"It's A-Me/Mario": Playing As A Ludic Character

Daniel Vella
IT University of Copenhagen
Rued Langgaards Vej 7,
2300 København S, Denmark
(+45) 7218 5248
dvel@itu.dk

ABSTRACT

Discussions surrounding the avatar-figure have tended to focus on its status as a manifestation or embodiment of the player. This paper complicates this understanding by arguing that the avatar is also an embodiment as a distinct character. Philosophical models of embodied phenomenology and naratological theories of character are drawn upon in order to propose an understanding of the avatar as a 'frame' that structures the player's relation to the gameworld in such a way that playing becomes not only playing as oneself, but also *playing as* a character.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0. [**Personal Computing**]: Games

Keywords

Avatar, player-character, possible worlds, narratology, game ontology, phenomenology.

1. INTRODUCTION

There can hardly be anyone with more than a passing interest in videogames who has not heard, at least once in their life, the exclamation announcing the entrance of everyone's favourite cod-Italian plumber: "It's a-me, Mario!" Few aural signifiers within gaming culture are as instantly – almost comfortingly – recognizable; and yet, a brief consideration of Mario's cry might serve as a springboard for an engagement with an important question regarding the relation between players and the game characters under their control.

We might begin approaching this question by asking ourselves a much simpler one: *who is doing the speaking?* The short answer is that it is Mario, the fictional character speaking from within the textual (understood in the broad sense of 'mediated') world of the Mushroom Kingdom. By the time the Nintendo mascot's emphatic self-identification first resounded in living rooms - in *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo, 1996) – he had already become firmly established as arguably one of the most iconic characters in contemporary culture. Since his first appearance in *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981), the list of facts and signifiers that define the diegetic entity we know as 'Mario' had already become firmly established: his preferred outfit of dungarees, red shirt and cap, his Italian ethnicity, his heroic willingness to rescue Princess Peach (or, in his earlier incarnations, his 'friend' Pauline) again and again, his relation with his brother Luigi, and so on.

Still, the question demands further elaboration: what sort of character is this that is doing the speaking? For, as an avatar (or player-character – and, as I will go on to argue, the distinction between the two terms is vital), Mario's function within the game is to be controlled by the player, to act, in other words, as a vessel for the player's embodiment within the gameworld. And yet, here we have one of the most iconic of avatars gleefully affirming his own autonomous identity. What are we to make of this declaration of independence, and how are we to account for the relationship between the player and this entity that is *at the same time* both her manifestation within the gameworld *and* a distinct entity – a fictional individual bearing their own characteristics and identity? More succinctly: what does it mean to play as a character?

The figure of the avatar, of course, is hardly a new object of focus for game studies: the formal ludic properties of avatar-play have been examined before [16; 5], as have the philosophical assumptions underpinning our understanding of the avatar [19], and the complexities of the identity-relation between player and avatar have also come into focus [9; 29]. Some moves towards linking the avatar to notions of character have also been performed – whether to dismiss the link as superfluous [22] or to attempt to delineate the tension between a narrative character as a predetermined entity and player freedom [15].

We need not spend much time on the notion that "the player *is* the avatar and vice-versa" – as Mukherjee [19] notes, such an unproblematic one-to-one relation does not bear up to scrutiny, for even to speak of identification at all is to consider it as a bridge across a gap of difference. However, if there is broad agreement that a more nuanced model for the player-avatar relation is required to replace this overly simplistic understanding, there seems to be little agreement on the shape that such a model should take.

Salen and Zimmerman [27, p.453] argue for a replacement of the "immersive fallacy" of total identification with a notion of double-consciousness, in which the player adopts the persona of the character in relation to the gameworld while remaining aware of her own existence as a player manipulating a game object. Gee [9] suggests the emergence of a shared "projective identity" between the poles of the avatar's virtual identity and the player's real-world identity, and this model serves as the foundation for Waggoner's [29] study of the relationship between players and their avatars in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda, 2002).

However, before we can pose any questions regarding the relation between the external identities of the player and the identity she adopts within the gameworld, it is necessary to gain a clear understanding of the mechanisms by which it is possible for the

player to adopt, and act out, a persona within the gameworld in the first place.

Just as crucial to our task is the matter of character in games. The notion is certainly one that has become a staple of critical discourse – both popular and academic - surrounding the medium. In a recent New York Times arts blog feature, the playwright Lucy Prebble argued that the defining aesthetic quality of games is "a sort of identification with your character that other media will never be able to replicate" [24]. Opposed to this, however, we find Jørgensen's examination of the inherent conflict between the fixed qualities of a character and player agency: using *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010) and *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) as examples of the two poles, she argues that the conflict will tend to resolve itself either into a restriction of character development to non-ludic sequences such as cut-scenes (and hence the strong implication of a dissociation between narrative and gameplay), or a restriction of player agency within very limited bounds in order to ensure the player does not go out of character.

The intent of this paper is to take a formalist approach to the question of the player-character relation, placing the focus of analysis squarely on the game-object itself – and the play-process it structures – in order to reach an understanding of the formal mechanisms by which ludic actions can be perceived as the enactment of a diegetic character within the gameworld. It shall be my argument that, through the affordances of the avatar as a game component, the player is placed in a specific subject-position in relation to the gameworld, in such a way that the framing of the gameworld can be understood as the manifestation of a character's point-of-view – and that the player's actions when interacting with the gameworld through this frame constitute the enactment of that character.

2. ONTOLOGY OF THE GAME WORLD

It is impossible, however, to examine the nature of the avatar-character in isolation either from the diegetic gameworld or the ludic system it is entrenched in and defined by. Thus, although a consideration of the ontology of digital games is not the scope of this paper, a basic ontological framework is a necessary foundation for our discussion on the formal nature of the avatar. A useful starting point in this regard is Salen and Zimmerman's influential assertion that "all games can be understood as systems" [27, p. 50], with *system* being defined as "a set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole". This is the insight upon which Järvinen founds his "theory of game elements" [14], which understands games as a set of physical, computational or even purely conceptual constituent elements or "game components". From this perspective, as Sicart observes, "formal [game] analysis is understood as descriptions of game components that can be discerned from others by means of their unique characteristics and properties" [28].

However, few digital games maintain a status as a primarily abstract system - it is much more often the case that the system is put into the service of representing a source domain, being overlaid with a semiotic layer that renders the game component as a whole - not only in its visual representation, but also in its systemic properties and in its behavior during the process of play - a representation of a (fictional or actual) referent. This is, as such, a representation that is constituted of both "signs *and* a dynamic model, that will specify its behavior and respond to our input" [1, p. 1].

Such a textual understanding of a game opens up the possibility of framing the game-system as a whole as constituting a textual world. Ryan suggests that for the "semantic domain" of a text - the nebulous, vaguely-defined range of its signification - to cohere into a world, it needs to be perceived in the form a *cosmos* [26, p. 91]. Nash has noted the extent to which conventional, mimetic poetics in the Aristotelian tradition depend upon precisely such a notion of the textual world as a cosmos – "a complete, integrated system of phenomena governed by some coherent scheme of rules" [21, p. 8]. The congruence of the idea of cosmos to the game-as-system understanding is immediately evident: more, perhaps, than any other aesthetic form, games can, precisely through their inherent formal properties, not merely represent but enact a cosmos. A digital game can not only signify a system but signify *as* a system; it is not a represented system but a representative system.

Still, no matter how we frame our understanding of what constitutes the game-system, there are elements of digital games that seem to resist being subsumed to the logic of a ludic system. It is difficult to account for representational elements in a game that are not tied to a game component - that are, in other words, not part of the functioning of the system. The most drastic examples of this are cutscenes and other such non-ergodic sequences: it is impossible to deny that such sequences are a recurring feature of the digital game form, and yet it is equally difficult to see them as anything other than 'breaks' that suspend the operations of the game-system.

Perhaps this is because, as Aarseth has argued in a recent paper, 'games' only covers a part of what the medium of digital games has come to be. He observes that "we often commit the mistake of using the metonymic term 'games' for software that in reality are integrated crossmedia packages" [2]. In practice, then, we would seem to be dealing with a medium whose textual world is a hybrid of a core simulated world surrounded by a 'merely' represented, fictional world extending outwards in many directions.

However, a framing of digital games as a hybrid medium, consisting of a ludic system on the one hand and of non-ludic elements on the other, fails to account for the fact that the player's experience is not that of dealing with a set of discrete, separate elements. Before experience with the game brings such differentiations into play, the game is initially experienced – in the unity of all its disparate elements – as a coherent textual world. It is only once she starts feeling out the limits of the space of possibility she is granted within the gameworld that the player becomes aware of what is systemically modeled and what is 'merely' fictional trimmings. "Why can't I pick that up?", "Why can't I do that?", "Why can't I go over there?" – such questions, or their equivalent, are familiar to anyone who has ever picked up a digital game. It is at that point that a rift is torn open between the represented and the representational worlds of the game, and the player comes to understand the two as separate. Importantly, though, this realization of a separation does not entirely efface the original unity of cosmos – it merely complicates the player's relation to it. The object that cannot be picked up, the action for which the game system does not allow, the 'there' that is only a painted backdrop: these things do not disappear from view once the player realizes they are not a part of the ludic system. They might certainly, to some degree, recede into the background, ceasing to appear as objects of interest and becoming part of the general ground against which more systemically meaningful entities emerge as distinct figures. But they do so precisely with

the sense of closed-off possibilities, and what comes to the fore at this point is an awareness of the particular 'role' or subject-position in which the game mechanics place the player in relation to the gameworld.

This is a vital point, and we shall return to it in a later section, but first it is necessary to address the task we have set ourselves – that of identifying a theoretical framework that can collect the disparate constitutive elements – ludic and non-ludic – of this hybrid form under the aegis of a single schema. Aarseth's approach to tackling this dilemma is to propose identifying the "common denominators" shared by games and stories, concluding that there are four "ontic dimensions" - *world, objects, agents* and *events* – that constitute a shared "ludonarrative design space" [2]. Simplifying this model even further, we can consider objects and agents to be sub-categories of the overarching set of entities making up the textual worlds. 'World' in this case can be understood as both the totality of the set of entities of which it is made up, and as the setting or ground that sets them off as discrete objects. Applying such a perspective, for reasons of illustration, to *Super Mario World* (Nintendo, 1990) allows us to include within the same set both those entities which are part of the game-system - gold coins, a red shell, a 1-up mushroom - and those which are purely non-ludic – such as the clouds and mountains making up the multiple layers of parallax-scrolling background. Moreover, such an ontological structure allows us to consider the Mario we encounter as a game component and the Mario we encounter in cut-scenes as different aspects of the same ludonarrative entity, rather than as separate entities existing in different semantic domains.

The next task that presents itself before us is that of determining precisely the manner in which the cognitive gap between a system of entities and a complete, coherent cosmos is bridged – in other words, understanding how it is that the gameworld comes to appear to the player as a world. Again, it is narrative theory that provides us with an answer. Ryan suggests that a textual world becomes available to consciousness through a process she terms *recentering.* Through this mechanism, "consciousness relocates itself to another mode, and, taking advantage of the indexical definition of actuality," – by which she means that what is perceived as *actual* is only so in relation to the standpoint from which consciousness looks out - "reorganizes the entire universe of being around this virtual reality"[26, p. 103]. By temporarily leaving the actual world and anchoring itself in a particular location in the textual world, consciousness can relocate itself to a position internal to the textual world, gathering a cosmos around itself by placing itself among the entities and relations of that world.

The specific quality of this position – to borrow another term from narratology, we can refer to it as a *focalization* [10]– varies on a case-by-case basis. Most often, in literature, such an internal perspective would be strongly associated with a particular character within the textual world. Price suggests that, when reading a novel, "we may enter into a character to a considerable degree and 'perform' his feelings" [25, p. 10], such that we become aware that the world we are perceiving is the world as constructed by that character's distinctive subjectivity.

In games, the subject-position into which the player is cognitively recentered takes on a specific quality, being defined by the necessity for the player to actively engage with the gameworld from her position within it. As Calleja notes, it could be argued that this active role defines the player's position within the gameworld and her perception of it. More than the actual taking of a ludic action, it is this subject-position itself that constitutes the essential effect of games and other ergodic texts: "the effort implicit in the ergodic is first and foremost a *disposition* and readiness to act" [5, p.41].

It is not necessary for this ergodic subject-position to be equated with the figure of the avatar. Different modes of focalization are possible: in the *SimCity* games (Maxis, 1989-2013), for instance, the player's perception of the gameworld is focalized through the implied subject-position of a nearly-omniscient mayor with access to information regarding every aspect of her city. Nonetheless, the avatar constitutes one of the dominant paradigms for this positioning. In order to gain a clearer picture of the formal mechanism by which such an avatar-based recentering might function, we can turn to Calleja's concept of *incorporation,* which he defines 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*" [5, p. 169]. There is a double movement here: incorporation, thus defined, accounts for the player being made present within the gameworld, embodied in the figure of the avatar. At the same time, it also accounts for the gameworld being made present to the player, as an object towards which the player's being is directed. In other words, to paraphrase Calleja, the process by which the gameworld becomes intelligible to the player, as an object towards which thought (and, inseparably, action) can be oriented – and hence precisely as a *world* - is precisely the same process by which the player is virtually embodied in the gameworld.

At this point, then, we can proceed to the first primary question of this paper. What is the nature of the avatar, and what does it mean to be embodied in a gameworld?

3. THE AVATAR
3.1 Avatar as Instrument
In ontological terms, the simplest way of framing the avatar is simply as one element of the set of components making up the game. However, it is, of course, a privileged component, in that it has the property of responding directly to player input, translating this into output in the form either of a change in its own state, or in that of one or more of the other elements of the game system.

In most cases, the relation between player input and avatar output is so direct that the distinction between the two is effaced. The player is instructed to "Press X to jump": when the player presses X, the avatar responds immediately with a jump. With input leading directly and unproblematically to the intended output, thinking in terms of input and output might be less practically useful than thinking simply in terms of 'actions' performed by the player through the avatar.

Such a purely instrumental view of the avatar is the one adopted by Newman [22], who argues that avatars are not first and foremost representational entities, not, in fact, player-*characters,* but rather "sets of capabilities, potentials and techniques offered to the player". This avatar-as-instrument perspective is vital in understanding the basic formal nature of the avatar as a game component. However, if this were all that there is to the avatar, there would be nothing to set it apart from the aforementioned cue ball, or from other examples of what Järvinen would term "components of self" that do not function according to the paradigm of avatar-play. There is something that sets the avatar apart – and, to return to the assumptions presented at the

start of this paper, it is the fact that the avatar functions as an embodiment for the player within the gameworld.

3.2 Avatar as Embodiment

Klevjer's suggestion that the avatar "acts as a mediator of the player's embodied interaction with the gameworld" [16, p. 10] allows us to understand avatar-play as an extension into the virtual environment of the phenomenological mechanisms by which our everyday environment becomes perceptible to us as embodied beings, and by which we can relate to it as a sphere of meaning and action. In terming avatar-play 'embodiment', virtual or otherwise, we are drawing on our experience of actual embodiment within the physical world: in Klevjer's words, "one of the reasons why avatar-based games appeal to us is precisely because the principle of the avatar is grounded in, and plays with, the general phenomenology of the body" [p. 92].

 Such an embodied phenomenology owes its genesis to the philosophical tradition of phenomenology that finds its most influential expression in the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger famously defined the human mode of Being as *Dasein*, or 'Being-there', a mode whose fundamental character is that of being literally 'grounded' in the world in which it is placed. There can be no self-contained, isolated subject prior to its engagement with an object – instead, consciousness is always-already directed towards the world:

> When Dasein directs itself towards something and grasps it, it does not somehow first get out of an inner sphere in which it has been proximally encapsulated, but its primary kind of Being is such that it is always 'outside' alongside entities which it encounters and which belong to a world already discovered. [12, p. 89]

Merleau-Ponty builds on this notion by placing a necessary emphasis on the role of the body: the Being-in-the-world of Dasein, he argues, is intrinsically constituted of an *embodiment* within the world: "consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body" [18, p. 159-60]. It is through the capacities of bodily action that the world is made available to consciousness – therefore, Merleau-Ponty argues, phenomenology should be founded first and foremost upon the perception of things in the world through the frame of the possibility of bodily action: "consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'".

Crucially, then, it is only through this act of being addressed by Dasein that the world is brought forth *as* a world. The world as cosmos, as a sphere of meaningful possibility towards which Dasein orients itself, is therefore determined by the mode of our engagement with it - it is only through being perceived and acted upon that the objects of an environment come to constitute a definite, meaningful world. Heidegger suggests that "perception becomes an act of *making determinate*" [p. 89], while Merleau-Ponty, tellingly, focuses attention not on perception, but on the grasp: "In the action of the hand which is raised towards an object is contained a reference to the object […] as the highly specific thing towards which we project ourselves" [p. 159].

The double movement of Calleja's notion of incorporation therefore comes fully into view here: it is precisely through the virtual embodiment of the player within the gameworld that the world becomes available to her phenomenologically - that is to say, as an object of consciousness - *as* a world. Just as the nature of embodied consciousness is determined by the world towards which it is always-already directed, the world itself is determined through its being perceived and grasped by that embodied consciousness: one is inseparable from the other.

It should be immediately evident how this phenomenological understanding of embodied being can enrich and add another dimension to the instrumental view of the avatar. What Newman terms "capabilities, potentials and techniques" constitute, within the virtual environment, Merleau-Ponty's 'I can', in such a way that the state of being embodied as a particular avatar is determined by its specific set of possible actions.

It is only a small step from here to Crawford's proposal for an understanding of game design as the delineation of a lexicon of verbs available to the player [6]. In some game genres, notably the point-and-click adventure genre, the game interface literally presents the player's choice of actions - usually variations on 'Look at', 'Talk to' and 'Use' - as direct verbal prompts, but the same insight can be extended to the set of possible actions available to the player in any avatar-based game.

This range of capabilities – or, to return to Merleau-Ponty's term, 'I can's – open to the player through the avatar therefore determines the player's mode of being-in-the-gameworld. As we have established, to some extent the avatar *is* the player - both as an instrument to use, and as an embodiment that allows the player to speak of being-in-the-gameworld in the first place. However, it is already becoming clear that this is an embodiment that happens necessarily on the avatar's own terms – though there might be some degree of choice both in terms of specifying the attributes and affordances of the avatar (this is especially true of role-playing games as a genre) and in terms of putting the avatar's range of 'I can's to use, this is necessarily only within rigid, strictly delimited boundaries.

As we have already argued, then, the affordances granted to the avatar – and hence the mechanics of its relation to the gameworld – determine the player's mode of being in that world. Considering the avatar-figure as being unproblematically an extension or manifestation of the player within the gameworld, therefore, is much too simplistic. Instead, we need to complicate our understanding of the avatar-figure – and of the formal structure it enacts – by taking into account the other aspect of the figure – that is, its simultaneous status as a player-character, constituting an identity distinct from the player's own.

4. CHARACTER

In the *Poetics,* Aristotle argues that the representation of human individuals in action represents one of the primary imperatives of mimetic art, and, to a considerable extent, this belief has remained central throughout the Western tradition. Genette identifies "proper name [and] physical and moral 'nature'" [10, p. 246] as the crux of the traditional literary understanding of character – implying a conception of the irreducible individuality delineated by the uniqueness of the character's name and by the equally unique, essential nature the name stands for.

At the most basic level, characterization is accomplished through a set of textual cues that accumulate into a coherent figure. In applying this understanding of textual character to games, we would probably – at least initially – be looking at the non-ludic aspects of the avatar to identify cues of character. The introductory cut-scene for *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (Naughty Dog, 2007), for instance, economically reveals protagonist Nathan Drake – before handing control of him over to the player - to be a descendant of the explorer Sir Francis Drake, a man of action who is not reluctant to get his hands dirty, a confident, somewhat

brash, quick-witted individual who is never short of a quip to lighten the mood, and someone who is not above bending the rules to get things done. Nor should we limit our attention to such non-ludic sequences – it is also necessary to consider the depiction of the character during gameplay. Physical appearance and costume play a crucial role – witness the list of iconic signifiers associated with the figure of Mario listed at the beginning of this paper - as do a character's voicing and animation: Drake and Mario both jump, but while Drake's leap from one precarious ledge to another is the desperate act of a man doing what he has to do to survive, Mario's bound across platforms is an expression of sheer, kinaesthetic joy. It is in these senses that a player-character like Drake or Mario (or Lara Croft, or Link, and so on) can be translated into a set of iconic signifiers that can be remediated as filmic characters and action figures.

Of course, whatever the medium under discussion, the gap between such an information cluster and the perception of a living, breathing character endowed with specific attributes and a life beyond his or her narrow textual function, is considerable. First of all, as Price observes, "fictional characters are only partially specified" [25, p. 56]. There is much we do not know about even the most meticulously detailed fictional character. However, Price goes on to say, "if the character is all verbal surface at one level, he is all implication and suggestion of human life on another" [p. 57]. The text itself can only go so far, at which point the onus falls upon the reader – or the film viewer, or the game player, as the case may be – to connect the dots and imaginatively produce the individual behind the contingent facts.

This invites us to consider Iser's aesthetic response theory, in particular his discussion of the notion of narrative 'gaps' [13] – of everything which is left unspecified and occluded between the propositions of a narrative. The presence of gaps, Iser argues, "implies" the reader, not only inviting but – if the text is to be comprehended at all – necessitating her to participate in closing the spaces, creating coherence out of fragments. This seems to be precisely what Palmer has in mind when he says that, in building a mental concept of a character, "the reader collects together all of the isolated references to a specific proper name in a particular text and constructs a consciousness that continues in the spaces between the various mentions of that character" [23, p. 176].

There is, therefore, an inherent aspect of role-playing to the reception of character in any medium: the structure of textual cues provided can only come to life as a character if we employ these cues in order to, to some extent, imaginatively 'perform' that character's interiority. Certainly, it is vital that we do not take this as a premise for effacing the distinction between the player's relation to her character and, say, the reader's relation to the protagonist of a novel. When we speak of playing a character in a game, we mean it in an entirely different sense – a sense we are still to define. The point, however, remains: from the moment they are introduced, and precisely because they are introduced as a character, the player-character announces themselves as a palpable figure within the gameworld distinct from the player. Before the player has had the chance to control Drake (to keep to the same example) she has witnessed him acting independently, and has already imaginatively performed him: she knows, in other words, precisely what shoes she is meant to fill. Though the player cannot engage with the game at all unless she can, to some degree, perform the cognitive leap of recentering through her incorporation within the gameworld in his form, Drake himself – as a distinct character who is *not* the player, a character the player

can choose to adhere to or, conversely, react against - never disappears from view. Immediately, a space is opened up between the player and the player-character, one which creates the potential for both identification and distance.

As important an insight as this is, however, there is nothing here which distinguishes the nature of player-characters from non-player characters, or, indeed, from characters in other media. Returning briefly to Jørgensen's comments regarding the difficulty of reconciling notions of character with player agency [15], we have focused so far only on the non-ludic aspects of ludic characters. While this is certainly a vital aspect of player-characters, to stop here would be to reinforce the separation Jørgensen draws between the character as presented and the avatar as played. The necessary next step, therefore, is to develop the observations we have already made into the nature of the avatar, and its role in establishing a subject-position for the player's cognitive recentering within the gameworld, into an understanding of how this subject-positioning – as a formal mechanism of avatar-play – can be utilized in the service of structuring play into an expression of character.

5. THE CHARACTER AND THE PLAYER
5.1 Character as Frame
The idea of a character, not simply as a set of factual information - or as the figure we can extrapolate from this information - but also, or most essentially, as an interiority, became explicit with the dawn of literary modernism. In a reaction against what she viewed as the excessively naturalistic approach taken by a number of prominent novelists of the time, Virginia Woolf argued that it is in identifying the essential nature beyond the accidents of physical detail and material facts that character is to be located. One of the ways in which she suggests this interiority can be captured is by explicitly linking character to point-of-view. A character in a literary text, she suggests, "has the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes" [30, p.19].

This notion of a textual character being conceived of as a psychological frame through which the textual cosmos is perceived is a possibility we have already alluded to. When discussing the mechanism of recentering we noted the possibility of the cognitive process being pivoted on the subjective point-of-view of a character within the textual world. We can understand this more clearly by suggesting an understanding of character as a psychological frame. I am here using the concept of 'frame' as defined by Bateson, as a cognitive mechanism by which "a class or set of messages (or meaningful actions)" are delimited [4, p. 186]. As such, a psychological frame is both inclusive and exclusive – it groups a set of phenomena together into a perceptual unity while excluding everything which falls outside the frame.

The idea of the frame formalizes what we mean by a character's 'point of view' beyond the simple geometry of a position in space. Bateson points out that a frame is only such on the basis of its 'premises' – the parameters determining the logic of its omissions and inclusions, as well as the unifying principles which allow the contents of the frame to be seen as a coherent whole.

If we task ourselves with identifying the premises determining a particular player-character's frame upon their gameworld, we might begin by suggesting that it is the non-(or pre-)ludic representation of a player-character that first begins to give shape to the frame through which the player perceives the gameworld.

The intro sequence to *Uncharted,* described above, might already lead a player to approach play in a manner that would be consistent with the way the character of Drake has been depicted. However, if we wanted to go further, we would need to proceed to the notion that it is the ludic affordances associated with the avatar as a game component that most forcefully determine the nature of the frame: through what the avatar can and cannot do, through what objects in the world are available to it, the textual world that the game presents to the player is framed in such a way that certain aspects of it emerge to the fore, while others recede into the background. In some games, this framing process is explicitly brought to the fore. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady, 2009) allows the player to switch from the standard view to a 'detective mode' that highlights relevant objects in the gameworld while reducing everything else to a nondescript, dark blue background, allowing the player to literally see the gameworld as Batman sees it. The framing process, however, need not be so explicit: to some degree, it is present in every avatar-based game as an essential feature.

A useful parallel to draw might be to Lynch's investigations regarding city space. Lynch has suggested that the city-dweller negotiates an understanding of – and makes possible an engagement with – the complexities of the contemporary cityscape through a process he terms 'imaging', by which he refers to the creation of a cognitive map or image that reflects the individual's specific usage of the space.

> Environmental images are the result of a two-way process between the observer and his environment. The environment suggests distinctions and relations, and the observer – with great adaptability and in the light of his own purposes – selects, organizes and endows with meaning what he sees. The image so developed now limits and emphasizes what is seen, while the image itself is being tested against the filtered perceptual input in a constant interacting process. [17, p. 6]

The cityscape, Lynch suggests, is selectively mapped – reduced and emphasized - according to the individual city-dweller's interests and objectives. Certain objects, places and paths advance into view as distinct, meaningful entities, and together they form that particular city-dweller's image of the city – the overwhelming chaos of the cityscape reduced into an ordered cosmos that, in the patterns of its selection and ordering processes, reveals at least as much about the observer as about the city.

This is the crucial insight that allows us to link the notion of frame to that of character: if we equate the premises determining the nature of the frame with the tendencies, dispositions and perspective of a character, then we can understand the frame as providing us with the image of the world as perceived by a character.

This still leaves us with the task of determining the manner in which the frame is defined in terms of avatar-play. The first set of parameters by which such a frame may be defined is given by recalling Merleau-Ponty's 'I can'. To a considerable extent, the set of affordances and possible actions granted to an individual determines the way in which they frame the world: if I give you a hammer, you will instantly perceive the world in terms of things which can and cannot be hammered. Much the same, we could argue, is true of the player's avatar-mediated relation to the gameworld, with the crucial qualification that, here, both the avatar – and hence the player's set of 'I can's – and the world at

which these afforances are directed are mutually interlinked aspects of the same designed system.

It is here that we return to our consideration of the ontological nature of digital games – specifically to the observation that the ludic system addresses only selected aspects of the textual world, leaving others unsimulated, and therefore out of bounds. The player's embodiment within a particular character – and hence, a specific subject-position – however, means that this does not necessarily appear as a limitation of the simulation. Instead, these limitations can be understood as the 'image' of the gameworld through the frame of the role she is placed in within the gameworld: and the implication here is that what the avatar cannot do is as important as what the avatar can do – an insight that, as we can see from Murray's discussions on the dramatic potential of limitations on the avatar's capabilities [20], has already proven central to considerations of the player-avatar relation.

There is another point we need to take into consideration when determining the formal nature of the character-as-frame, and that is the horizon towards which the player-character's 'I can's are oriented. If we return, briefly, to Lynch, we can note the emphasis on the fact that the image of the city is drawn "in light of [the city dweller's] own purposes". The point being made here is that affordances serve no purpose unless there is a goal they are directed towards. Such an orientation towards goals or tasks is already a key element in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, where it is viewed as the necessary focus that allows for the sense both of the body and the world it is directed towards: "if my body can be a 'form' and if there can be, in front of it, important figures against indifferent backgrounds, this occurs in virtue of its being polarised by its tasks, of its *existence towards* them" [18, p. 115].

In the field of narratology, this insight is echoed in the work of Doležel, who argues that a character's actions cannot be divorced from the intentionality behind them, even if it is problematic and difficult to pin down: "intention in and for acting orients the agent towards the future, directs him or her to proceed from a given initial state to an anticipated end state. Because it is future oriented, intentionality makes acting goal oriented" [7, p. 58]. If we understand a goal, in game terms, as an orientation towards a desired end state, and if we view the player-character's set of 'I can's as affordances to be employed towards the attainment of that end state, then the nature of the frame, and the way in which it shapes the player's relation to the gameworld as that of a specific character, comes even more clearly into focus.

5.2 Character as Performance

The character-as-frame perspective, then, takes us a lot closer towards grasping the mechanics of playing as a character. Still, the understanding it provides is entirely static. It leaves us with the question: what happens when play actually occurs, that is, when the player starts interacting with the gameworld through the frame of the player-character?

The clue lies in the fact that both of the sets of parameters we have identified for defining the 'frame' of a player-character hinge on the notion of *action.* The process of play actuates, moment by moment, a sequence of selections from the range of available 'I can's, with a view towards the short- or long-term goals that the actions are directed towards. Play, in other words, produces a sequence of actions. This might seem like a blasé observation, but, once again, it links avatar-play to theories of character, where action is given considerable weight. Palmer, for instance, notes that, "characterization is a continuing process. It consists of a

succession of individual operations that result in a continual patterning and repatterning until a coherent fictional personality emerges" [23, p. 40].

Two insights are suggested here. The first is the idea of character – or, more precisely, the identity taken on by a character – as a performance, a conscious construct that attempts to translate the contradictions and conflicting forces of the individual into a consistent narrative. This aligns the notion of character with an understanding of identity that, in a number of modulations, has been established at least since Giddens' modernist theories of identity [11], and that has only grown more radical in postmodernist and posthumanist constructions of identity. Identity, then, is something that an individual (a category in which we can include fictional characters) 'plays at'. This raises the possibility of the player-character-as-frame being understood as giving the player the possibilities of – consciously or unconsciously – performing a set of actions that cohere into a specific identity for their player-character.

The manner in which this might happen is given by the second point we can take away from Palmer – that is, the understanding of identity as a "patterning and repatterning" of action. Of course, this recalls a philosophical tradition of understanding play as a free movement – see, for instance, Gadamer [8] – which contains within it the notion of play as the playing-out of a pattern, the tracing-out of order according to the fixed rules determining the movement. Price suggests that, in order to play a game, "one must follow the rules in order to shape the unpredictable into a form that is prescribed" [25, p. 3], and that playing a game is therefore "an active effort to bring form into being" [p. 5].

In avatar-play, the construction of an identity within the gameworld can therefore be understood as one of the ordering processing structuring the act of play. Character, therefore, is not a frame, it is a performance - or rather, the frame determines the player's mode of being-in-the-gameworld, thereby constituting the affordance that allows for the production of character through the act of playing.

It is in this sense that we can term the act of avatar-play to constitute the *enactment* of a character. In fact, the verb "to enact" itself, in its multiple, linked significations, might prove enlightening here. Formed of the prefix *en-* ('to cause to be') and the root *act* ('to do/perform'), the range of meanings the Oxford English Dictionary associates with the verb – including "to play a part", "to personate (a character) dramatically", but also "to bring into act" – gather themselves around the notion of causing something that exists as potentiality – as a script, a design, an idea - to be brought forth into being. The idea is that of bringing something to life through actuating a more or less predefined action, and, as such, the amenability of the concept to our understanding of the performance of a player-character is immediately apparent. If, as we have argued, character is, to a great extent, understood as the "coherent fictional personality" (to use Palmer's term) that can be extrapolated behind a given sequence of actions, then we must conclude that, in the fullest sense, there is no such thing as a player-character that pre-exists the actuation of a sequence of actions through the player's interactions with the gameworld (though this is not to say that this sequence of actions might not, in certain games, be almost entirely predetermined). If character is primarily a performance, it is only through its being put into motion in the play-process that the player-character can be considered a character.

What exists before play, then, is a represented, non-ludic character on the one hand, and, on the other, a set of ludic possibilities and prescriptions structuring the player's agency within the gameworld in a particular direction. While this certainly leads to the possibility of a mismatch – as Jørgensen suggests is the case with *Red Dead Redemption*'s John Marston, where "what the player character says in cut-scenes and what he does in play sequences differ widely" (2010) – in the ideal situation these two aspects of the player-character would support each other, adding up to more than the sum of their parts.

6. CONCLUSIONS: THE AVATAR-CHARACTER

We have already touched upon the divergences between the terms 'avatar' and 'player-character'. By this point, it should be amply clear that both terms – 'avatar' referring to the formal game component acting as the player's embodiment within the gameworld, and 'player-character' referring to the nonfactual individual enacted within the textual world – are both indispensable. At the same time, it is also evident that neither term on its own suffices to give us a complete understanding of the figure it stands for. Klevjer has already suggested an amalgamation of the two into the term 'avatar-character' [17, p. 116], but he stops short of tracing the full implications of the compound term. The understanding of the avatar-character that we have reached should allow us to conceive of this game component as the primary means by which the player is given the tools to construct her persona within the gameworld – a persona which, to a great extent (allowing, of course, for varying degrees of freedom within prescribed confines) is determined by the affordances – or, in the terms of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, the 'I can's – structuring the player's engagement with the gameworld.

These affordances, together with the goals towards which they are directed, constitute, I have argued, the premises for the frame of the avatar-character's perception of the gameworld. This is a frame and a perception that the player adopts, and, by acting upon the gameworld from their perspective, the act of playing becomes the performance – or enactment – of a character. It is this enacted character – the character that emerges through play, determined by player choice within the limits imposed by the avatar's nature as a predefined 'frame' on the gameworld – that constitutes the essential nature of the avatar-character *as* a character. The crucial point, of course, is that, by this logic, player actions within the gameworld therefore have a double significance: as the actions of the player, and, diegetically, as the actions of the character within the gameworld.

It has not been the aim of this paper to examine the intricate play of identification, empathy, transformation and negotiation that occupies the space player and character identity. However, by establishing a clearer notion of what is meant by the identity of a player-character, and the ludic mechanics by which it is structured, it is hoped that this paper might offer a surer theoretical standpoint from which to discuss the possibilities for friction, affinities, dissonances and harmonies between players and their characters.

It might be useful, in this regard, to recall Calleja's suggestion that the narrative of a player's experience – what he terms the *alterbiography* [5, p. 115] – can be focalised as either an alterbiography of self (the player) or an alterbiography of entity (the avatar-character). He argues that the two are differentiated

"mainly by the player's disposition" [p. 125] – implying, perhaps, that the distinction is not dependent upon any inherent quality in the game itself that might make it more or less amenable to one or another. Instead, the suggestion seems to be that the formal and structural nature of avatar-play establishes an experiential space within which both attitudes are rendered possible. More specifically, we can, at this point, conclude that the very nature of the relation establishes an ambiguous space between the player and this entity that both is and is not them. It is within this space that meaning emerges, and it is not a matter of choosing and adhering to one phenomenological focus over the other, but of embracing the hesitation. It is in the negotiation itself that the expressive potential of avatar-play – playing out on the spectrum between empathy and ironic distance - is realized.

If, while I am playing *Super Mario 64,* someone unfamiliar with the game walked in, pointed at the screen and asked, "Who is that?" I would be fully justified in answering either, "That is Mario," or, "That is me." Which of those two statements is more correct is a problematic notion, but rather than attempting to answer it, perhaps we should focus precisely upon the moment of indecision between the two possible answers.

What I hope to have achieved with this paper is a theoretical understanding of precisely what we mean, in formal terms, when we say that we are playing *as* a character. I would like to suggest that the avatar is *both* the player's embodiment in the gameworld *and* a distinct character bearing its own set of properties and characteristics – and that it is the oscillation between the two positions that represents one of the most intriguing aspects of avatar-play within gameworlds. It is in this oscillation that the player becomes aware of playing *as* a specific character, of feeling out the friction between their own orientation towards the world and that of the avatar-character, and of synthesizing the two into a consciously-constructed identity – or, to use Calleja's term, an alterbiography - at play within the gameworld, exploring both a gameworld from a specific subject-position, and a specific subject-position in relation to a gameworld.

7. REFERENCES

[1] Aarseth, Espen (2007): "Doors and Perception: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games". *Intermedialities*, Nr. 9, pp. 35-44

[2] Aarseth, Espen (2012): "A Narrative Theory of Games", in *Proceedings: Foundations of Digital Games 2012*, Raleigh, NC, USA, May 29 – June 1, 2012

[3] Aristotle, *Poetics*. In *Classical Literary Theory* (2000). London: Penguin

[4] Bateson, Gregory (2000 [1955]): "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind.* Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp. 177 - 193

[5] Calleja, Gordon (2011): *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[6] Crawford, Chris (2002): *The Art of Interactive Design.* San Francisco: No Starch Press.

[7] Doležel, Lubomir (1998). *Heterocosmica.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[8] Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1989 [1960]): *Truth and Method.* London: Sheed & Ward.

[9] Gee, James Paul (2004): *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy.* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

[10] Genette, Gérard (1980): *Narrative Discourse,* trans. by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

[11] Giddens, Anthony (1991): *Modernity and Self-Identity.* Cambridge: Polity.

[12] Heidegger, Martin (2008 [1927]): *Being and Time,* trans. by John MacQuarrie. New York: Harper.

[13] Iser, Wolfgang (1980): *The Act of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[14] Järvinen, Aki. (2008): *Games without Frontiers: Theories and Methods for Game Studies and Design.* Doctoral Thesis. Acta Electronica Universitatis Tamperensis 701 Media Culture. University of Tampere.

[15] Jørgensen, Kristine (2010): "Game Characters as Narrative Devices". *In Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture.* 2010; 4 (2), p. 315-331

[16] Klevjer, Rune (2006). *What is the Avatar?: Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer Games.* Doctoral Thesis. University of Bergen.

[17] Lynch, Kevin (1960): *The Image of the City.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[18] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (2002 [1945]): *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. by Colin Smith. London: Routledge.

[19] Mukherjee, Souvik (2012): "Vishnu and the Videogame", in Proceedings: 6th Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Madrid, Spain, January 29 – 31, 2012

[20] Murray, Janet H. (1998): *Hamlet on the Holodeck.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[21] Nash, Christoper (1987): *World-Games*. London and New York: Methuen.

[22] Newman, James (2002): "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame". In *Game Studies* (1,2). http:// gamestudies.org/0102/newman/

[23] Palmer, Alan (2004): *Fictional Minds.* Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press

[24] Prebble, Lucy (2012): "A playwright on the art of video games" . New York Times ArtsBeat Blog. http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/26/game-theory-a-playwright-on-the-art-of-video-games/

[25] Price, Martin (1983): *Forms of Life.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

[26] Ryan, Marie-Laure (2001): *Narrative as Virtual Reality.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[27] Salen, Katie and Zimmermann, Eric (2004): *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[28] Sicart, Miguel (2008): "Defining Game Mechanics". In *Game Studies* (8,2). http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart.

[29] Waggoner, Zach (2009): *My Avatar, My Self.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

[30] Woolf, Virginia (1924): *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.* London: Hogarth Press