts, such as Ernst Adams' typology of immersion [2], went as far as to definitely separate the fictional component from any active involvement in the game. Here, fictional immersion is associated solely with the non interactive delivery of story elements through cut-scenes, while interactive segments are associated with either tactical or strategic immersion. However, most scholars have adopted less antithetical positions in the debate. It seems obvious that video games cannot simply be assimilated to previous fictional forms and studied with the narratological frameworks they inspired, but many ludologists now acknowledge that contemporary video games are permeated with fictional elements to some extent. In 2005, Jesper Juul has notoriously proposed the following compromise:

> Half-Real refers to the fact that video games are two different things at the same time: video games are real in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. [14]

Juul's wording here is very important and locates the debate firmly in the realm of ontology. On account of their participatory nature, video games become more "half-real" than other fictional forms; rule systems may incorporate imaginary entities such as a dragon, but the non-trivial physical effort it supposes on the part of the player brings it closer to the real. More recently, Aarseth has proposed to distinguish between many different ontological layers in the experience of video games; the dynamic models that are part of mimetic entities – say, a dragon – shifts the status of these entities from the purely fictional to the virtual, from fiction to simulation. Although the layer the most specific to games – labeled 'the virtual' by Aarseth – is distinguished from reality, here again, it is defined as being closer to our real-life experience:

> It is this model behavior that makes it different from a fiction since we get to know the simulation much more intimately that we come to know the fiction. […] Simulations allow us to test their limits, comprehend causalities, establish strategies, and effect changes, in ways clearly denied us by fictions, *but quite like in reality.* (emphasis mine) [1]

Aarseth observes that fiction films also include elements that are not purely fictional, but the interactive quality of video games appears to be the decisive factor that excludes their worlds from the realm of fiction: "instead of the common notions that game worlds are fictional, we should start to see them as composites where the fictional element is but one of the many types of world-building ingredients" [1]. Here again, the interactive nature of the models seem to change the ontology of the world experienced; this world is closer to reality.

These attempts to differentiate the worlds – and ultimately, the experience of fiction and games – are not completely ill-fated, but the "ontological ladder" that is put forward is problematic. It clearly encourages a teleological vision of video game evolution. It is not uncommon to come across conceptions that put immediacy – understood as a paradoxical will to recreate our typical experience of reality through media, but in a way that is seemingly unmediated (see Bolter and Grusin, 1999) – as the ultimate goal of the medium's evolution. In a contribution about immersion and presence in video games, Alison McMahan declares:

> A recent shift in computer game design involves a move away from 2-D level design in games like *Prince of Persia* (1992) to 3-D design and a first-person point of view. This shift increases the sense of immersion by replicating the aesthetic approaches of first-person shooter games in other types of games, such as adventure games, role-playing games, and even strategy games, which previously used 2-D levels or isometric views. *The shift in design is indicative of an overall trend to make desktop video games feel more like virtual reality*. (emphasis mine) [15]

The constant development of new controllers to interact with virtual worlds clearly feeds this conception of the medium's evolution. The marketing campaign for Nintendo's Wii console (code-named Revolution during its design phase) focused on the seemingly perfect adequation between the actual manipulation of the user and the resulting action in the game world; since then, Nintendo has rebutted itself with the introduction of Wii Motion Plus – which promises *true* 1:1 manipulation – and the

competition is now trying to one-up the successful Japanese corporation. We notice the same teleological view of the medium's evolution when it comes to the procedural models integrated into the worlds. Aarseth observes: "With today's increasingly more physics-heavy 3D games, the drive away from fiction towards simulation continues with the development of dedicated physics processors (PPUs), in order to emulate real-world physics ever more faithfully" [1]. The dream of procedural authorship also implies the development of evermore complex models of world and agent behavior. These models, managed by a procedural author, would allow the event-space to be extensively shaped by the player's virtual actions while insuring the satisfactory nature of the experience, and thus fully realize the promises of the interactive medium [16, 22]

Such a teleological account of the medium clearly distorts the actual state of video games; third-person perspective dominates many popular genres, and while complex models of physical phenomenon are integrated into games, the worlds at large appear to be defined by a very selective modeling of reality. Incidentally, this aspect seems to bridge contemporary mimetic games with traditional experiences of fictional worlds. It is our hypothesis that the common ground between the two forms resides in the optimization of experience they propose. Users are immersing themselves in crafted worlds and are willing to invest their cognitive, affective or procedural resources because they expect gratification, or at the very least, that gratification is more likely to occur through these experiences. The following overview should not be seen as an attempt to equate the experience of movies, novels, and video games, but rather as a presentation of the continuity that can be observed through different conceptual lenses.

GAMES AND FICTION. THE OPTIMIZATION OF EXPERIENCE

It is impossible to talk about the optimization of experience without referring to the seminal studies conducted by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In *Beyond Boredom & Anxiety* [8], Csikszentmihalyi exposed the result of interviews carried out with a significant sample of chess players, alpinists, dancers, etc. in order to better understand the structure of autotelic activities, that is, activities which provide tremendous gratification in themselves. The aspects underlined by the study include: focused attention, limitation of stimulus field, clarity of goals and retroaction, and most importantly a balance between skills and challenges. This balance is a key element in Csikszentmihalyi's account: in order to reach the state of *flow*, an individual must feel he or she can take on the challenges associated with an activity. If the development of skills is constantly balanced by new challenges, then this individual can enter the "flow channel". Torben Grodal speaks of a similar balance in order to define "total immersion" [13].

It is interesting to note how the individuals relate the experience of flow. When asked "Why do you like to play chess?", some players replied "It is another world" [8]. Csikszentmihalyi's definitions were clearly inspired by such accounts:

> [C]hess is a *self-contained universe* which one can control. And that is true of all flow activities. The components of the universe can vary (the world of chess is different from the world of rock climbing), and the skills needed to control a particular universe are diverse. But the flow experience is similar across the various activities. (emphasis mine) [8]

The activities discussed in this first study – chess, basketball, alpinism – has tied Csikszentmihalyi's theoretical framework to ludic phenomena. As many scholars, from Caillois to Salen and Zimmerman, have pointed out, games and sports define clear goals and specify the actions that must be performed in order to reach these goals; in doing so, they create an event-space, a more focused range of possibilities that maximizes inference production, and consequently, provides a better opportunity to learn and master challenges. For the scholar, however, a wide range of activities can offer a deep feeling of immersion; in *The Art of Seeing*, a collaborative effort published in 1990 [9], he used the same model of flow to study art appreciation, an "activity" that many would argue doesn't include any clear goals and/or retroaction. While most of the art historians that were interviewed reached a state of flow by finding the implicit or symbolical meaning of their favorite paintings, or by bridging these paintings with their historical roots, this study clearly suggests that the experience of fictional worlds could be studied with the same theoretical framework.

In *Pourquoi la fiction?* [23], Jean-Marie Schaeffer proposes a theory of fictional immersion that seeks to encompass a great variety of cultural phenomena: being lost in a book, watching a movie, going to the theatre, and playing games in virtual worlds. For Schaeffer, mimicry is the essential component in all these experiences, and it operates on two levels. Fictional forms all invite their users to reconstruct a world model which obeys a loose constraint of analogy with regards to reality; the worlds of fiction are not supposed to represent real events faithfully, and many genres are based on the deliberate modification of some aspects of reality. Piecing together this mimetic model constitutes, according to Schaeffer, the main goal of fictional immersion. But in order to do so, users gain access to this world in a variety of ways that also mimic to some extent our modes of cognizing the world we live in; this is what he refers to as immersive postures. For instance, the

simulation of speech acts in a novel supposes that users access the fictional world through the "access key" of "natural narration"; the quasi-perceptive simulation associated with audiovisual media such as cinema and television invite users into a "pluriperceptive experience", while the actual perceptions of simulated events in a theatre supposes the posture of an "observer"; the substitution of physical identity that Schaeffer relates to the work of the actor, child's games of make-believe and video games is said to procure full subjective identification. In this theory, fictional immersion is based on illusion-making, but users don't simply let themselves be fooled by the illusion; for Schaeffer, fiction is first and foremost a cognitive function that frames the mimetic cues, insuring that they are not taken at face value – as serious speech acts, documentary images, real events – but rather playfully. This framing operation relies more on the pragmatic aspect of the fictional forms – the culturally instituted contexts of usages and norms – than on the mimetic cues in themselves. Thus, for Schaeffer, fiction is a shared and ludic form of illusion-making.

The scope of Schaeffer's theoretical framework is certainly impressive, yet it is not without its issues. It integrates video games but its focus on mimesis excludes the purely arbitrary game experience from the discussion. Moreover, Schaeffer thoroughly insists that the immersive posture cued by illusion-making is identical to the posture adopted by users when confronted to equivalent non-fictional situations – factual narration, documentary movies, real life events – since our perceptual abilities cannot distinguish between serious and playful mimesis. But if indeed fiction is a cognitive framing operation associated with culturally instituted contexts of usages and norms, why insist on such split-second duplicity? In our view, the interest of a pragmatic definition of fiction is to better understand the underlying expectations that shape the users' experience of fictional worlds. First and foremost, it appears that fictional mimesis is clearly distinct from its non-fictional equivalents. In fiction, mimicry becomes "hypernormal" – an expression Schaeffer uses to describe the exaggeration of mimetic traits in children's dolls and in the treatment of sound and image in motion pictures; it is deliberately selective and willfully distorts some aspects of the source. Such a treatment is not simply a consequence of the partial modeling of reality that human beings – and the technological apparatuses they invent – are capable of, but is clearly a way to focus attention and alleviate the production of meaning. To put it in other words: fictional forms rely on the optimization of experience, and users implicitly expect this optimization.

Many studies of fiction run parallel to this idea of an optimal experience and can help us define the users' basic expectations. In their account of storytelling in movies, Gaudreault and Jost pointed out in that the experience of narrative is de facto very distant from that of reality « because it forms a *whole* ('that which has a beginning, a middle and an end', according to Aristotle)" [11]. Similarly, in his seminal work on time and storytelling, Paul Ricoeur states that the goal of narratives is to bring coherence and concordance to the otherwise discordant daily experience of time [19]. Understanding narratives call upon our encyclopedic knowledge of the world at large, but the clearly formed boundaries of the experience seem to transform the highly mimetic fictional worlds into "self-contained universes" to some extent. Noël Carroll's erotetic theory of movie consumption posits that the fictional worlds of popular fiction are organized according to a question and answer logic. Early scenes typically set up a few macro-questions (Will the fellowship of the ring succeed in their quest to stop Sauron? Will Ben and Alison get married?), and the function of later scenes is to settle such queries. Below the larger sequences, each scene can raise a great many micro-questions that will be settled in a shorter time span – for instance, the many suspenseful scenes in action movies constantly asks "will the protagonist overcome this obstacle?" One could question the specifics of Carroll's theory, but the key idea that "the spectator expects answers" [6] seems legitimate. That is to say: no matter how convincing the illusion-making, no matter how *real* the experience is said to be, the awareness of an editorial intelligence that carefully crafted this experience for us appears to influence our expectations in a decisive way.

In order to complement these general propositions, the following section will draw parallels between contemporary video games that portray rich virtual worlds with previous fictional forms, most notably cinema. We will expose such parallels on two levels: the hypernormal quality of the mimetic models integrated into these worlds, and the overt assistance provided by an editorial intelligence to alleviate the production of inferences.

IT'S A HYPERNORMAL WORLD

The hypernormal quality of mimetic entities in fictional worlds has been underlined by a variety of accounts. In *Lector in Fabula* [10], Umberto Eco observed that fiction calls upon a variety of common scenarios which become the basis for the inferences made by the reader to understand the world of the story. However, these scripts are typically less complex than those who would be useful in daily life and are often based on intertextual knowledge. Robbing a bank in real life is a lot more complicated than what is typically portrayed in a movie; unlucky robbers, according to Eco, most likely built their plan on the basis of an intertextual script. More recently, cognitive accounts of fiction have discussed the hypernomal quality of characters

to a great extent. Protagonists are often described as "chemically pure types" or "cards" (W. J. Harvey):

> In current film theory there is a consensus over the high degree of typing of the protagonist in traditional feature films. The characters who appear in classical cinema are not actually individuals, but can best be described as a collection of traits that are required to realize the prototypical causality of the action. [24]

Contemporary popular fiction films have not given up on this aspect of classical cinema. Many examples could be given here, but the latest *Star Trek* movie (J. J. Abrams, 2009) seems particularly suited. The second sequence introduces us to young James Tiberius Kirk, eight years old, who just stole an antique car from his family and is driving recklessly while listening to *Sabotage* by the Beastie Boys. When a police officer starts to chase him, Kirk gets off the main road, into the desert; coming up to a gorge, the young boy decides to throw the car off the cliff, jumping out at the last second (fig. 1). This sequence clearly seeks to characterize the protagonist as an impulsive man of action, who listens to his guts before logic – a trait that will oppose him to the "Spock card" and thus plays a major part in the central conflict of the movie. As Tan pointed out, such "hypernormal" characters become vectors of causality and play a great role in facilitating the production of inferences regarding the upcoming course of actions. According to David Bordwell, causality is one of the main components of the "master schema" that drives expectations; viewers constantly seek to establish clear causal chains, and popular fiction typically caters to these expectations [5]. In this view, causal gaps are put forth by narration only to focus the production of hypotheses, and this retardation device mostly seeks to heighten the pleasure of making meaning once the dots are actually connected.

Figure 1: The "Kirk card" (*Star Trek*, J. J. Abrams, 2009)

Turning to contemporary video games, one can make similar observations about the dynamic models integrated into the experience. Some noteworthy examples do indeed seek to simulate physical behavior evermore faithfully and thus correspond to Aarseth's proposition. The *Gran Turismo* and *Flight Simulator* series are presented as "true to life" reproductions of the original experiences; a plethora of variables such as weather conditions, driving surfaces and the different mechanical attributes of respective vehicles are taken into account to generate a complex model of car and plane navigation. However, it appears that hardcore simulations are still at the periphery rather than at the center of the gaming phenomenon. Most driving games, for instance, clearly simplify the car handling mechanics and potential impact of the various driving conditions. New aspects are modeled, such as the "crash" physics integrated into the *Burnout* series, and if parts of this model do appear more life-like than previous attempts, the ability to "take down" other cars and the driving mechanics in general take much liberty with its source (fig. 2).

Figure 2: Crash sequence in *Burnout Revenge* (Criterion, 2005)

The recent fascination for gestural interfaces is an interesting case in point. In some of the *Wii Sports* (Nintendo, 2006) for instance, the manipulation model doesn't calculate the behavior of the ball according to the exact movements of the wiimote; rather, the system compares the input with a database of possible moves and maps it to the closest one. Again, such trickery is not simply from lack of technology or computing resources, but rather is deliberate and seeks to maximize the users' ability to assimilate the model and overcome the challenges. Of course, many games take advantage of the accuracy made possible by current motion capture technology, yet the typical strategy to preserve the potential gratification of the experience has been to dissect the gaming experience into a collection of mini-games which requires the mastery of very simple gestures, as in *WarioWare: Smooth Moves* (Intelligent Systems, 2007) or *Cooking Mama: Cook Off* (Office Create, 2007). With motion controls, providing the same balance between efforts and gratification that players have come to expect is a renewed challenge for game designers. After all, as Steven Poole observed, one of the main appeal of video games lies in the amplification of input they propose [18]. Pointing towards this new challenge, Gamespy's review of *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10*

(EA, 2009) lists the "accurate and instant feedback from Wii Motion Plus controls" [3] both into the pros and cons section.

Much like the mimetic entities that populate fictional worlds, it appears that the dynamic models in contemporary games purposely exaggerate or simplify their source. Does a virtual dragon feel "closer to reality" solely because of its underlying dynamic behavior model? From *Mega Man 2*'s Mecha Dragon (Capcom, 1989) all the way to the red beast from the upcoming *Dragon Age* (Bioware, TBA), dragons in gaming worlds are typically defined by their ability to attack the avatar – give or take a few routines – and some health capital. One could argue that any non-interactive dragon – say, donkey's love interest in the *Shrek* series – is actually much *livelier* than their dynamic equivalent. Beyond this inability to figure out which type of representation is clearly more *lifelike*, the hypernormal quality of both these mimetic models is plain to see. In video games and popular fiction, the potential of agents is clearly stressed out, thus helping users establish clear causal connections. To put it in other words, mimesis in fictional and virtual worlds seem to rely on a "hypernormal" form of causality to a great extent.

SEEING THROUGH, PERFORMING MORE

The study of popular fiction has underlined a variety of media-specific strategies that all seek to hide the presence of the editorial intelligence throughout the experience. With the 19th century novel in mind, Émile Benveniste observed that third-person, past tense storytelling is the ideal mode of enunciation for the narrator to withdraw itself in favor of the depicted events. The rules of spatial and narrative continuity editing in classical Hollywood cinema are seen as a translation of this absent narrator into its filmic equivalent, the ideal observer [5]. Other accounts suppose that users identify with the editorial intelligence; Schaeffer asserts that readers can identify with the narratorial entity of homodiegetic or heterodiegetic fiction [23], and the theory of primary identification with the camera, even though it is stripped from the psychoanalytical framework that Metz used to define the notion, is still prevalent in cinema studies. Theories of identification with movie characters – the secondary form in Metz's account – have been questioned by many scholars, including Ed Tan, Dolf Zillmann and Noël Carroll: "most often characters and spectators are cognitively and emotionally too unalike to warrant any presumption of identity" [7]. Following this logic, identification with an omniscient narrator or a ubiquitous kino-eye seems highly unlikely, for not only are we are completely oblivious to the stories they present to us, but the clarity with which intricate events and multiple thoughts are related and the variety of focal distances they can convey clearly surpasses our own ability to know and communicate our experience. As such, editorial intelligences in popular fictional forms are not invisible at all. As a matter of fact, as the illusion-making becomes more complex and intricate, strategies to alleviate the production of meaning on the part of the user seem to become more overt and aggressive. Here again, the experiences of fiction and simulation seem to have a lot in common.

The classical Hollywood film style has become so familiar that its strikingly discursive nature might go completely unnoticed to us contemporary western viewers. Yet the technological capture of auditory and visual stimulus that serves as the basis of filmmaking has been complemented by a plethora of techniques to assist the viewer in making sense of this complex assemblage of information. Even if irises, which isolated a relevant aspect of the shot in a very intrusive manner, gradually disappeared throughout the 1920s, the work of an editorial intelligence is still clearly visible in the classical style. No amount of matches can truly hide the fact that analytical editing provides overt spatial and narrative guidance to moviegoers, and when narratorial manipulation conceals such information through gaps and retardation, it is with the implicit promise that the dots will be connected later on. The editorial intelligence can borrow strategies from previous forms, for instance by displaying written information about the time and location of the events, or organize the events in chapters with revealing titles (*Dogville*, Von Trier, 2003); it can also simulate extended forms of vision through a series of special effects, a tendency already seen in Hitchcock's *Sabotage* (1936) – where a "x-ray" shot reveals the inner mechanisms of the bomb carried by a child (fig. 3) – and that permeates contemporary cinema to a large extent, from similar x-ray shots in *Amelie* (Jeunet, 2001) to the truly ubiquitous camera movements in *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999). In any case, this extended regime of vision – the ability to "see through" the complexities of the mimetic world – obviously seeks to maximize inference production with regards to the fictional events depicted. To complement these observations, much could be said here about extradiegetic music, lighting effects, shot composition and other aspects of film style.

Figure 3: Extended vision (*Sabotage*, Hitchcock, 1936)

For the sake of continuity, we will focus mostly on aspects of video games that correspond to this regime of extended visuality. Of course, the remediation of analytical editing has been a short-lived adventure, for the typical focal flexibility afforded by modern 3-D engines is at odds with the fixity supposed by such a technique; it has been used mostly by survival horror games such as *Resident Evil* and its minions, and even the popular series has abandoned this style from the 4th instalment onwards. More frequently, the virtual camera in games such as *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2003) will perform zoom-ins on relevant objects or fly-bys of upcoming spaces in order to provide guidance. Beyond this remediation of cinema techniques, the vast majority of contemporary 3-D games integrate a layer of extradiegetic signs which seeks to discriminate the significant aspects of the virtual world or to inform the player on a state of affair relevant to the gameplay. In *Eternal Darkness. Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002) and the *Chronicles of Riddick* series (Starbreeze), objects in vicinity that may be of any use, such as ammunition, are constantly blinking a white glow. In *Gears of War* (Epic, 2006), *Riddick* and many first-person shooter games, the position of a red mark on a circular indicator points towards the provenance of a threat (fig. 4). *Call of Duty 4* (Infinity Ward, 2007) even integrates a grenade indicator, and its targeting reticle – another obvious extradiegetic addition – turns red or green if it's pointing at a foe or a friend respectively. Many game genres incorporate maps and radars overlays which are updated in real time with relevant information, such as the position of rival drivers in *Gran Turismo 5 Prologue* (Polyphony Digital, 2008), narrative hotspots or the awareness of prefects who make the law in the world of *Bully* (Rockstar Vancouver, 2006), and the provenance of enemies in *Panzer Dragoon Orta* (Smilebit, 2003), a rail-shooter which, by definition, already provides a lot of guidance to players. Even in this age of GPS-assisted driving and localization in real time on iPods and cell phones, few games actually try to camouflage these procedural guiding devices as technology present in the virtual world.

Figure 4: Threat indicator (*The Chronicles of Riddick. Assault on Dark Athena*, Starbreeze, 2009)

Figure 5: Radar overlay in *Panzer Dragoon Orta* (Smilebit, 2003)

With this short overview of an extended regime of visuality in contemporary video games, we can already try to formulate some conclusions. It appears that even first-person games are far removed from the immediacy ideal outlined earlier in this paper; the layer of extradiegetic indicators account for a strikingly hypermediatic experience. In the case of third-person games, this experience is even more "fractured", since players control one or many avatars in "first-person" mode – manipulations on the controller directly translates into on-screen actions – yet the distant camera, even if it is anchored to the avatar,

allows for the monitoring of events in a way that clearly surpasses the abilities of the latter. In spite of the numerous phenomenological accounts that evoke a strong identification between players and their avatar, it seems that the experience of video games casts us as something more than the playable character put forward in any game. As we have pointed out, identification with the editorial intelligence is not a realistic proposition. However, all the interventions of this entity that we have presented seem to obey the same logic: they reveal information about the imaginary events that wouldn't be so readily accessible if one were experiencing these events from the perspective of a protagonist. To say it differently: it is as if the editorial intelligence shares part of its knowledge with us, in order to stimulate our attention and assist us in understanding complex situations. The purpose of such overt assistance is obviously related to the optimization of experience: the additional knowledge provided to users seeks to transform these complex imaginary situations into adequate challenges.

Ultimately, how should we describe the immersive posture experienced by moviegoers and gamers? Contrarily to what Schaeffer suggested, it appears that the perceptive and participatory postures studied in this paper are idealized, clearly distinct from their serious "real life" equivalents; both the hypernormal nature of the mimetic entities, and the spatial and narrative guidance offered by the editorial intelligence play a decisive part in shaping user expectations. In a very basic way, these postures correspond to Thomas Pavel's concept of a "fictional self" [17]. Popular fiction films promote the posture of an ideal perceiver for us to inhabit, where we can invest cognitive resources willingly, expecting in return to produce meaning more easily. Similarly, in the rich mimetic worlds proposed by a significant portion of video games, we become ideal perceivers, but the finality of such assistance is obviously to be something more: an ideal performer.

In *Half-Real*, Juul observed that elements of the heads up display hanging over mimetic game worlds, such as directional arrows, are not found in fictional forms, and that many aspects of these worlds – for instance Mario's multiple lives – are purely inconsistent from a fictional standpoint. It is indeed easy to find instances of rules that are not integrated seamlessly into the virtual world, from the weapon cool down mechanic in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) which makes for a peculiar enactment of real-time combat, to the unrealistic distribution of gold and loot after a fight with simple beasts in many RPGs – such as *Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap* (Sega, 1989) or *Diablo* (Blizzard, 1996). Yet those mechanics are not equivalent to arbitrary rules; they push the mimetic representation of imaginary events (combat, reward) further up on the scale of hypernormality at the expense of coherence, but in concordance with the immersive economy associated with the posture of the ideal performer. In video games, the challenge goes beyond the production of meaning. As our involvement with mimetic worlds becomes more elaborated, editorial assistance follows suit. On top of the spatial and narrative guidance provided by directional arrows and many other elements of the HUD, the editorial intelligence assists players in ways that are much more overt and aggressive than in previous media. The possibility to save and restore a state of the world and the rating of performance through scores and verbal feedback have come to play an increasing part in crafting users' expectation of an ideal training ground, where time and efforts can be invested with a newfound confidence in our eventual ability to overcome obstacles, and experience the gratification that this heightened ability procures. Even if readers or moviegoers are not ideal performers in the sense we have defined here, the continuity that can be found in the optimization of experience is certainly worthy of more investigation.

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