

Title: Narrative in Transition. How New Media Change Our Experience of Stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how our experience of narrative has changed with the emergence of new forms of narrative media, particularly with the medium of computer games. It explicates the distinctive character of this novel experience, and investigates how it differs from the narrative experiences created in older media such as the 19th century novel or the classical Hollywood film. The paper argues that in order to understand the experiential differences between these media, it is necessary to critically review the representational concept of narrative as developed once in structuralist narratology, and to develop an additional presentational conceptualization, applicable to both the marginal narrative practices of the past as well as the mainstream practices of the present. Drawing on recent theories on the distinction between representation and presentation from the fields of media studies and the arts, this paper explains the limits of a structuralist approach, and proposes a conceptual alternative.

Introduction

Whenever you hear a story about a game designer who's got a notebook of his world which he's been designing since he was 12 years old, get very nervous. He's got a story to tell, and he should be writing a fantasy novel or something.

- Ken Levine (EDGE, October 2006)

For many years now, the topic of storytelling has been high on the agenda of game magazines. The popular periodical EDGE contains numerous articles, columns and letters discussing the particular ways games deal with stories. What these contributions often share is a profound belief in the new possibilities computer games offer in terms of narrative. The exact interpretation of these new possibilities can however differ greatly. No general idea exists on the affordances of games in terms of storytelling. The game designer Ken Levine, acclaimed for his revolutionary approach to storytelling in the BioShock series, believes games to be essentially different from books or movies as an expressive medium.

This paper explores to what extent the practice of storytelling in games indeed deviates from narrative practices found in novels or films. Do we experience the story in games any different from stories in books or movies? To answer this question, this paper explicates the distinctive logic behind the narratives of computer games, and investigates how this narrative logic differs from the ones found in older media such as the 19th century novel or the classical Hollywood film. The paper will argue that in order to understand the experiential differences between these media, it is necessary to critically review the representational concept of narrative as developed once in structuralist narratology, and to develop an additional presentational conceptualization, applicable to both the marginal narrative practices of the past as well as the mainstream practices of the present.

Narrative as representation

Although the scholarly interest in storytelling has a long history and can be traced all the way back to Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*, the study of narratives as an autonomous academic discipline only came into existence in the 1960s. Termed 'narratology' by Tzvetan Todorov in his work *Grammaire du Décaméron* (1969: 10), the theory of the narratological aims to present a logical and structural description of the way in which stories are told (Jahn 2005). Though scholars in what often is referred to as structuralist narratology disagree about the exact definition of narrative, their work unanimously conceives narrative as representational in nature. As explained by Marie-Laure Ryan in *Narrative Across Media* (2004), these narratologists believe the standard conception of narrativity to be manifested in the act of 'telling somebody else that something happened, with the assumption that

the addressee is not already aware of the events' (13). Also, the etymological root of the word narrative defines it as a form of recounting, as it derives in part from the Latin verb *narrare*, which means "to recount". A feasible definition of the structuralist concept of narrative, then, is given by Gerald Prince in his *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987). According to Prince, narrative should be thought of as 'the recounting [...] of one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narratees' (58).

What is distinctive about this particular conceptualization of narrative is that it understands narrative as something that communicates real or fictitious events from the past. The concept of recounting implies that the events expressed (the story) already happened and find themselves re-presented in the present by some discourse, whether verbal, written, pantomimic, or any other form of narrative transmission (Chatman 1978). For structuralist narratologists, then, a narrative retrieves the there-and-then in the here-and-now, thereby suppressing (but not replacing) our direct experience of the here-and-now. Its modus operandi is concerned with communicating or re-presenting events, not with staging new events. Stories concern the there-and-then, and are solely expressed in the here-and-now (Metz 1974: 22).

Representation or presentation

Although structuralist narratologists study various forms of narrative transmission, their concept of narrative has arisen mainly out of stories that are either told or written. Not surprisingly, it is in these narrative formats where one finds a strong representational logic (Elam 2005: 98). The 19th century novel is exemplary here. Books of authors such as Charles Dickens or Jane Austen portray without exception the story as a thing recounted. This can be contributed largely to the presence of a narrator who, in telling the story to the reader, explicitly emphasizes its "pastness". Narrators establish the story as something that happened in the past by using the past tense when discussing, summing up, and commenting on the events pertinent to it and by employing specific temporal tropes (Rimmon-Kenan 2005: 110; see also Stam 2005: 90).

The representational approach to narrative becomes problematic however when applied to narrative formats without an explicit narrator. In cinema or theatre for example the discourse does not always clearly acknowledge the "pastness" of the story it expresses. We are presented with a sequence of images or gestures, and have the feeling as if the events projected or performed are happening right in front of us, in the here-and-now rather than the there-and-then. So to what extent are these events still representational in nature as the audience witnesses the events unfolding directly in front of them? Is this representational logic still valid? In the second edition of *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2008), Abbott addresses this specific problem, he writes:

Those who favor Aristotelian distinctions sometimes use the word presentation for stories that are acted and representation (re-presentation) for stories that are told or written. The difference highlights the idea that in theater we experience the story as immediately present while we do not when it is conveyed through a narrator. My own view is that both forms of narrative are mediated stories and therefore involved in re-presentation, conveying a story that at least seems to pre-exist the vehicle of conveyance. (15)

Like Abbott, I do not prefer to use the Aristotelian distinction between telling (diegesis) and showing (mimesis) to designate the difference between representation and presentation. I do prefer however, unlike Abbott, to keep the distinction in practice. To me, the logics of representation and presentation provide valuable insights, not when used to differentiate between vehicles of narrative conveyance, but when used to address different ways in which every single one of these vehicles in principle can deal with stories. Even a story that is told can have a presentational logic, and a story that is shown a representational. Admittedly, the representational logic governs many popular books and movies, but this logic seems confidently at home in – not essential to – the medium-specific form of these particular media. In terms of story, a Choose-Your-Own Adventure book operates differently than a 19th century novel, just as cinematic experiments as *Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery, 1947) or *Enter the Void* (Noé, 2009) work differently than most classical Hollywood blockbusters.

The logics of representation and presentation

So, what is exactly the difference between a representational and a presentational approach to narrative?

To get a clearer idea of how the two logics differ from each other, this article borrows from performance theory. In theatre studies, a clear distinction is made between representation and presentation, not to describe different ways of narrative transmission, but to describe different ways in which the performance of a story addresses the audience:

There are two ways of relating to the audience during the performance of a story. The difference is clearest in theater. In a representational play, the actors all act as if there were a fourth wall between them and the audience. [...] Presentational theater, on the other hand, tears down that imaginary fourth wall. The actors don't just admit the audience is there, they make constant contact with the audience. (Card 1988: 134-135)

Following Card, I believe the essential difference between representation and presentation to lie in the way the audience is addressed in the performance of a story, and consequently the kind of

spatiotemporal consciousness that arises from this difference. The audience is either addressed as physically present or physically absent in the world of the story.

In a representational story performance we often feel as if we are looking at events that belong to some other time and place, even though the performance happens in the here-and-now. The actions on stage “stand for” or “re-present” actions that unfold in another spatial and temporal moment. Sceneries, actors, and props all portray places, people and objects belonging to this dimension of the there-and-then (Elam 2005: 61). We as the audience, consequently, have a strong feeling we do not belong to this other construct of space and time; we observe it hidden behind the fourth wall, but do not have our place within it. Even though we experience the story in the here-and-now, we still feel as if it happens somewhere else than the here-and-now of our own physical, lived existence.

Much like the representational story performances in theatre, most movies do not address the spectator as physically present within the world of the story (Schubert and Crusius 2002). The audience is positioned, in a sense, as a ghostly presence: consciously present, but physically absent, able to travel through temporal and spatial barriers (Bordwell 1985: 10). In their goal to show the events that are relevant to the story, movies often propel us forwards or backwards in space and time. In only a couple of hours we are mentally transported through many different moments in time while visiting many different places.

Distinctive of narrative discourse when steered by a representational logic, is the feeling it creates in the audience as if they move away from the here-and-now of their physical existence towards the there-and-then of the story told. This feeling is commonly associated with the idea of narrative immersion, as Richard J. Gerrig describes in *Experiencing Narrative Worlds. On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (1999):

Readers become "Lost in a book" (see Nell, 1988); moviegoers are surprised when the lights come back up; television viewers care desperately about the fates of soap opera characters; museum visitors are captivated by the stories encoded in daubs of paint. In each case, a narrative serves to transport an experiencer away from the here and now. (3)

As will be explained later, the exact opposite seems to happen when the discourse is steered by a presentational logic. While we move away from the here-and-now towards the there-and-then of the story in what I refer to as the representological mode, we seem to stay in the here-and-now and the there-and-then of the story moves towards us in the presentological mode (think of reenactments, augmented reality or LARP). The narrative *addresses* the audience as physically present within the story expressed, thereby *positioning* them as embodied participants. Notably, both narrative modes alter our perception of the world around us. When following Janet Murray’s exemplary definition of immersion as ‘the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is

from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus' (1998: 98), the feelings evoked in presentation and representation both fall within the definition of immersion, even though the former operates distinctively different from the latter.

In his thesis *Digital Games as Designed Experience: Reframing the Concept of Immersion* (2007), Gordon Calleja gives an insightful account of two forms of immersion in computer games that seems to align with my own distinction between representation and presentation.

There is a distinction that needs to be made between holding mental images of a scene in mind while imagining being present within that scene, and occupying a location within a computer generated environment that anchors users with regards to other agents and enables them to interact with the environment from that specific location. [...] When we identify with a character in a movie or a book, or imagine we are in the same room as the protagonist, we have no way of altering the course of events; no way of exerting agency. Likewise, the environments and characters represented in these media have no way of reacting to our presence, no matter how strongly we identify with them. (88)

I follow Calleja in the distinction he makes between a form of immersion in which one has the feeling of being in the presence of characters without them noticing your presence (representological mode), and a form of immersion in which one has the illusion of being physically grounded to one specific location in space and time, perceivable for those who share this spatial and temporal moment (presentological mode). I prefer however not to incorporate the idea of interaction in this distinction.

The distinction between narrative presentation and representation is not in essence a distinction between interactive and non-interactive. Both forms can be either interactive or non-interactive. Interactivity, or “ergodicity” in the context of storytelling, describes the condition of media objects where ‘nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text’ (Aarseth 1997: 1-2). Admittedly, many presentational narratives possess this ergodic quality, but there are many examples of representational narratives which also need nontrivial effort to make the story unfold, think of interactive DVD’s, games such as *Heavy Rain* (2010) or particular experiential forms of theatre. All these examples hand the audience some form of control over the story’s direction, thereby giving them the power to (co-)decide the faith of the story’s characters.

In her exploratory article ‘Beyond Myth and Metaphor - The Case of Narrative in Digital Media’, Marie-Laure Ryan labels this form of narrative discourse “External-ontological interactivity”, describing it as follows:

Here the user is like the omnipotent god of the system. Holding the strings of the characters, from a *position external to both the time and space of the fictional world*, he specifies their

properties, makes decisions for them, throws obstacles in their way, and sends them toward different destinies lines by altering their environment. (2001; my emphasis)

Different from this form of interactivity, Ryan also proposes the categories of “Internal-ontological interactivity” and “Internal-exploratory interactivity”, respectively referring to narrative discourse where ‘the user is cast as a character who determines his own fate by *acting within* the time and space of a fictional world’ and narrative discourse where ‘the user *takes a virtual body with her* into the fictional world, but her role in this world is limited to actions that have no bearing on the narrative events’ (my emphasis). Although these two categories differ from each other in the way the player influences the unfolding story, they both belong to the presentational logic as both categories give players the feeling as if things are happening in the here-and-now of their physical existence.

In a presentational story performance events seem to happen in the perceptual field of our direct, firsthand or lived experience, even when mediated through a screen or some other means of transmission. The moment the performers acknowledge our presence, make eye contact, and start interacting with us, we change from being an invisible observer to an active participant. We are made aware of our physical presence and through this contact are drawn back to the here-and-now of our own bodily existence: *physically anchored to one location in space and time and in principle able to act*. Contrary to the representational logic, we do not move away from the here-and-now towards the there-and-then of the story, but as already stated, seem to stay in the here-and-now while the there-and-then of the story moves towards us. In effect, we still feel as if existing in some other spatial-temporal moment, but one that aligns with our experience of being physically in the here-and-now. In theatre studies, many scholars have tried to explain how this presentational mode differs from the representational one.

Most importantly, performers make the audience aware of their own presence by inviting them into some form of interaction, thereby undoing the audience’s spectatorial and voyeuristic position. This is often accompanied by a focus on the execution of acts that are real in the here-and-now and find their fulfillment in the very moment they happen. What occurs in the interaction between audience and spectator could be, but is not necessarily, meaningful in comparison with what has happened in the past and is about to happen in the future (Lehmann 2006: 104-105). Also, the performers usually do not enact prescribed roles but carry out prescribed tasks. They can still assume fictional personalities, but not in the representational sense; their actions do not signify the actions of protagonists. Rather than representing others personas, performers try to alter their own self, typically by changing their appearance and behavior (Kostelanetz 1981: 8). As a result, the audience recognizes the performer through the fictional disguise. Performers lose their conventional function as an actor portraying a role, and make their performativity an integral part of the theatrical experience, often introducing a strong element of role-playing and playfulness in general (Cremona et al. 2004: 4-5).

These characteristics also apply to the design of many story-driven games. In games such as *Half-life* (1998), *BioShock* (2007) or *Fallout 3* (2008), the game characters, similar to the performers in the prior examples, make direct contact with players. They acknowledge our physical presence by looking into our eyes, and direct their speech towards us. The opening scene of *Half-life 2* (2004) is particularly strong in making the player feel as if they are physically anchored in the story world. When the player steps of a train riding into a station, a flying robot moves in front of the player and takes a picture of him. In this very moment, the game explicitly addresses us as present and perceivable within the story world that unfolds around us. Not surprisingly, this does not happen in a representological game like *Heavy Rain*. Characters do not look into the camera directly. Their eyes focus on the avatar who the player is controlling, even in the case of a POV shot. As in conventional cinematography, the camera in these POV shots positions itself near, but not along, the avatar's line of sight. Rather than looking straight into our eyes, characters look slightly past us, thereby enhancing the sensation that these characters do not perceive us as being present.

Also, in games like *Half-life 2* we hardly find as many temporal devices (ellipses, flashbacks and flash forwards) as in games like *Heavy Rain*. The extensive use of these editing techniques makes the existence of a narrator recounting a story apparent behind the seemingly "presentness" of visual presentation (Branigan 1992: 146-147). Thus, *Half-life 2* avoids these techniques as they would disrupt our feeling of being not only mentally, but also physically grounded in the story world. Like the theatrical performances discussed, the focus is on the execution of acts in the here-and-now, as Jesper Juul also emphasizes in one of his articles on game stories: 'Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are happening now, and that what comes next is not yet determined' (2005: 223). Game characters play an important role in creating this focus. Like performers, they come equipped with a set of prescribed tasks. Their aim is not so much to represent certain events from a real or fictitious past, but rather to create new events through interaction within the confines of the narrative context. The freedom fighters the player encounters in *Half-life 2* for example assist the player in various ways, based upon the situation at hand and the decisions the player makes. Every encounter results in a different outcome, but stays meaningful within the story world.

As explained by Michael Nitsche in his book *Video Game Spaces. Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (2008), story events like these do not seem to pre-exist the discourse – they do not evoke the sensation of "pastness" – but seems to come into existence the very moment they happen:

Narrating in video game spaces differs from that of fixed literary or cinematic pieces. It occurs at the same time as the generation of the interactive event and is influenced by it. While literary, cinematic, and many oral forms of narrating build on events past and retold, real-time

virtual worlds—like live television or radio broadcasts—narrate the events at the moment of their manifestation. (55)

A similar observation has been made by Henry Jenkins in his exploratory work on storytelling in computer games. In his often-cited article ‘Game Design as Narrative Architecture’ (2004; see also 2007), Jenkins discusses game stories as being essentially spatial. Although he does not really conceptually define the phenomenon of spatial stories or environmental storytelling, it seems that Jenkins understands them as being presentological in nature. He characterizes spatial stories as follows: ‘In many cases, the characters - our guides through these richly-developed worlds - are stripped down to the bare bones, description displaces exposition, and plots fragment into a series of episodes and encounters’ (2004: 122). Again, the same presentological characteristics I have discussed earlier seem to be foregrounded here. Events feel as if coming into existence in the very moment they are expressed as the discourse focuses on describing what happens in the here-and-now (description) rather than providing a lot of background information on the plot (exposition). Plots fragment into episodes and encounters. Unlike the representational mode, where the discourse structures events in tight strings of cause-and-effect, the discourse of presentation places events meaningfully besides each other rather than after each other. Spatial stories also portray the protagonist less as a distinctive other and more as an empty vessel for somebody to project one’s own identity on. Because of this, they succeed in extending our physical presence and thus function effectively as guides through “richly-developed worlds”, to repeat the words of Jenkins. All these presentological characteristics are apparent in many, if not most, of the popular story-driven games sold today.

(Re)Presentological game design

		PRESENTATION		
		PLAYER PROTAGONIST	(DIRECT) ENVIRONMENTAL PRESENCE	(DIRECT) SOCIAL PRESENCE
RE-PRESENTATION	(INDIRECT) ENVIRONMENTAL PRESENCE	STORY SETTING		
	(INDIRECT) SOCIAL PRESENCE		STORY CHARACTERS	
	(INDIRECT) PERSONAL PRESENCE			STORY EVENTS

Figure 1: Two logics of narrative

So, what are the implications of the difference between narrative representation and presentation for the design of narrative experiences in games? In Figure 1, I have tried to map the difference between narrative representation and narrative presentation by placing the representational and presentational logic besides the three commonly accepted constituents of narrative: ‘Narrative representation consists of a world (setting) situated in time, populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (events, plot) and undergo change’ (Ryan 2001). On the left and upper side of the diagram, I have plotted three forms of presence. These forms of presence have been borrowed from an article of Heeter where she reduced the phenomenon of presence to three main categories:

A sense of presence in a virtual world derives from feeling like you exist within but as a separate entity from a virtual world that also exists. The differentiation and experience of self may be enhanced if other beings exist in the virtual world and if they appear to recognize that you exist. It may be enhanced if the virtual environment itself seems to acknowledge your existence. (Heeter 1992)

The three forms of presence discussed by Heeter (environmental, social, and personal presence) align with the three main constituents of narrative (story setting, characters, and events). On the presentological side of the diagram, I use the additive “direct” to signal that in presentation the story setting, characters and events seem to exist in our direct physical presence. On the representological side of the diagram, I use the additive “indirect” to signal that in representation, as the word “re” emphasizes, the story setting, characters and events seem to exist in another temporal and spatial moment, one that exists outside our direct physical presence. By positioning the three main constituents of narrative besides the various categories of direct and indirect presence, the diagram plots three primary points of friction: representational vs. presentational story settings, representational vs. presentational story characters and representational vs. presentational story events. What follows is an exploration of the implications of these points of friction for the development of narrative experiences in avatar-based 3D games, primarily from a presentological perspective.

1 Story setting

When looking at the spatial design of 3D games, the recurrence in sceneries is remarkable. Many games place the player in vast landscapes, from war-torn cities and stretched-out dungeons to grand canyons and endless forests. What is most striking about these locations is that, although they seem highly similar in their visual presentation, the way they are bodily experienced differs greatly. An endless forest can be experienced as a corridor, a maze, a branching path, even as a closed-off room, all depending on the way designers choose to structure them spatially. Everybody who plays 3D

games knows the awkward sensation of being blocked by an invisible wall when a forest visually stretches out for miles. Suddenly, the never ending forest becomes ending, and thus, not an endless forest at all.ⁱ This is where the difference and sometimes problematic relation between narrative presentation and representation in game design becomes visible.

The difference between representation and presentation concerning the story setting comes down to the idea of recounting once again. The story setting commonly refers to the where and when of the story expressed. Gerald Prince in his *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987) defines it as the 'spatiotemporal circumstances in which the events of a narrative occur' (86). From a representational perspective, the setting recounts or re-presents the temporal and spatial circumstances in which the events pertinent to character(s) happened. To do this effectively, media rely on the ability of users to infer space and time from cues within the discourse, be it a description of a garden, an image of a city or the sound of a waterfall. Cinema for example calls upon our imagination to expand on that which is actually seen, as Bordwell and Thompson explain: 'The narrative may ask us to *imagine* spaces and actions that are never shown' (68; my emphasis).ⁱⁱ The setting when approached presentological on the other hand does not concern itself with communicating the spatiotemporal circumstances of events from the there-and-then. Space is not visually re-constructed through the imagination, but is constructed in real-time around the body of the user. Time is not represented, but develops in a progressing present. Thus the spatiotemporal modus of presentation deals with environments addressing our bodily existence in the here-and-now, tied to one specific location in space and time, even when mediated by the screen-dependent technologies used in for example computer games or virtual reality.

The difference between representation and presentation leads to an interesting yet problematic tension in 3D game design. Avatar-based games do not position the player in an actual tangible environment. They need a screen-projected avatar to simulate the feeling of presence, which immediately invites a representational logic. As a result, their worlds always belong respectively to the avatar as protagonist and to the avatar as a disciplined extension of the player's body. When a 3D game designs its setting solely as the world of the protagonist without taking into account that this setting also hands the player the feeling as if they themselves move through a world, aesthetic conflicts could arise. The body may disrupt the spaces developers want to trigger in the mind of the player. The way in which a story world is represented and consequently imagined can be drastically altered by the way this world, in its presentation, is experienced. Imagine a game in which we see an exciting cut scene of a character running through a forest chased by creatures unknown. This forest is shown to be vast and dense. It stretches out in all directions. The moment the game gives us control of this character, the forest which was first a maze, can suddenly become nothing more than a box with a clear exit. The moment at which the avatar changes from protagonist to the extension of the player's disciplined body, we

suddenly, physically, feel the borders built into the game world. The vastness so convincingly portrayed visually, fades away when our bodies, confronted with the spatial borders of the game, remind us of the fact that we are simply running in a marked-off space.ⁱⁱⁱ

When comparing the popular 3D games sold today with those of previous decades, the development in setting is remarkable. Game developers have steadily become better at building rich, atmospheric sceneries, imbued with spectacular set pieces. The studio that developed the BioShock franchise for instance employed some of the best skilled artists to create this fibred underwater dystopia. However, in terms of presentation most 3D games remain quite one-dimensional. To put it bluntly, the player still mainly moves through corridors, occasionally fighting off hordes of enemies. The next obvious step in 3D game design will be the abandonment of this one dimensionality. Not only will the worlds of future games look even more atmospheric, they will also offer a richer, more meaningful palette of spatial experiences.

2 Story Characters

The relation between representation and presentation concerning story characters mirrors the previous paragraph on story setting. The same difference in logic applies. In presentational narratives beings exist in bodily presence to each other, and specifically to the player, within an environment, even when mediated through communication technologies. Story characters in representational narratives, on the other hand, come into existence through our imagination. They belong to the represented world of the main character and logically exist solely in his or her presence. Because representational narratives center on the trials and tribulations of the protagonist, our emotional investment in other characters is often channeled through empathic identification with this protagonist. Movies make us care for the main character so we feel moved when we see him or her struggling to reach a certain goal, as Torben Grodal writes in *Moving Pictures. A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition* (1997):

The film experience is made up of many activities: our eyes and ears pick up and analyze image and sound, our minds apprehend the story, which resonates in our memory; furthermore, our stomach, heart, and skin are activated in *empathy* with the story situations and the protagonists' *ability to cope*. (1; my emphasis)

Whether this protagonist is able to cope also depends on the characters surrounding him or her. That is why our emotional responses towards these characters depend largely on how they relate to the actions, feelings and desires of the main character. In short, we tend to feel sympathy for those who are loved or help-out. We dislike those who obstruct, endanger or deceive. The emotional reactions of

the main character towards others, serve as cues for us to build our own emotional relationships. We closely observe facial expressions, body language and other signals to infer from them how we should relate to the other characters in the story. For example, when we see protagonists mourning the death of a friend, we tend to mourn with them. When we see them in pain, we tend to be deeply moved, which does not differ that much from watching a loved one in tears. Even if we have never actually seen the deceased friend in the movie, we care for his death, because the main character cares and we care for the main character. This empathy-driven investment in story characters does not work the same way in presentological avatar-based 3D games.

Presentational narratives are less able to provide us with these sorts of emotional tie-ins. The game world does not solely belong to the protagonist, but also to the player, since the avatar functions as both the main character and the extension of the player's body. In presentational avatar-based 3D games, the boundary between protagonist and player blurs, therefore we lose the empathic identification with the main character so typical for representational narratives. The emotional relationships we build in these games focus less on the main character and more on the characters surrounding him or her. Story characters do not longer only belong to the world of the protagonist as they exist also within our simulated physical presence. Exactly this quality offers new possibilities for building emotional relationship with them.

When a presentological narrative confronts us with a deceased character, this often barely affects us emotionally when the meaning of this event is placed too much with the emotional state of the protagonist. It means something to him or her, but not necessarily to us. In presentational narratives, our empathic identification with the protagonist seems different from representational narratives. Because we are, in a sense, the main character, we barely see his or her emotional reactions to events, be it for the occasional cut scene. There is no camera registering every single facial expression or physical gesture. We see the world through the protagonist's eyes (first-person view) or from behind his shoulders (third-person view). In *Half-life* for example, we almost never see or hear the protagonist Gordon Freeman. He remains for a large part a *tabula rasa*; an empty vessel for us to project our identity on. To really feel the loss of another character in a game, then, their continuous presence to us in the game world needs to be undone. To build an emotional relationship between players and characters, they must be placed in each other's physical presence in a meaningful way. To put it simply, they have to spend time together.

Presentological avatar-based 3D games that succeed in building a meaningful bond between player and story characters mainly employ this approach. In its series on the best games of the last decade, the magazine *Edge* pays homage to Valve's *Half-life 2* (2004), praising its character design with the following words: 'Half-life 2's characters are engaging both dramatically and in action: they are a

tangible presence in the world which help or hinder the player directly' (Anon 2010: 70; my emphasis). In successful presentological games we often see that instead of the protagonist, the character(s) closest to the protagonist provide the player with emotional connections to other story characters. It is no coincidence that in *Half-life 2* the most intense dramatic moments concern relatives not of Gordon Freeman, but of Alyx Vance, the girl who follows him throughout his adventures. For example, it is her father who gets killed in one of the episodes. Because the player spends a lot of time in the presence of Alyx instead of Gordon, we feel touched more easily when she rather than he suffers, even though Gordon is the main protagonist of the story. Would it have been the death of Gordon's father, the effect probably would have been less as we play Gordon Freeman, and to empathize with the death of somebody else's father is in general emotionally more moving than to mourn the death of one's own imagined father.

Other successful games have asked players to visit their families regularly (*Fable 2*), to escape a dungeon hand-in-hand with a little girl (*Ico*) or to hang out with friends in bars, bowling alleys and clubs (*Grand Theft Auto 3*). As these games show, 3D games can be emotional engaging when it comes to their characters. We humans have the peculiar ability to care for inanimate objects and anthropomorphic entities, think of the *Tamagotchi* or other robotic beings. Rather than re-presenting character relationships, the language of presentological games should further tune in on this particular human attribute. This is not only done by perfecting the way these digital beings act, look and talk to us. Also their spatial position in relation to us is essential in how we relate to them emotionally. Space functions as a mediator. It can literally force us into someone's presence, or force us out of someone's presence. It can make a loved one reachable or condemn us to solitude. In simple ways, games have already been mapping emotional tensions on their spaces for decades. In *Super Mario Bros* (1985) we have to cross a number of worlds in order to save the Princess. By expanding on these predecessors, future game designers will become more and more skilled in staging meaningful meetings between human and digital beings.

3 Story Events

The tension between representation and presentation in relation to story events also comes down to the difference between the player and the protagonist. From a representational perspective, story events are the events that happen to protagonists whereas from a presentational perspective they concern events that happen to players. Because in 3D avatar-based games the avatar is both player and protagonist, this tension is one of the most fundamental ones in 3D game design. Are the things that happen to the protagonist still meaningful when they are experienced as if directed towards our personal presence? Marie-Laure Ryan has written on this question in her article 'Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media' (2001):

What kind of gratification will the experiencer receive from becoming a character in a story? It is important to remember at this point that even though the interactor is an agent, and in this sense a co-producer of the plot, he or she is above all the beneficiary of the performance.

One could, indeed, wonder if the majority of events that happen to characters in for example popular movies are still meaningful or pleasurable when they are staged as if happening to us. Ryan concludes they are not as ‘any attempt to turn empathy, which relies on mental simulation, into first-person, genuinely felt emotion would in the vast majority of cases trespass the fragile boundary that separates pleasure from pain’ (2001). There seems to be a major difference in the sort of story events we like to experience ourselves and the sort of story events we like to be told about. A simple example will suffice to explain this. In games we enjoy running, jumping and shooting for hours on end, while most people would certainly not enjoy watching this for the same amount of time. Some events are worthwhile to be experienced in the here-and-now while others are worthwhile to be represented. It is not easy to say what characterizes the difference between these events. We need to study these differences in more depth which in the end will be of benefit to game designers. What sort of events are interesting to tell or to be told about (book), to show or to be shown (movie), to enact or to see being enacted (theatre), and what kind of events are interesting to stage in the here-and-now and to be experienced firsthand? When the answers to questions like these become clearer, the development of avatar-based 3D will equally mature.

It is important to emphasize the essential spatial quality of the presentational narrative mode at the end of this paper. When players are addressed as an embodied participant in the story world, the spatial design of the game world becomes important. Game designers indeed become, as Jenkins proposes in one of his articles, “narrative architects” (2004; 2007). Like architects, they trigger specific emotions in players just by structuring the spaces around their bodies in a particular way, thereby influencing the kind of stories players personally experience. Space thus can become much more than just the setting or background of the story, as explained by Mieke Bal in her *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1997):

Space functions in a story in different ways. On the one hand, they are ‘only’ a frame, a place of action. In this capacity a more or less detailed presentation will lead to a more or less concrete picture of that space. The space can also remain entirely in the background. In many cases, however, space is ‘thematized’: it becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes an ‘acting place’ rather than the place for action. (136)

The spaces conjured up in narratives are not simply locations for events to take place. Narrative events often possess spatial structures that express profound meanings in themselves. One of Bal's well-known examples relates to the spatial tension between the house as a safe and the street as a dangerous place. Many movies deal with spatial transgression, with invaders who cross this threshold between the outside and the inside. These stories are powerful as they relate to broadly shared and deeply felt existential structures. In cognitive linguistics these structures or patterns are called image schema. In *The Body in The Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (1987) Mark Johnson distinguishes some elemental ones, for example the container (inside/outside), the path or the blockade. In 3D game design, too, these image schemata could be used as a language for staging arresting experiences. The beauty of 3D games is that they seem to be able like no other medium to hand us the feeling as if we are physically present in the story world. Avatar-based 3D games really excel in giving us sensations as if being inside or outside a building or as if being caught between two walls. The challenge for game designer, then, is to explore the various spatial experiences games can conjure up and embed them meaningfully in the context of a narrative. Besides running, jumping and shooting through corridors, computer games can stage many other worthwhile spatially-grounded human emotions and experiences. When employed meaningfully within the context of thrilling story worlds, computer games move closer towards becoming that full-grown artistic medium we all long for.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the logics behind two distinctive ways in which narrative media, particularly avatar-based 3D games, deal with narrative. I have argued that a basic distinction can be made between games in which players steer a hero through challenging trials and tribulations (e.g. Heavy Rain) and games in which players become the hero and have adventures of their own (e.g. Half-life). Drawing on theories from structuralist narratology, the article has shown the former approach to be essentially representational in its logic. Subsequently, by bringing together alternative theories on storytelling from the fields of game-, film-, and theatre studies, the article has developed a new, additional concept of narrative, applicable to the latter approach. This presentological conceptualization explicates the narrative practice of creating story events in the present, while the representational concept describes the practice of communicating story events from the past, whether diegetically set in the past, the present or the future. The former creates a form of narrative experience in which things seem to happen in a time and place aligned with the here-and-now of our own physically anchored existence, even though we are not always literally present. The latter creates a form of narrative experience in which one feels consciously present but physically absent when things happen to others in a there-and-then; a spatiotemporal elsewhere removed from the here-and-now.

The distinction between a presentational and a representational narrative logic proposed in this paper is broad and academically abstract. It only helps in making an elemental division in the broad range of narrative experiences offered to us today, but does not suffice to describe the intricate differences between narrative formats with the same logic. Popular avatar-based 3D games for example share their narrative logic with experience theatre, but there still exist many differences between the two. For one, the former depends on the screen to stage its events, while the latter stages events in our material reality. It feels different when a real actor comes to you and shakes your hand than when a digital character does exactly the same, even when controlled by a real person. Future studies should elaborate on these difference forms of mediation, (dis)embodiment, participation and observation.

At the end of this paper, I like to mention that in principle not one of the two logics developed here is preferable over the other in future game design. It could well be that they originate from different basic human desires. Though more research is necessary to support this claim, it seems human beings on the one hand seem to enjoy listening to the adventures of others. We like to get an inside view on somebody else's experiences and thoughts, empathize with them and think how we would have done things differently. The affordances of real-time 3D computer technology enable people to have a say in how things turn out for story characters. We can steer heroes into specific situation and witness their reactions. This is one of the novel narrative pleasures 3D games offer us. On the other hand, human beings also want adventures of their own. We love to venture out into the unknown. In our contemporary experience society, the advent of previously marginal practices such as extreme sports, experience theatre, free running, land art, survival tours and interactive architecture testify to a culture evermore captivated by this direct exposure to intense experiences, from the subtle and the gentle to the extreme and the spectacular. Computer games take center stage in this development. Their affordances enable people to visit places nonexistent in real life. Build like no other medium, games elaborate fantasy worlds for us to dwell in. This is another revolutionary pleasure offered to us by the story-driven games of today.

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ⁱ Often, designers use more elegant solutions than an invisible wall, for instance natural barriers such as a river or a mass of rocks.

ⁱⁱ In order to describe the processes in which spectators infer off-screen space from on-screen space, film scholars commonly make a distinction between on-screen space, plot space and story space (see: Bordwell and Thompson 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Some game genres, for instance Japanese Role Playing Games, design their spaces always in this fashion. Mainly because it is the representational quality of the story, expressed in elaborate cut scenes, what makes these games appealing. Whether the setting of the story changes from a canyon, to a mountain range or a forest, mostly it is, in experience, just a long pathway filled with enemies to beat before receiving another cut scene which propels the story forward again. When we think about presentological avatar-based 3D games on the other hand, especially action adventures, it becomes much more important to surpass this one-dimensionality in spatial design as they are less concerned with representational storytelling.