"Who Am 'I' in the Game?": A Typology of the Modes of Ludic Subjectivity

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ABSTRACT
In order to arrive at an understanding of the formal structures by which an 'I' is established for the player towards the gameworld, this paper proposes a typology of the various modes of ludic subject-positioning. It highlights the ways in which each mode of ludic subject-positioning uses specific formal mechanisms to structure the player's experience of the gameworld around a particular subjective , presenting relevant examples in each case.

Keywords
Phenomenology, perspective, point-of-view, subjectivity, embodiment

INTRODUCTION
The question this paper sets out to tackle is – what are the various forms taken by the 'I' the player identifies as herself *in* a digital game? Game studies has extensively explored the formal nature of games as systems of interrelated components (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 50; Järvinen 2008), the spatiotemporal organization of these systems in the player's perception in the shape of a virtual environment (Klastrup 2004, 27; Calleja 2007, 44) and their constitution in experience as a meaningful gameworld (Aarseth 2008; Leino 2010; Gazzard 2011; Jørgensen 2013; Wolf 2014). On the other hand, comparatively little work has been done in order to arrive at an understanding of the formal structures by which digital games establish an existence for the player as an experiencing and acting agent within the gameworld.

In order to address this gap in the existing literature, I shall begin by considering the concepts of point of view and point of action in digital games (Thon 2009), as well as the idea of the Game Ego (Wilhelmsson 2008), before presenting the notions of the ludic subject-position (Vella 2015) as a more effective conceptual model for theorizing the player's experience of the gameworld and of her own subjective existence towards the gameworld. Building on the distinction between the embodied and the transcendent ludic subject-position (ibid., 14), I will then propose a more comprehensive typology of the various modes of ludic subject-positioning in digital games – distinguishing between *singular embodied, multiple embodied, distributed, semi-transcendent* and *pure transcendent* ludic subject-positions. After outlining the formal characteristics of each mode of ludic subject-positioning, I shall demonstrate their implications for the player's

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experience of the gameworld and for her subjective sense of herself towards the gameworld, presenting relevant examples in each case.

THE LUDIC SUBJECT-POSITION AND THE LUDIC SUBJECT

Though the overlap between the two sets is not total, the vast majority of digital games fall within the category of "games in virtual environments" (Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå 2003, 48; Calleja 2011, 14), in that they provide the player with a spatiotemporal organization of the components of the game system into an experiential world. Inseparable from this experience of the virtual environment as a world is the establishment of a subjective existence for the player within this world – an 'I-in-the-gameworld.'

As an initial foothold in getting to grips with this 'I-in-the-gameworld,' it could be proposed that this is an 'I' who experiences and an 'I' who acts. While playing *Dark Souls* (From Software 2011), the player might say, "I saw a knight lurking in the dark corridor ahead of me," and, subsequently, "I put up my shield and stepped forward cautiously", or even "I died". By this understanding, the primary constituents of this 'I' within the gameworld are what have been called the *point of view* and the *point of action* (Neitzel 2002; Thon 2009) – that is, the standpoint from which the player perceives the gameworld, and that from which she takes action upon the gameworld.

However, while the distinction between point of view and point of action makes analytical sense on a formal dimension, it does not adequately describe the various factors shaping the player's perspective on the gameworld beyond the purely visual. As John Sharp has argued, the question of player perspective in videogames is much more complicated than such an approach can account for, and needs to take into consideration, at a minimum, *who the player is, what the player can do, what the player is asked to do* and *what the player feels* (2014, 113-114). Nor does it account for the way in which experiences of the gameworld – both in the sense of perceptions and actions – coalesce into a unified subjectivity that the player identifies as 'I'.

To this end, Ulf Wilhelmsson suggests the notion of the 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). However, Wilhelmsson's concept remains unclear. The emphasis on the Game Ego being upheld by a "bodily based function" and on its being determined by means of a "tactile motor/kinaesthetic link" suggests that it is primarily understood as a phenomenological embodiment in the gameworld (Taylor 2002; Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007a; 2007b; Gee 2008) by means of a cognitive incorporation (Calleja 2011, 169) into the form of the avatar or player-character. However, Wilhelmsson's examples reveal that the concept is intended to have a wider reference, somewhat contradicting its definition. *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1989), for example, would not seem to fit the criteria, in that it is difficult to speak of a "bodily based function". 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). Wilhelmsson's concept, then, lacks the rigour and specificity required to offer a cogent definition of the formal entity that the player *is* in the gameworld.

In an attempt to counteract this difficulty, I have suggested the notions of the *ludic subject-position* and the *ludic subject* to refer to the 'I' the player adopts while playing a game (2015, 14). The ludic subject-position is the "perceptual standpoint" the player adopts in relation to the gameworld (ibid., 21) – with 'perception' here being understood

in a multifaceted sense which takes into account Sharp's observation regarding the multiple senses of player perspective in digital games. Thus, rather than being simplistically equated with point of view or point of action, the ludic subject-position thus describes an experiential Gestalt resulting from the aggregation of a set of formal mechanisms structuring the player's engagement with the gameworld.

Subsequently, the ludic subject is "the subjective 'I-in-the-gameworld' the player crystallizes through engaging with the gameworld" (ibid., 22). In other words, it is the 'I' to whom the player ascribes experiences of the gameworld and actions within the gameworld. It emerges, in the course of play, as a subjective identity the player experiences as 'herself', in the first-person – albeit, crucially, as a 'self' that is distinct from her own identity as a playing individual outside the gameworld, and that is in large part determined by the game itself through its structuring of the ludic subject-position.

There are many cases where this 'I-in-the-gameworld' is equated with a diegetic character – an individual in the story-world represented by the virtual environment. This is what we mean when we say, in everyday parlance, that one 'plays' Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996). Nonetheless, the ludic subject must be maintained as clearly conceptually separate from the diegetic character on the one hand, as it is separate from the player as an actual individual on the other.

THE MODES OF LUDIC SUBJECTIVITY

A cursory glance at the range of mechanics, interfaces and formal conventions should be enough to convince any observer that ludic subject-positioning is not one-size-fits-all. Rather, it is a function that can take many possible forms. In order to begin accounting for this formal variety, I have previously suggested a distinction between *embodied* and a *transcendent* ludic subject-positions (2015, 14). The first case describes a situation in which the player engages with the gameworld through an embodiment in the form of a playable figure within that world – what is often called the avatar or the player-character, a "component-of-self" (Järvinen 2008, 64) through which the player engages with the other components of the game system. Conversely, the second case refers to a situation in which the player's subjective standpoint towards the gameworld does not relate to any single figure within that domain.

While this is a crucial distinction, it does not go far enough in describing the various ways in which ludic subjectivity can be structured in digital games. In practice, 'pure' embodied and transcendent ludic subject-positions do not represent a strict duality, and a number of distinct variations are possible in the formal construction of both modes of ludic subject-positioning. As such, in order to arrive at a more rigorous typology of the various possible forms that ludic subject-positioning can take, I shall now look at the concepts of the embodied and the transcendent ludic subject-positions in turn, analyzing their relevant experiential dimensions and their different potential manifestations.

Embodied ludic subjectivity

Drawing on theoretical explorations of embodied being in the phenomenological tradition, particularly in Jean-Paul Sartre (1966[1943]) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002[1945]), the embodied ludic subject-position can be understood as being constituted of several interlinked aspects relating to the player's incorporation of the playable figure as 'herself,' all of which, taken as a whole, shape the player's subjective perspective towards the gameworld (Vella 2015, 261-90). The foundation of the embodied subject-position, then, is precisely this mechanism of *incorporation,* defined by Gordon Calleja

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*" (2011, 169, italics in original).

First of all, the player's incorporation in the form of the playable figure grants her a *spatial standpoint* within the gameworld – an *origo* or point of origin to which deictic terms like 'here,' 'there,' 'ahead' or 'to the left' relate (Leirfall 2013). The phenomenologist Dan Zahavi writes that "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, 65-6) – which means that, as Calleja argues, the "systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location" is the foundation of the embodied ludic subject-position.

This spatial standpoint in turn determines both a visual *point-of-view* and an *auditory standpoint* towards the gameworld, insofar as what the player can and cannot see and hear at any given point is dependent upon where she is standing in the gameworld.

Next, the figure's *capabilities and limitations* determine what the player can and cannot do in the gameworld, structuring the possibilities for action she can wield towards the gameworld. Again, this is an insight which follows on from the phenomenological tradition – Merleau-Ponty writes that "consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'" (2002[1945], 159) – which, of course, is always shadowed by an "I cannot," our awareness of impossible or disallowed actions (Young 1980, 146). Rune Klevjer picks up on this insight when he argues that "the defining appeal of games such as *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 effect of the *I can* on our phenomenological experience of the world is that of shaping it, in our cognitive understanding, as what Sartre terms an "instrumental complex" (1966[1943], 620) – an experiential organization of the world surrounding the subject's embodied standpoint according to lines of instrumentality extending along possible paths of action – "the world as the correlate of the possibilities which I *am* appears […] as the enormous skeletal outline of all my possible actions" (ibid., 425). Entities in the gameworld, then, gain meaning according to what the playable figure can and cannot do with them, meaning that, from the embodied ludic subject-position, the gameworld takes an experiential shape determined by the possibilities for action the playable figure grants the player.

Capabilities and limitations, however, only make sense with a view towards the purposes towards which they can be wielded. Thus, *goal-orientation* is also a key element of the embodied ludic subject-position. Again, both Sartre (ibid., 620) and Merleau-Ponty (2002[1945], 115) describe how it is in the light of one's projects and purposes that things gain meaning in one's experiential world. In this, of course, there is a clear link to the formal and conceptual analysis of games, where goal-directedness – or, at least, an orientation towards more rather than less favourable outcomes – has often been considered one of the primary characteristics of games. Most relevantly, Petri Lankoski has described how "goal-related engagement" serves to align the player's standpoint with that of the playable figure (2011).

The final aspect of the embodied ludic subject-position can be termed *passion.* The term 'passion' is used here in its sense as the obverse of 'action'. It refers to the fact that, when embodied in the gameworld as a playable figure, the player exists as an entity among the entities of the gameworld, and as such, does not only act upon the gameworld, but is also acted upon. Klevjer, for instance, observes that, "if we recognise that Lara Croft [in *Tomb Raider*] 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).

In all these ways, the embodied ludic subject-position organizes the player's experience of the gameworld – and of her embodied being within it as the centre and structuring principle of this experience – in the form of a *body schema,* a cognitive image of one's bodily existence within the world to which that existence relates.

Questions of embodiment, and of incorporation into the subject-position of a playable figure, have thus been extensively explored in game studies. However, what has not been sufficiently taken into account is the variety of forms that the embodied subject-position can take in digital games – and the ways in which digital games can not only reflect the phenomenology of the body, but play upon it and twist it into interesting shapes (Gualeni 2015, 85). In order to account for this range of forms of embodied ludic subject-positioning, it is necessary to distinguish, at a minimum, between the basic, or *singular embodied ludic subject-position,* the *multiple embodied ludic subject-position,* in which the player has access to multiple playable figures controlled one at a time, and the *distributed embodied ludic subject-position,* in which the player controls multiple playable figures simultaneously.

Singular embodied ludic subjectivity

This is the simplest and by far the most common form of embodied ludic subject-positioning. It describes situations in which the player is given a single playable figure, with her relation to the gameworld being structured entirely through her engagement with this figure. Most digital games in the adventure, action-adventure, platform and first-person shooter genres, as well as many role-playing games, would fall within this category. *Tomb Raider, Super Mario 64, Grand Theft Auto III* and *Dark Souls* – to use examples that have already been mentioned – would all fall within this category, as would games as diverse as *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980), the point-and-click adventure game *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990), the action role-playing game *Diablo* (Blizzard Entertainment 1996), the first-person shooter *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) and the role-playing game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015).

In this mode of ludic subject-positioning, the player's existence in the gameworld is fully determined by her incorporation in the playable figure. As such, this is the mode of embodied ludic subject-positioning which adheres most closely to the phenomenology of the body whose relevant dimensions were presented above, establishing a stable body schema for the player within the gameworld around her spatial standpoint.

By definition, the embodied ludic subject-position is associated with a point of action that is, to use Neitzel's term, "concentric" (2002) – that is, focused entirely on one location within the gameworld. It is pertinent to point out, however, that, in relation to the player's engagement with the gameworld via the playable figure, Klevjer makes a distinction between *tangible* and *indirect* modes of interaction (2006, 120). In short, the former refers to interaction with the gameworld that operates "in a manner that simulates

physical interaction" (ibid.) – in other words, that mimics our engagement with the world as embodied beings. Meanwhile, indirect interaction refers to situations "when we control or influence elements in the environment through symbolic action" (ibid.).

An embodied ludic subject-position can operate both through a tangible and an indirect mode of control. *Tomb Raider, Super Mario 64* and *Dark Souls* all exemplify tangible interaction. Meanwhile, a point-and-click adventure game such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* provides us with an example of a singular embodied ludic subject-position using an indirect mode of control.

Multiple embodied ludic subjectivity

In a number of games, the situation of embodied ludic subjectivity is complicated through the player's being given possession of two or more playable figures. At any given point in time, the player only has direct control of one of these playable figures, in much the same manner as the singular embodied ludic subject-position. However, the multiple playable figures are simultaneously present within the gameworld, and the player can switch at will between controlling each of them in the same scene.

The paradigmatic form to which this kind of ludic subjectivity relates is the squad-based action game – examples of this include *The Lost Vikings* (Silicon & Synapse 1992), *Space Hulk* (Electronic Arts 1993) or *Hidden & Dangerous* (Illusion Softworks 1999). Most digital simulations of team sports games, such as *FIFA 16* (EA Sports 2015), would also be classified in this category.

The multiple embodied ludic subject-position complicates the player's phenomenological relation to the gameworld. The player's adoption of any one figure's body schema remains a clear case of incorporation; however, even while controlling one figure, the player's experience of the gameworld is shaded by her knowledge of the possibility of *also* bringing into play other playable figures and their associated possibilities for action.

In the squad-based action-strategy game *Valkyria Chronicles* (Sega 2008), the player might, at one point, be controlling Alicia, a fast but lightly-armed scout, scoping out the way ahead. Turning a corner on a ruined street, she spots an enemy tank, against which the scout's rifle is ineffective. The player knows that, as the scout, there is nothing she can do to take the tank down – the instrumental complex her embodiment in the figure of the scout offers her does not afford any possible action that leads to the outcome of the tank's incapacitation.

Were this a case of singular embodiment in the gameworld, this would constitute a very clear 'I cannot' – similar, perhaps, to the 'I cannot' which initially structures the player's encounter with the tentacle beast encountered in the blast pit in *Half-Life*, which prove impervious to the player's weapons. In that case, the player would recognize her inability, as a ludic subject, to destroy the tank as a constituent limitation and determining element of her ludic subjectivity, and would seek out an alternative means of overcoming the tank-as-obstacle – say, finding a way of using cover to progress undetected.

However, the player knows, in this case, that her squad also contains Largo, a lancer armed with an anti-tank rocket launcher. As such, she positions Alicia behind a wall, safely out of the tank's line of sight, and switches control to Largo – at which point she moves him forward, establishing a clear line of fire, and uses the rocket launcher to deal heavy damage to the enemy tank.

Here, the importance of the player's incorporation into the playable figure, and the resulting embodied subjectivity, is preserved. The player is still able to say, "The tank is right in front of me!" – in other words, using Alicia, as the playable figure she is controlling at the time, as the *origo* for her directional organization of the gameworld. In the next moment, she can say, "I fired a rocket at the tank and ran behind cover before it could retaliate," now occupying Largo's ludic subject-position.

The crucial difference between this and the singular embodied ludic subject-position – apart from the simple fact of moving between different embodied subject-positions – is that even though, at any one time, the player is only controlling one of her playable figures – and, as such, can only engage with the gameworld according to the set of capabilities afforded by that figure – the capabilities of the other playable figures remain at every moment present in suspension. If Alicia were the only playable figure in *Valkyria Chronicles,* the tank would be construed in the player's subjective existential sphere as 'unkillable,' forcing her to act accordingly. Instead, even while controlling Alicia, the player incorporates the capabilities of Largo and the other team-members, shaping the gameworld as an existential sphere around herself according to an instrumental complex that agglomerates all of their capabilities – because of this, her access to Largo's capabilities as a playable figure allow the player to perceive the tank as 'killable' even while she is controlling Alicia.

The effect of the multiple embodied ludic subject-position, then, is that, while the individual embodied ludic subject-position represented by each playable figure remains very much in play, and the player engages with the gameworld from its phenomenological standpoint, it is decentred. Each individual figure and its respective body schema – and, consequently, the instrumental complex into which it organizes the gameworld – is cut across by vectors of intentionality relating to the body schemata of other playable figures.

As an additional note, we might observe that games employing a multiple embodied ludic subject-position might or might not employ what can be termed a *privileged figure.* Games that do so specify one of their playable figures (usually, but not necessarily, identified as the commander of the team) as being – on both a mechanical and a diegetic level, the player's central 'I' in the gameworld. This figure might automatically take on certain tasks – most often, for instance, dialogue with non-player characters. Moreover, in almost all cases, this playable figure tends to be the only one that is not considered expendable: though other playable figures can be killed in action, the death of the privileged figure will inevitably lead to a 'Game Over' screen. In *Valkyria Chronicles,* to retain the same example, the privileged figure is Welkin, the commanding officer of Squad 7. While the game can proceed if other squad members are killed in action, Welkin's death immediately ends the game.

The multiple embodied ludic subject-position should be distinguished from the superficially similar situation encountered in games such as *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* (Red Storm Entertainment 1998) or *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2008). In these games, the player, occupying an embodied ludic subject-position resulting from the incorporation into a single playable figure, is able to issue orders to one or more team-mates, but cannot switch to direct control of any of these secondary figures.

The crucial difference lies in the fact that, in these latter cases, the player only ever has direct control over one single playable figure - the ludic subject-position remains one of

embodiment in the singular. The ability to issue orders to team-mates, and to have these team-mates extend their capabilities for action towards the things of the gameworld, constitutes, in phenomenological terms, a prosthetic extension to the player's body-schema within the gameworld: the team-mates' capabilities for action are incorporated into an instrumental complex that remains centered at a single bodily standpoint within the gameworld. While playing *Mass Effect,* the player might order Liara T'Soni, one of the party members that can be recruited during the course of the game, to use her Electronics skill on a door console in order to hack the lock and grant the party access to the room beyond. However, in phenomenological terms, the vector of action that finds its terminus at the door console still originates in the figure of Shepard, whose body schema the player incorporates as 'I' – this body schema is extended, but it is not decentred or multiplied.

A distinction also needs to be drawn between the multiple embodied mode of ludic subjectivity, and the case we encounter in games such as *Giants: Citizen Kabuto* (Planet Moon Studios 2000), in which the player is moved from one playable figure to another in the course of the game's progression – in other words, occupying a sequence of singular embodied ludic subject-positions. In this situation, since the player cannot switch at will between playable figures, the body schema of the figure she inhabits at a given point constitutes the complete range of her phenomenal engagement with the gameworld at that given point. The affordances offered by other playable figures do not enter the equation, since they cannot be brought into play at will, but only as and when the progression of the game dictates. The player does not have the experience of having the instrumental complex of a singular embodied ludic subject-position either extended or multiplied.

Distributed ludic subjectivity

In contradistinction to the multiple embodied ludic subject-position, rather than only having direct control of one playable figure at any one time, the distributed ludic subject-position describes a situation in which the player can also control multiple playable figures simultaneously. In most such cases, the option for the player to control each playable figure individually remains – what distinguishes the distributed ludic subject-position is the additional capacity to control multiple figures in unison.

Most party-based role-playing games establish this kind of ludic subjectivity – see, for instance, *Baldur's Gate* (Bioware 1998) or *Pillars of Eternity* (Obsidian Entertainment 2015). Other examples include strategy games such as *Syndicate* (Bullfrog Productions 1993) and *Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines* (Pyro Studios 1998), each of which grants the player control over a small squad of units.

Playing *Baldur's Gate,* for example, the player can individually control the thief Imoen while in a dungeon, advancing slowly down an unexplored corridor and using her trap detection skill to manoeuvre her carefully around deadly traps before using her thief abilities to disarm them. Then, the way ahead having been cleared, the player can select all six adventurers in her party and order them to move down the corridor together.

The effect this has is to further decentre the embodied ludic subject-position. While controlling Imoen – or any other playable figure – individually, the vestiges of a sense of incorporation, and of an embodied experiential engagement with the gameworld, remain. The player remains able to process her spatial orientation within the gameworld in relation to her embodied standpoint as *origo.* A statement such as, "Oh no, there's another trap to my left," is only possible against the background of precisely such a

phenomenological precondition. Similarly, a judgment of the form, "Disarming this trap is beyond my current abilities," implies that the player has incorporated the playable figure's 'I can' (and its parallel 'I cannot') as the organizing principle of her instrumental complex.

However, this embodied standpoint is not only decentred, as it is with the multiple embodied ludic subject-position, but abandoned entirely. When the player is controlling several of her playable figures simultaneously, as when she selects her party as a whole and instructs them to move across the map, she no longer identifies herself as occupying a spatial standpoint within the gameworld – deictic terms such as "to my left" no longer makes sense. Similarly, the player is unlikely to talk about "my abilities" in this situation. Faced with the same problem of a trap that cannot be disarmed, the player is more likely to say something like, "None of my characters has a high enough thief skill to disarm that trap" – revealing the player's organization of the experienced gameworld according to a compound instrumental complex that encompasses the affordances represented by each playable figure, positioning them as tools to be deployed towards the gameworld. This foregrounded emergence of an 'I' who stands over and above the playable figures – indeed, who possesses them precisely, in Järvinen's term, as "components of self" – highlights the player's stepping into a phenomenological engagement with the gameworld that brackets her relation of embodiment in any one playable figure, and that establishes a standpoint distinct from them.

As a general rule, in a distributed mode of ludic subjectivity, control over the playable figures operates in, to return to Klevjer's distinction, an indirect mode. This is so almost by necessity, given that tangible control requires, as a precondition, precisely the phenomenological incorporation of the body schema of a single playable figure that this mode of ludic subject-positioning sets aside. Exceptions to this – in which the player is given direct, tangible control over multiple playable figures simultaneously – are rare, but they do exist. *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios 2013) and the *Animal Crossing: Sweet Day* minigame in *Nintendo Land* (Nintendo 2012), for example, would fall within this category. In both of these cases, the player is given direct control of two playable figures simultaneously, with the movement of each figure being mapped to one of the two analogue sticks on the Xbox 360 gamepad and the Wii U GamePad respectively.

In a sense, these exceptions prove the rule – in that the cognitive difficulty of inhabiting two embodied subject-positions simultaneously, and of co-ordinating one's engagement with the gameworld from the two respective standpoints, is, in both cases, foregrounded as the game's primary challenge.

In the same way as the multiple embodied ludic subject-position, the distributed ludic subject-position might or might not enshrine a privileged figure. *Baldur's Gate* is an example of a game with a distributed ludic subject-position that features a privileged figure. Though the player controls a party of six adventurers, only one of these – the protagonist, whose name, gender and appearance are set by the player – is considered essential. The player can discard any character from the party, apart from the protagonist, who, as the player's 'I', cannot be 'fired' from the party. Likewise, if any other character in the party dies during the course of an adventure, play continues, but the protagonist's death leads to the automatic termination of the game (and to the necessity of reloading).

Transcendent ludic subjectivity

So far, I have considered variations upon the form of the embodied ludic subject-position, whether in singular, multiple or distributed forms. It is not surprising that many digital games – arguably even a majority – structure the player's phenomenological engagement with the gameworld on the model of an embodied subject.

However, this is by no means the case for all games. To the embodied ludic subject, Vella contrasted the transcendent ludic subject, which he defines as relating to a ludic subject-position that is not attached to any playable figure, but that, instead, is present in the gameworld only in the form of actions taken directly upon entities within it (2015, 14).

It is evident that this implies a radically different mode of phenomenal engagement with the gameworld on the part of the player. Lacking a spatial standpoint, she has no *origo* or 'here' within the gameworld – hence, contrary to the embodied subject-position, phrases such as "to the left" or "ahead" do not apply within this mode of ludic subject-positioning. Nonetheless, *point-of-view* and *auditory standpoint* still factor in here, given that, in most games with a transcendent ludic subjectivity, the player is not privy to simultaneous total knowledge of the gameworld in its entirety. The difference from the embodied ludic subject-position lies in the fact that, in most cases, point-of-view and auditory standpoint do not relate to the spatial *origo* of a playable figure. Instead, the player is able to view, more or less at will, any aspect of the gameworld whenever she chooses to do so – at least, within certain restriction, such as the fog-of-war mechanic common in strategy games.

As a result, the player's field of knowledge – though not necessarily total, meaning that the attribution of omnipresence to such a perspectival standpoint (Aarseth, Smedstadt and Sunnanå 2003, 49) is a little hasty – extends beyond the inherently limited viewpoint of the embodied subject. The real-time strategy game *Supreme Commander* (Gas Powered Games 2007), for example, allows the player to zoom the visual point-of-view outwards to take in the whole of the game's extensive battle maps at once, with the capacity to follow developments on multiple battlefronts simultaneously.

The issue of *capabilities and limitations* is still a factor in determining a transcendent ludic subject-position. Though, in this case, the player's possibilities of action are not tied to the abilities (or lack thereof) of a playable figure, the game system still grants the player a set of possibilities for action that coalesce into a particular *I can,* and, as such, arrange the gameworld, in experiential terms, into an instrumental complex. Likewise, the orientation of these capabilities towards a goal or set of goals remains intact. However, since there is no component-of-self that grants the player a physical existence within the gameworld, the *passive* dimension of subject-positioning is absent here – the gameworld cannot *act upon* the ludic subject here, since the ludic subject is not attached to a body in the gameworld.

Taken together, this leads us to the observation that what the transcendent ludic subject-position establishes is a phenomenological standpoint – and, as a result, an experiential organization of a world – that stands, not in reflection, but in contradistinction to the familiar, centred experiential structure of embodied being-in-the-world. In other words, what the transcendent ludic subject-position reveals is the capacity of digital games to actualize Stefano Gualeni's suggestion that "virtual worlds can be recognized as pragmatically opening up new and interactive horizons of thought, and of ways to understand time, space, properties, and causation that are supplementary, and in some

cases even alternative, to those through which human beings structure their everyday relationships with the actual world" (2015, 85).

As with the case of the embodied ludic subject-position, the transcendent ludic subject-position can take different forms. A distinction might be made between a *semi-transcendent* ludic subject-position, in which the player can act upon the gameworld through one or more playable figures *and* act directly upon certain existents in the gameworld, and a *pure transcendent* ludic subject-position, in which the player possesses no playable figures as components of self, meaning that she can only interact directly with existents in the gameworld.

Semi-transcendent ludic subjectivity

In this mode of ludic subject-positioning, the player controls one or more playable figures; however, in distinction from the distributed ludic subject-position, the player is also able to perform actions upon certain existents in the gameworld directly, without the intermediary of a playable figure.

As an example of the semi-transcendent ludic subject-position, we can mention the spaceship simulator *FTL: Faster than Light* (Subset Games 2012), in which the player controls the ship's crew members but can also directly affect a number of the ship's systems. This means that, as in any other case of embodied ludic subjectivity, whether embodied, multiple embodied or distributed, the player can act upon the gameworld through one of the playable figures. For instance, she might instruct one of her crew members to move to the engine room and use her engineering skills on the engines in order to repair damage done to them during a battle. However – without needing to issue orders to any crew members – the player can also, during the course of the same battle, divert power from the engines to the weapons systems in order to launch a counterattack, and simultaneously to seal internal doors and open an airlock on one side of the ship to extinguish a fire.

Many real-time strategy games – for example, *Command & Conquer* (Westwood Studios 1995) or *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* (Blizzard Entertainment 1995) – can be classified in this category. Here, the majority of the player's engagement can be construed as occurring through her units as playable figures. Playing as the orcs in *Warcraft II,* the player might instruct a peon to chop wood from a nearby forest, direct a goblin zeppelin to explore an unknown area, or order a grunt to attack an enemy mage. As such, there is still a vestige of the body-schema in the player's phenomenological engagement with the gameworld – the possible actions of chopping wood or attacking an enemy unit relate to the instrumental complex of the units as embodied beings, and the fog-of-war mechanic that conceals sections of the map from the player's perception associates her visual point-of-view upon the gameworld with her units' line of sight. However, she can also order her barracks to produce more troll axethrower units, and, via the forge, spend resources to upgrade her units' weapons and armour – actions which are independent of the body-schema of any playable figure.

Even more radically than the distributed ludic subject-position, this form of ludic subjectivity results in the superseding of the embodied standpoint within the gameworld. Certainly, as we have seen, traces of it remain insofar as we still find components of self that act as playable figures, offering the player possibilities of action towards the gameworld. However, the additional ability to act directly upon entities within the

gameworld establishes lines of action whose point of origin does not relate to any body within the gameworld.

In bypassing the playable figure entirely, this goes beyond Klevjer's distinction between tangible and indirect manipulation, both of which refer to control of a playable figure, and action upon the gameworld through this figure. We might term this direct action – action performed on the gameworld directly, without the medium of the playable figure. In other words, here we are dealing with an ex-centric rather than a con-centric point of action (Neitzel 2002).

As with multiple embodied and distributed ludic subject-positions, the semi-transcendent ludic subject-position can, in some cases, be associated with a privileged figure. For example, in the real-time strategy game *Total Annihilation* (Cavedog 1997) – which, in every other way, has a ludic subject-position that operates on a clear parallel to that of *Warcraft II* – one of the player's army of robotic units, the Commander, is privileged: if the Commander is destroyed during the course of a mission, the player automatically loses the battle, no matter how many of her other units remain on the battlefield.

Pure transcendent ludic subjectivity

In the case of a pure transcendent ludic subject-position, no playable figures are present, and the player relates directly to entities in the gameworld. Here the last vestiges of a phenomenological engagement with the gameworld from an embodied standpoint disappear entirely.

SimCity (Maxis 1989) is an example of a pure transcendent ludic subject-position. Here, no figures respond directly to the player's control. Instead, the actions the player can perform are enacted directly upon the gameworld – such as zoning a new industrial district or laying down a road. Another example of a purely transcendent ludic subject-position – and particularly indicative in its contrast to the semi-transcendent ludic subject-position of *Warcraft II* – is the one structured in the god game *Black & White* (Lionhead Studios 2001). Here, in the subject-position of a deity overseeing a primitive civilization, the player is granted a wide range of possible actions. Via the cursor as an ex-centric, disembodied point of action, the player can uproot trees and throw them around at will, use a leash to lead her pet giant creature to a desired location, cast spells (such as invoking a raincloud over grain fields), designate sites for new buildings and so on. Though there are villagers that appear, superficially, to have the same status – as components of self – as the player's units in *Warcraft II,* the player cannot directly issue orders to her villagers to act upon the gameworld. Instead, the player must influence them by directly affecting things around them in the gameworld, or by acting directly *upon* the villagers rather than through them (for example, by picking one up with the cursor and dropping him next to a task that requires doing). In this case, the villagers do not represent subjective standpoints from which actions can be taken, but objects to be acted upon.

As these examples demonstrate, the pure transcendent ludic subject-position is completely independent of any physical entity within the gameworld into which the player is incorporated, and which she identifies as 'I'. This does not mean, however, that there is no ludic subject associated with this mode of ludic subject-position. The ludic subject-position of *Sim City,* for example, gives rise to a set of actions which define the ludic subject as the 'Mayor' of her city. Meanwhile, *Black & White* positions the ludic subject as a deity overseeing a civilization, and, given the broad range of actions the ludic

subject-position allows, the game gives the player the leeway to enact her ludic subjectivity as a deity that is 'benevolent,' 'evil' or somewhere along the spectrum between the two extremes.

Nor does this lack of a body to anchor this mode of ludic subjectivity prevent the gameworld from being given the structure of an instrumental complex in the player's experience. The fact that the player still relates to the gameworld in terms of a set of capabilities and limitations wielded towards the achievement of a project or goal – whether this is the project of achieving a thriving city in *SimCity,* or of having one's tribe defeat a rival tribe in *Black & White* – means that the gameworld is still meaningfully organized along the lines of action-possibilities, with existents in the world being given meaning according to how they relate as affordances or obstacles to the achievement of the player's purposes. The pure transcendent ludic subject-position, then, brings into view the phenomenological structure of a non-embodied instrumental complex, operating according to a spatiality and a positionality that differs radically from the familiar structures of embodied consciousness.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been the aim of this paper to establish a typology of the various modes of ludic subject-positioning employed in digital games – in other words, of the different formal structures by which an 'I-in-the-gameworld' is established for the player, as a subjective existence to which experiences of, and actions towards, the gameworld are attributed.

This typology is not intended to suggest that each game should fit neatly into one of the categories of ludic subjectivity. While it is certainly the case that most games will dominantly exhibit one form of ludic subject-position, it is also possible that a game might employ more than one form of ludic subject-positioning. Moreover, it is also the case that, as "integrated crossmedia packages" (Aarseth 2012), contemporary digital games will tend to integrated these formal mechanisms of ludic subject-positioning with non-ludic modes of aesthetically representing a subjective perspective, such as the various techniques of literary (Genette 1980, 189; Bal 1985; Margolin 2009) and filmic (Branigan 1992, 101) focalization – further complicating the matter.

As such, the typology presented in this paper is inherently limited and reductive, offering only a simplified understanding of the ways in which games determine their players' subjective existence towards the gameworld. Nonetheless, it has been the aim of this paper to demonstrate the complexity of ludic subject-positioning, and to offer a vocabulary and a conceptual toolkit for the formal analysis of ludic subject-positioning in games. It is hoped that this toolkit can serve a useful purpose in exploring the ways in which games not only reflect our embodied phenomenological engagement with the world, but also play with, modify, expand upon and depart from these familiar phenomenological structures, not only imagining but also enshrining – and inviting us to test out – alternative phenomenologies and new experiential structures, not only of worldhood, but also of selfhood as oriented towards the world.

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