

The Emancipated Player

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ABSTRACT

Elevating video games to the same aesthetic level as other forms of representational art, this paper explores humankind's inherent drive towards aesthetic beauty and the creation of meaning. To analyse this specific type of player, slumbering in all of us, I propose the emancipated player. The emancipated player represents an open-minded and critical player type who willingly engages in the act of play and who primarily wants to experience play's aesthetic effect. As a refinement of player involvement in video games, the emancipated player's experience in the gameworld can be regarded as a specific phenomenology of play and becomes particularly fruitful for the analysis of virtualized storyworlds or video game narratives.

KEYWORDS

Emancipated player, emancipated involvement, implied player, aesthetic effect, ideation, perspectives, wandering viewpoint, video game narrative, *Journey*

INTRODUCTION

The pleasures of play are many, and there can be no strict delineation of what players may find aesthetically alluring during each and every moment of their experience. To begin with such a statement necessarily demands explanation, and it might be beneficial to start with a brief synopsis of *supposed pleasures* Thatgamecompany's *Journey* (2015) triggers within the player. In *Journey*, an enchanting short story set within a post-apocalyptic storyworld, the player embarks on a spiritual quest towards an enigmatic mountaintop, towering majestically at the edge of the horizon. The road leads us from the vast desert where the journey begins to the underworld ruins of now dead civilization and onto a frozen mountaintop where we will face our inevitable end. The virtualized storyworld of *Journey* is stunning and adorns the player's route with beautiful architecture and vistas. It is not uncommon to stop every once in a while and to marvel at the environment's beauty. Players may leisurely explore this world, navigate its spaces, slope down its hills, and fly above its landscapes. They may share their journey with companions, computational ones as well as real world beings, and decide whether to work together with them or not. By these occurrences, players may become emotionally attached as they relish the narratives they've helped create.

It is easy to discern that the pleasures of *Journey*, as I have described them, fit well with Gordon Calleja's six distinct but interwoven forms of player involvement: kinesthetic, spatial, shared, narrative, affective, and ludic involvement (2011, 37f.). But our involvement in *Journey* does not necessarily stop here and may still go further, as we ponder more precisely about our experience within the virtual diegesis. And probably it is

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almost inevitable that we link the enacted events to facts about our empirical reality and thus, through the act of play, experience an effect so well-known from engaging with representational art. Of course I am talking about an *aesthetic effect*. But its demands are high and require an emancipated being that open-mindedly and critically works her way through the virtualized storyworld s/he encounters (both ergodically and imaginatively).

Calleja implicitly recognised this potential for a higher form of player involvement, but surprisingly did not integrate it as a separate category. Therefore, and in order to do justice to the player's full spectrum of pleasures, I want to propose the category of *emancipated involvement* as an extension of Calleja's established forms. Emancipated involvement occurs when the player steps beyond the basic pleasures of entertainment and affective emotions and reaches for the levels of significance; an experience which leads to a partial restructuring of her or his habitual dispositions. One thing is clear, however. For such intricate involvement to occur, high demands are imposed on the player-subject, and a specific type of player becomes necessary to further discussion.

I therefore propose *the emancipated player*, an empirical being who is critical about her or his involvement in the game- and storyworld and who primarily wants to experience play's aesthetic effect. For this purpose, the emancipated player necessarily shows an affirmative attitude towards representational art and seeks pleasure from her quest for meaning. This transforms the emancipated player neither into an ideal nor a model player, but into a real world player type who engages in *creative dialectic* with the intersubjective structure of the implied player: here defined as the *affordance and appeal structure of the game* which holds all the preconditions necessary for the game to 'exercise its effect' (an *aesthetic effect* experienced in the act of play). Hence, in addition to being a real world player type, the emancipated player (in her or his interaction with the implied player) can be used as method of analysis for virtual environments in general and becomes particularly fruitful for the critical observation of *virtualized storyworlds*. Such qualities, it is needless to say, separate the emancipated player from previously established player types in video game studies (I use the term virtualized storyworld synonymously with gameworld: that is, for video game narratives whose greater storyworld has become partially virtualized and which moreover shows ludic qualities).

To illustrate my claims, I will begin with an investigation of the term *emancipation* itself and show how the concept is used in representational art. Therefore, I will compare three takes on the participant's active involvement in non-ergodic media: Jacques Rancière's emancipated spectator, Wolfgang Iser's active reader, and, finally, Kendall Walton's imaginatively and psychologically involved appreciator. Secondly, the concept of emancipation will be extended to the video game medium by integrating it into Calleja's model of player involvement. Then, five hypotheses about the emancipated player become possible.

- 1) The emancipated player refrains from accepting a languid attitude towards representational art and participates to her or his fullest potential in the video game (narrative).
- 2) The category of the emancipated player is closely tied to an aesthetic complexity of video games.
- 3) The intellectual richness of playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations benefits from the emancipated player's state of knowledge and life experience.
- 4) The emancipated player expresses herself through play (on both an ergodic and imaginative level) as s/he engages in a creative dialectic with the implied player.

- 5) The emancipated player frees herself from a confining and linear perception of video games and acknowledges their multifaceted nature.

These theoretical deliberations will be interspersed with an illustrative analysis of Thatgamecompany's *Journey*. And although I only touch upon further examples, I see no way around the argument that the emancipated player (in her or his interaction with the implied player) represents a specific phenomenology of play and works particularly well for virtualized storyworlds or video game narratives.

ON THE CONCEPT OF EMANCIPATION IN REPRESENTATIONAL ART

Consulting a basic dictionary, the meaning of the Latin word *emancipare* may be described as follows: to free oneself from paternal authority, to declare freedom, and to become independent. The term and its understanding, it is clear, inevitably raise a couple of questions: can the concept of emancipation be made fruitful for the critical study of video games? And if so, why is it important? For a moment let us brazenly assume it can. What then are the necessary conditions for the emancipation of the player? And from what does s/he actually *free* herself? To answer these questions is by no means an easy task and bears with it a couple of considerations. It is best, then, to start with an investigation of how the concept of emancipation is used in representational art. For this purpose, I will now take a closer look at Jacques Rancière's concept of the emancipated spectator, Wolfgang Iser's take on the active reader, and, last but not least, Kendall Walton's deliberations on the imaginatively and psychologically active appreciator.

"Why identify gaze and passivity, unless on the presupposition that to view means to take pleasure in images and appearances while ignoring the truth behind the image and the reality outside the theatre" (Rancière 2009, 12)? In his article *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière primarily opposes two fundamental misconceptions that reduce theatre spectators to "passive voyeurs" (4): for one thing, the didactic mindset that "viewing is the opposite of knowing" (2), that during the observation of a play knowledge undergoes a "straight, uniform transmission" (14) from "schoolmaster" to "ignoramus". And for another, that viewing "is the opposite of acting", that "the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive" (2). Against these claims Rancière holds the notion of *emancipation* and emphatically underscores the spectator's imaginative and interpretive participation in the spectacle.

At the heart of his argument thus lies the call for emancipation from certain oppositions, and specifically from the "poles of distanced investigation and vital participation" (5). Consequently, Rancière maintains: "Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; ... It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The Spectator acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, relates, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on stages, in other kinds of places." (13) According to Rancière, then, spectators are far from passive and actively participate in plays on both an imaginative and interpretive level. To do so, they mobilise their world knowledge and relate the actions on stage to the empirical world they live in (22). Being a spectator thus means to enjoy *and* understand. And it is exactly this insight that closely links Rancière's concept to Wolfgang Iser's process of ideation.

In his groundbreaking work *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), Wolfgang Iser called for the emancipation of the reader without using the term *per se*.

Suspiciously close to Rancière's argumentation, Iser's key line of thinking revolves around the reader's imaginative and interpretive involvement in the text who in interaction with the latter contributes to the creation of the "*aesthetic object*" (x, 92; italics mine). Foregrounding the "process of actualization" (18), Iser thus compares the reader's (emancipated) involvement in the literary text to an "experience" and "dynamic happening" (22) which will lead to a "restructuring of experience" (25) and, consequently, to a change in the reader herself (25).

Now, in order to attain such an effect, the reader cannot remain passive, but has to exert considerable effort and become imaginatively involved in the text; and this involvement includes two closely interrelated steps. To experience a work's *full effect*, Iser argues, the reader strives for closure on basically two levels: on "the level of the plot" and on "the level of significance" (123). And while both forms emerge through the reader's effort to build consistency, only their combination will lead to the formation of the aesthetic object. This distinction, then, represents a decisive point for the concept of emancipation. To achieve closure on the level of the plot, the reader forms a "primary gestalt" that "emerges out of the interacting characters and the plot development" (123). But this gestalt, Iser emphatically maintains, cannot be closed and necessarily remains open. "The closing can only come about, when the significance of the action can be represented by a further gestalt" (123). None of this is surprising, as art's aesthetic effect should not be reduced to an appreciator's involvement on a basic level of entertainment (although it is very much linked to it). It is therefore only through the formation of the additional gestalt (the one that goes beyond the level of the plot) that the reader of a literary text (and in general any appreciator of art) may advance to the planes of significance (123).

To expand the notion of emancipation to the larger realms of representational art, it is now beneficial to take a brief look at Kendall Walton's take on the imaginatively and psychologically active appreciator. In his seminal work *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990), Walton meticulously describes the appreciator's involvement in representations (that is, fictions) as being determined by the mental attitude of make-believe (4). "The basic appreciative role consist, in a word, in *participating* in a game of make-believe in which the appreciated work is a prop" (190). As a result of her involvement, the appreciator is willingly sucked into a game of make-believe and becomes absorbed by the all-engulfing space known as fiction (215f.). Fiction, in the broad Walton sense, can therefore be regarded as a mental *attitude* and is best "understood in terms of *function* ... [the function] of serving as a prop in games of make-believe" (91; italics mine). The appreciator is thus ascribed a vital role in the participation process, and this role Walton repeatedly stresses throughout his work.

To underline the appreciator's active role, Walton differentiates between "work worlds and game worlds, between the worlds of novels, pictures, and plays and the worlds of games of make-believe in which these works are props. Appreciators belong to the latter" (215). Like Rancière and Iser, Walton thus stresses the fact that appreciators cannot be reduced to mere "onlookers from the outside ... [t]hat leaves out our *participation*" (208). Rather, they are wilful participants "blatantly playing along with the fiction" (246).

But Walton's observations still go further and do not fail to recognise our involvement on the level of significance. Besides our imaginative and psychological "involvement in the worlds of our games" (272), critical observation remains a substantial aspect of our experience. Therefore, the appreciator assumes dual perspective: "He observes fictional worlds as well as living in them" (273). It follows that to engage with representational art

we (simultaneously) play two sorts of games: 1) participatory games that involve us on a basic level of entertainment and affective emotions and 2) emancipatory games that allow for the close examination and reflection of props. The appreciator's game is therefore best described as one of *proximity and distance*, as s/he constantly oscillates between the poles of inhabiting and observing a fictional world (285).

The question to be asked now is the following: can the emancipated player, following the observations above, be described as an amalgam of both creatures, living on the fragile border between inhabiting (Calleja 2011, 167) and observing a gameworld? To put it short: yes s/he can! In order to experience a video game (narrative)'s full effect, the emancipated player frees herself from the confining opposition between inhabiting and observing a gameworld and allows for both forms of involvement to occur. What Iser, then, remarked for the reader three decades ago, now comes suspiciously close to the player's emancipated involvement in the virtual worlds of the video game: "The ability to perceive oneself during the process of participation is an essential quality of the aesthetic experience; the observer finds himself in a strange, halfway position: he is involved, and he watches himself being involved" (1978, 134).

EMANCIPATED INVOLVEMENT IN VIDEO GAMES

It appears that to engage with representational art always means to perform a courtship play between *distance* and *proximity*; a play between the poles of what Rancière has called "distanced investigation and vital participation" (Rancière 2009, 5), between the desire for "knowledge" (2) and, referring to Plato, "the gaze for illusion" (3) and the frenzy of "spectacle" (4). The result is a life-giving tension between critical reception and illusive immersion, and it is only through this tension that our engagement with fiction comes to full fruition. Being an appreciator thus means cutting ourselves loose from languid attitudes towards representational art and to actively participate on both an imaginative and interpretive level. And although the player's involvement in gameworlds is extended beyond that of the non-ergodic media participant, it would be a mistake to think that these insights would not hold true for the former as well. Building on these observations, an initial hypothesis concerning the emancipated player becomes possible.

- 1) *The emancipated player enjoys and understands. As a ludo-gourmet, s/he refrains from accepting a languid attitude towards representational art and participates to her fullest potential in the video game (narrative). This means it will not satisfy her to be exclusively involved on a basic level of entertainment and affective emotions (that is, on a purely ludic or plot level), but only the thrills of significance will suffice. Emancipated play may thus only occur through the player's combined efforts of inhabiting and reflecting on the gameworld.*

The interplay of inhabitation and critical reflection, it has been noted, represents the vital premise for *emancipated play*, and the emancipated player is therefore best described as an empirical being who both interacts with and attentively ponders on the virtual diegesis. In this respect, Britta Neitzel has already pointed towards the potential of such a player type. In her article *Medienrezeption und Spiel*, she refers to the player's involvement in video games as an intimate game of proximity and distance ("Nähe und Distanz") which manifests itself in a variety of doublings (2008, 102). One of these is the logical deduction that the player's involvement on the level of the plot is necessarily interwoven with her interpretive involvement (100). But although Neitzel points out the potential for such an attitude, she chooses not to incorporate it into her seven categories of player involvement (103).

Similarly, Gordon Calleja in his influential work *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (2011) implicitly recognises the potential for emancipated involvement, but surprisingly does not integrate it as a separated category. Player involvement, Calleja rightly notices, differs from the appreciator's involvement in non-ergodic media in that the virtual world of the video game recognises and reacts to the player's presence and participation (29). He then continues to develop a model that does justice to the "multidimensional phenomenon" (31) of the video game and establishes six distinct but interwoven categories: kinesthetic, spatial, shared, narrative, affective, and ludic involvement (37f.). All of these forms, Calleja continues, necessitate a certain amount of "attention" (40) on the player's side, and thus he effectively excludes the previously mentioned languid player. In addition, Calleja goes on to distinguish between micro and macro involvement, between the "moment-to-moment involvement within the respective dimension" (4) and "the ongoing motivation to interact with the game and the off-line thinking that fuels it" (37).

Admittedly, emancipated involvement may occur as part of all the forms Calleja observes, but for video games to be recognised as a valid form of representational art, I deem it beneficial to establish a separate category. *Emancipated involvement* differs from Calleja's established forms of player involvement in that it may fertilise each and every one of them. While the player can be involved kinesthetically, spatially, narratively, ludically, etc. on a basic level of entertainment and plot, her involvement may still go further and reach the levels of significance. Compare the standard player of *BioShock* (Irrational Games 2007) who engages solely for entertaining purposes to the emancipated player of this critical dystopia who goes on to ponder about the larger significance of her actions within the virtual diegesis. While the former's involvement remains caught up on the level of plot and affective emotions, the latter's goes on to establish links between virtual and empirical world, which, in turn, may influence or even benefit the player's life. As a result, emancipated involvement may occur during both micro and macro phases, during the player's moment-to-moment interaction with and perception of the game- and storyworld as well as during phases outside of play, where the emancipated player continues to philosophise about her previous experience within the gameworld.

We have seen so far that the aesthetic complexity of *BioShock* allows the player to become emancipatedly involved in the video game narrative, and that through the act of play s/he may experience a partial reorganisation of her or his habitual dispositions. Now, it seems logical that not all video games are capable of evoking such an effect, and this is most certainly due to a lack of aesthetic complexity.

THE MULTI-LAYERED QUALITIES OF THE IMPLIED PLAYER

In the recent *Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, Grand Tavinor posed the question as to why some video games may be considered art while others may not (2014, 61). One way to answer this question, I suggest, lies in an analysis of a video game's *aesthetic complexity*; and by this I mean the degree of openness or multifacetedness that allows for a diverse richness of playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations. To analyse the *structure* that affords these practices in the first place, a closer look at the *implied player* becomes necessary.

When Espen Aarseth transferred Wolfgang Iser's concept of the implied reader to the study of video games, he defined the phenomenon as follows: The implied player "can be seen as a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfil for the game to 'exercise its effect'" (2007, 132). Although appropriately

formulated, one cannot help but wonder as to what *effect* we are actually talking about, because there are many.

The reason for such multifacetedness can easily be discerned. Many video games are mass market productions that try to reach an audience as diverse as possible in order to maximise profitability. They are designed to cater to a wide variety of different tastes and mindsets, and it comes to no surprise that an analysis of player types and their specific tastes and needs designates an important aspect of the game development process (Bateman 2006, 49ff.). But fortunately, amongst the herd of popular culture mediocrity, there linger certain exceptions which, besides their entertaining purposes, show a certain amount of aesthetic complexity and whose multifacetedness elevates them beyond the status of pure popular culture products into what Umberto Eco has called multi-layered artifacts (It is commonly known that for Eco, postmodern texts are multi-layered works of fiction that allow for a variety of different readings. In this sense, an adventure story can either be read for entertaining purposes only (reader involvement is limited to the level of plot and emotions) or, and on an additional plane, can be understood on the level of significance (reader involvement extends to the *level of concept*) (1986, 76-82).

Consider the following examples: the teenage love story *Gone Home* (The Fulbright Company 2013), for instance, allows for play on primarily two levels (which naturally go hand in hand): on a purely entertaining level (here the player deciphers the Greenbriar family's story through exploring the mansion and by filling in of basic plot indeterminacies) and on the level of significance (here the player disputes with the video game narrative's theme of homosexuality). Similarly, *Flower* (Thatgamecompany 2009) enables its players to savour beautiful landscapes and to relax during tranquil moments of play, but if they choose to philosophise about eco-critical aspects, their experience may still go further. And finally, it is up to the greedy players of *Monopoly* (Parker Brothers 1935) or *Civilization* (MicroProse 1991) whether their moves within the (virtual) diegesis spring from a lust for power or whether they try to look beyond the anti-utopian nature of these works. The list could be developed further, but for now it suffices to point out an incontrovertible fact: that the potential for *emancipated play* as a specific form of player involvement can be found in an increasing number of video games. To ascertain a video game's aesthetic potential, then, an analysis of its implied player becomes necessary.

In literary theory the implied reader is described as “a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient” and which “embodies all those predispositions necessary for the literary work to exercise its effect” (Iser 1978, 34). The effect Iser refers to, so much is clear, is the aesthetic effect alluded to earlier. And for this effect to be *experienced* (experienced, because it cannot be ascribed to the literary work only), the implied reader lures the empirical one into a creative dialectic. To do so, *the appeal structure* of the implied reader consists of two interrelating parts or roles: 1) “the reader's role as a textual structure” and 2) “the reader's role as a structured act” (35). The first part relates to the text's strategies and repertoire (the literary text is organised as a system of perspectives which offer the empirical reader various points of orientation; these perspectives draw from – but do not copy – empirical reality, that is, from social norms, conventions, or culture in general, and also from other works of art (69)). The second part, then, is responsible for affecting the empirical reader. This is so because although the perspectives offered by the literary text suggest determinacy, “their gradual convergence [in the reader's process of ideation] and final meeting place are not linguistically formulated and so have to be imagined” (35). In other words, the appeal structure of the implied reader confronts the empirical reader with a complex network of indeterminacy,

and it is because of the text's incompleteness that the reader has to invest effort in the first place. The empirical reader thus becomes intimately involved in the literary text, and this involvement "*brings about* a standpoint from which the reader will be able to view things that would have never come into focus as long as his own habitual dispositions were determining his orientation" (35) (35f.).

Following the observations above, the implied reader is best understood as an "intersubjective structure" (118) and "frame" (107) for interaction that outlines the empirical reader's involvement in a text and which holds the possibility to influence her in a lasting manner. This involvement, however, is by no means free (otherwise there could be no effect on the reader), but is framed by implied reader which "offers guidance as to what is to be produced" (107). Aarseth recognised the same potential for the implied player (albeit focusing on ergodic, not on imaginative aspects) and, in combining it with Hans-Georg "Gadamer's notion of the unfree player subject", concludes that "we can start to see the implied player as a boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, a limitation of the playing person's freedom of movement and choice" (2007, 132). Hence, Aarseth's notion of player is close to (although more confining than) Salen and Zimmerman's definition of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure. The particular flavor of a game's play is a direct result of the game's rules" (2004, 310). These rules, they continue, "guide and shape the game play experience" (310).

Extending on Aarseth's conclusions, the implied player, as defined and used here, shall be described as the *affordance and appeal structure of the game* which holds all the preconditions necessary for the game to 'exercise its effect' (an *aesthetic effect* experienced in and through the act of play). It represents an intersubjective and (potentially) multi-layered structure (consisting of strategies and repertoire) that functions as a dynamic framework of play and which outlines the empirical player's interaction with the game- and storyworld on all levels of involvement. As such, the implied player is in no way to be confused with any empirical being and can rather be compared to a Walton-type work world that remains dynamically incomplete until the empirical player, through her game world (on both an ergodic and imaginative level), fills in its particulars (see also Sebastian Domsch who describes a gameworld's incompleteness and the player's efforts to complement it through ergodic action (2013, 30)). Before coming back to a game's particular strategies and showing how these affect the player, let me formulate a second and third hypothesis about the emancipated player.

- 2) *The category of the emancipated player is closely tied to an aesthetic complexity of video games, and it is only when this quality is given (that is, inscribed into the implied player) that the preconditions for experiencing play's aesthetic effect are given.*
- 3) *The emancipated player slumbers in all of us. However, the more knowledgeable s/he is and the more life experience s/he draws from, the better can the affordance and appeal structure of the implied player be read (or filled in), and an intellectual richness of playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations becomes possible. This sort of emancipated involvement necessarily demarcates the emancipated player from popular culture player types.*

After having dealt with initial questions, let us now take a closer look at how the emancipated player works in practice as s/he engages in a creative dialectic with the implied player. For this purpose, the video game narrative *Journey* represents an ideal example.

VIRTUALIZED STORYWORLDS AS SYSTEMS OF SIGNS AND PERSPECTIVES

“Where in the world am I? What in the world is going on? What am I going to do?” (Moylan 2010, 3). For Tom Moylan, such questions are basic to an understanding of science fiction, and nowhere, I believe, could they be more appropriately formulated than in an ergodic medium. The moment the player steps foot in the estranged world of *Journey*, s/he encounters a magnificent place that many years ago was struck by disaster. Right at the outset we are situated in the midst of nowhere, in the expansive dunes that bury the prides of a bygone civilization. We take on the role of a mysterious inhabitant of this world of whom we know nothing about, besides the fact that she or he is dressed in a red cloth and wears a beautifully adorned scarf. The tombs we pass hint at disastrous events that have transformed the virtualized storyworld into the derelict place we now encounter. This striking indeterminacy and the signs scattered all over *Journey*’s environment – that (in a Jenkin sense) embed information into the environment (2004, 126) – stir the emancipated player’s imagination and, in order to make sense of what s/he encounters, invite her to piece together the story that is not explicitly stated.

But as common to an ergodic medium, the player’s imaginative interaction is both complemented through and influenced by her capability to act within the bounds of the gameworld: we “are forced to act upon ... mental maps, to literally test them against the game world itself” (2004, 126). This leads to the conclusion that in video game narratives indeterminacy is removed through the player’s combined efforts of imaginative and ergodic participation (see also Bode 2013, 1). For to establish coherence of what is going on (that is, to create an initial gestalt on the level of the plot), the empirical player explores and discovers the gameworld. S/he acts within the bounds of its rules and employs her world knowledge to establish links and associations. As a consequence, the player actively partakes in the creation of plot and, in playful manner, participates in a game of make-believe that sucks her straight into the fiction of *Journey*. It is here where the player’s emancipated involvement starts. But in order to experience *Journey*’s full effect, the player’s efforts have to continue and will eventually lead to the formation of a second gestalt. This one is more ambiguous than the first and can be created in a variety of ways (Iser 1978, 123). In any case, the emancipated player willingly accepts the challenge and embarks on a *semantic voyage* into what Rancière would call the gameworld’s “forest of things and signs” (2009, 11) (See also Domsch who calls such a task “semantic challenge” (2013, 101), when he describes a sophisticated way to experience and interpret a section of *Brütal Legends* (Double Fine Productions 2009)).

In a lot of ways, the emancipated player’s experience in the virtualized storyworld of *Journey* (and in any other video game narrative) closely resembles the active reader’s participation in the literary text. Iser has described this phenomenon as the *process of ideation*, and to explain why it works so well for video game narratives, let us briefly take a look at his original concept. For Iser, the literary text is best described as a multifaceted network of divergent thought and opinion, and it is only through the reader’s effort to combine the various perspectives s/he encounters (points of view organised by the text’s strategies) and to relate them to facts about her empirical present (facilitated by the text’s repertoire: that is, “the familiar territory within the text” (1978, 69)) that meaning can be created. “What is combined within the text is a whole system of perspectives, for the literary work is not just the author’s view of the world, it is itself an assembly of different perspectives – and, indeed it is only through the combination of these different perspectives that the nongiven reality of the aesthetic object can be built up” (96).

In general, Iser postulates four major perspectives: “that of the narrator, that of the characters, that of the plot, and that marked out for the reader” (96). As the connection between these perspectives usually remains unstated, the empirical reader, in order to make sense of the fictional world and to establish its connection to the real one, uses her world knowledge to fill in the blanks that invariably arise between them (182f.). And indeed, I suspect this phenomenology to bear arresting similarities to the emancipated player’s involvement in the virtualized storyworlds of the video game narrative.

Similar to the literary text, then, but not equal to it, can the video game be regarded *as a system of perspectives*. These perspectives (or perspective segments) are cleverly organised by the implied player’s strategies and include: 1) the gameworld including its spaces, signs, environmental structures, sounds, music, and characters, 2) a potential plot framework, and 3) the rules of play and resulting processes and play styles. All these perspectives naturally draw from empirical reality, but may never copy it. In other words, social norms and conventions are taken from their original context (empirical reality) and are reorganised in the gameworld in a system of perspectives. Thus the game constitutes a reality of its own, which is that of the fictional and defamiliarized storyworld. So without further ado, let us put these insights to trial and explore how the emancipated player of *Journey* approaches her semantic venture.

For the emancipated player, the virtual desert of *Journey* represents a blank space for creative expression and interpretation. But this blank space is necessarily framed by the implied player and woven together as a whole system of signs and perspectives. When the player steps foot in *Journey*’s estranged gameworld, s/he is confronted with a panoply of these: the mountain as foregrounded goal, the world’s beautiful but sometimes deadly environments, its architecture and the linear route towards a pre-established goal, the constant alternations between torturous ascends and ecstatic descends, the enemies we encounter and the companions we meet, and, finally, the player’s potential interactions with them (be they NPCs or a human companion). In a “synthetizing process” (109), now, the emancipated player establishes coherence as her “wandering viewpoint” (108) travels between the perspectives segments s/he encounters. But in contrast to the reader of the literary text, who imaginatively closes the blanks between the various perspectives, the emancipated player enjoys the same benefits, with the additional pleasures of *acting on* and *creating* perspectives herself (through ergodic action). As a consequence, a fourth hypothesis concerning the emancipated player can now be formulated.

- 4) *The emancipated player expresses herself through play as s/he engages in a creative dialectic with the implied player. While doing so, s/he resembles a scientific investigator who employs her world knowledge to establish links and associations. The emancipated player participates, observes, selects, interprets, and acts upon her deliberations. Not only does s/he imprint herself in the gameworld, but s/he constantly relates the diegetic events to facts about her empirical present or other works of art s/he has previously encountered.*

EMANCIPATED PLAY AND THE PLAYER’S JOURNEY TO HAPPINESS

The emancipated player’s involvement in *Journey*, then, could potentially lead to the following insight: the player’s ascend of the mountain illustrates a beautiful metaphor of life and reflects on our innate search for *happiness*. The video game narrative therefore describes the inevitable road we all have to take, including life’s constant ups and downs. And although the player’s fate often seems to be predetermined by forces without her reach, the potential to happiness is partly laid into her hands and manifests itself in the

interaction with companions, or *philoï*. Such a conclusion may not be the only one to be reached, but is nonetheless, as a potentiality, deeply ingrained into the affordance and appeal structure of *Journey*. It can be reached through critical play and reflection and is outlined by the implied player through the clever juxtaposition of perspectives and the repertoire they draw from: 1) the gameworld including its spaces, signs, environmental structures, sounds, music (extra- and intradiegetic), and characters, 2) the narrative framework of the Hero's Journey, which outlines the player's creation and comprehension of plot, and 3) the rules of play and resulting processes and play styles.

In ancient and mediaeval times, the conception of happiness was a rather dark and pessimistic one. Human happiness was primarily ascribed to the capricious nature of the Goddess Fortuna who in an arbitrary manner exposed human fate to pure luck. Through a spin of her wheel, as the story goes, the poor and hapless could unexpectedly find fortune, while the hitherto renowned and wealthy would fall into misfortune. In those times, as Darrin McMahon writes, happiness was virtually ripped out of man's hand, as he found himself dangling between the poles of "luck and fate" (2006, 10). Both, he continues, are "[s]trictly speaking ... opposed, in that one implies randomness and the other preestablished order. When considered from the standpoint of human happiness, however, the two are closely related, in that each denies the role of human agency in determining the course of human events" (10). In *Journey*, now, the same lack of agency can be discerned for the player, and the emancipated player links this to the video game narrative's labyrinthine structure and arrangement of events.

For the emancipated player, the environmental structure of *Journey* evokes the image of a predetermined world in which the player is robbed of her agency to happiness. And indeed, when regarding it more closely, we are able to decipher a mixture of what Aarseth has defined as unicursal labyrinth, "where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center; and the multicursal, where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia" (1997, 5f.). As such, *Journey* intermingles a linear route towards a final destination with shortcuts and larger multicursal areas for exploration and task-fulfilment and, therefore, shows striking similarities to the path human beings embark on in their own lives. Not only may the player choose how long to remain in a specific area and how much to explore of it, but often will s/he be asked to fulfil certain tasks in order for the journey to proceed (similar to real life, where people set themselves goals and invest effort to unfold new sections on their life-long journeys). These involve collecting pieces of cloth that enlarge the player-character's (PC) scarf and open up pathways in the form of cloth crossings over derelict bridges. The player, now, is rewarded for her efforts, and once s/he steps foot on a pathway, the implied player considerably accelerates her PCs movement, enabling her to slide over in an almost ecstatic fashion. In the meantime, triumphant music underscores the feeling of frenzy, which lets the player savour her achievement even more. Such affective responses culminate in scenes where the player slides down longer slopes that are beautifully backgrounded with marvelous vistas or other areas that may be entirely overflowed. Having experienced these scenes (as perspectives), the player could misguidedly believe in self-determination, that s/he was in control. But this is not the case.

It is remarkable that *Journey*, although set in a post-apocalyptic scenario, shines with beauty. Aesthetic vistas and marvelous architecture abound, but such splendour is not necessarily equated to life's precious moments. From time to time, the road towards the mountaintop can be dreadful and even outright torturous. In doing so, *Journey* cleverly juxtaposes life's fortunate moments with its unpleasant and sorrowful downs, which is

further underlined by constant alternations between rapid declines and troublesome ascends. It is especially noteworthy, now, that all these moments occur in a largely pre-established order. As a result, the player is effectively robbed of agency and finds herself exposed to the capricious nature of the implied player which, in the same vein as the Goddess Fortuna, may unexpectedly throw her into despair or let her rise triumphantly from disaster. Especially striking here is one scene where the player all of a sudden falls into misfortune. In a metaphor of life's unpredictability (or even the inevitability of bad times), the player, after having slid down a long and beautiful slope, is thrown into a complex of underworld ruins, where s/he will encounter fiercesome enemies. The emancipated player, now, connects the various perspectives offered and which s/he has helped create and comes to the conclusion that life, as presented in *Journey*, has both its beautiful and terrible moments, but that the occurrence of such are out of our hands.

Contributing to this logic is the fact that the emancipated player's experience of *Journey* is outlined by Joseph Campbell's familiar and often employed plot model: the Hero's Journey (2008; Jacobs 2007, 28f.). Many of its steps are also discernible in the video game narrative and primarily outline the player's creation and comprehension of plot. In this regard, Michael Nitsche has detected one aspect which is of utmost importance to the concept of the implied player: the high "flexibility" of the Hero's Journey as a plot framework (2008, 63). "The monomyth model", Nitsche argues, "provides a scalable and adjustable matrix" (64) which allows "a form of quest that comes to live in the player's comprehension and his or her interaction with the game space" (64). This flexibility is also discernible in *Journey*, and especially in one of the framework's aspects. Beginning with the player's *departure* (including the *mentor* s/he meets and the first *threshold* s/he passes), the road continues as the player faces a series of *obstacles* and *enemies*, but also encounters *friendly companions* (these remind of human wanderers, or animals, such as dolphins and whales, that travel long distances). Having found her *death* in the torturous ascend of the snowy mountain, the player is *resurrected* and relishes the final ascend towards the mountaintop. Again, the player witnesses these steps (perspective segments) in a fairly linear fashion, and, therefore, the route seems highly prestructured, robbing us of any potential for self-determination. But it would be a mistake to reduce *Journey* to such a anti-utopian vision of life, and there is one aspect which contradicts such insight.

"Arguably there is no greater modern assumption than that it lies within our power to find happiness" (McMahan 2006, 12). In *Journey*, the player's potential to happiness is inscribed into the implied player which outlines various processes and play styles through a strict set of rules. Through choice and action, the emancipated player may therefore create *her own perspective* on the virtualized storyworld and becomes directly responsible for attaining happiness. This potentiality largely resides in her agency to find potential companions, or *philoï*.

Aristotle has described the concept of *philoï* extensively in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and describes it as the friendship between educated men contemplating about political and philosophical issues (2009, 142–182). In recent times, however, many scholars have expanded on Aristotle's original notion. Nussbaum, for instance, links the concept to various features such as: "love", "passionate longing", "sharing and mutuality" (2001, 354), "mutual well-wishing ... [and] benefiting in action" (355). In addition, she names aspects such as "the luck of finding ... a loved one to value" (359), "mutual pleasures and advantages" (356), "the pleasures of sharing that person's company" (357), trusting "one another" (359), "a kind of openness and receptivity" (359), "changes for the better and for the worse, of divisions, quarrels, and reproaches" (359). Now, it is easy to discern that all

the aspects and processes Nussbaum enlists are potential for the player to enact and experience in *Journey*.

The potential to find and interact with philoi becomes possible when the player connects her PS4 console to the Internet and allows a second player to join. After enjoying the luck of finding, the newly found companions cannot only choose to walk the route together, but can also communicate with each other, wait for their companion, and help them through dangerous parts of the gameworld. Together they witness its excellences and fly above its landscapes. And indeed, the journey towards the mountaintop is far easier with the help of a companion, as players are able to recharge their scarfs through communication (through music tones that appear by the push of a button). While for Aristotle, then, *eudemonia* (the good life) was highly dependent on our possibility to find a philoi, the answer to this question in *Journey* is entirely up to both players and shows itself in their interactions with each other. All these potentialities are outlined by the implied player, and one of them holds the pleasure of finding a virtual friend.



Figure 1: The emancipated player experiences and co-creates perspectives: (in this scene) the mountain as foregrounded goal, the troublesome ascends and ecstatic descends, and the interaction with potential philoi.

PUTTING PLAYER TYPES INTO PERSPECTIVE

So far I have already discussed a couple of perspectives the player potentially encounters or enacts in *Journey*'s virtualized storyworld: the gameworld including its signs, structure, and existents, the plot framework of the Hero's Journey, and, lastly, I have touched on the player's possibility (through agency) to create perspectives herself. Now, if our actions are previously outlined by the implied player, it is only logical that their results and consequences can be put into perspective as well and in the same way as any other aspect of the gameworld. Hence, every individual play style of *Journey* will result in a different meaning of the video game narrative as the player (in her process of ideation) fills in the blanks between everything s/he registers (a phenomenological approach similar to, but significantly extending on Clara-Fernandez Vara's *indexical storytelling* (2011)).

Consequently, playing *Journey* with the consciousness of a "gamist" (Kim 1998), "conqueror" (Bateman 2006), or "achiever" (Bartle 1996), one may come to the creation of the following perspective and conclusion. This player primarily rushes towards the story's end and lays the focus on collecting scarf pieces, which might distract her from savouring the gameworld's particulars and beauty. Combining all the perspectives encountered and filling in the blanks between them, such a playthrough will result in a very different conclusion to the video game narrative. In an allegory of life, it suggests a

lifestyle which is entirely focused on success and the fulfilment of tasks and duties. Such a person is likely to miss life's beauty itself, for s/he rushes blindly towards its end.

A "wanderer" (Bateman 2006) or "explorer" (Bartle 1996), on the other hand, might experience *Journey* in a different manner, which again creates an individual perspective on the virtualized storyworld. These players would rather be interested in the gameworld itself, in its intricacies and mechanisms (Bateman 2006, 66; Bartle 1996). They are similar, though not equal, to many narrative player types and would stop every once in a while to marvel at the gameworld's beauty and excellences. And indeed, isn't this what makes life precious? To stop every once in a while. To shut our windows, and to take a deep breath in order to escape, if only briefly, from the hectic times we live in.

Finally, there arises an interesting difference in interpretation when one considers the playthrough of a "killer" compared to the one of a "socializer" (Bartle 1996), or even an "ethical" (Sicart 2013) player type. While the former may not be inclined to cooperate with NPCs or the additional player (and might even try to harm them), the socialiser, especially if showing an ethical attitude, will act differently. In interacting with the newly found companions, s/he shows all the prerequisites to reach happiness in the Aristotelian sense of the concept and, therefore, walks the way of life together with philoi. The killer, conversely, represents a lone wanderer, which may entail pleasures of its own.

Although I have not covered all potential player types, we can observe an irrefutable fact: in the process of ideation, the emancipated player sets different play styles and processes into perspective (one could also call them props) and puts them under critical scrutiny. S/he then combines them with the horizon of perspectives s/he has previously encountered and has helped create. In doing so, and by employing her world knowledge, the emancipated player closes the blanks that invariably arose and as a reward to her efforts experiences play's aesthetic effect created in the interaction between implied and emancipated player. These observations, then, lead to a final and undeniably important hypothesis. The concept of the emancipated player comes with an additional benefit: in regarding video games (and video game narratives) as the multifaceted phenomena they are, the emancipated player frees herself from a linear perception and analysis of them and recognises the diverse meaning-making processes at play. Meaning, in other words, is created through the act of play and is to be experienced by the player.

- 5) *The emancipated player frees herself from a confining perception and interpretation of video games. Instead of solely analysing a particular aspect of the video game (its procedural rhetoric or semiotic layer, for example), the emancipated player tries to see the video game (narrative) in its entirety. Consequently, a variety of different perspectives on the gameworld appear, the combination of which may create the most interesting blanks to fill in.*

CONCLUSION

The emancipated player is both an empirical player type and a specific phenomenology of play, and can therefore be used as a method of analysis which has turned out to be particularly fruitful for the critical observation of video game narratives. Engaging in the act of play, the emancipated player contributes to the creation of the aesthetic object as s/he participates to her fullest potential in the video game narrative. For this purpose, the ludo-gourmet necessarily shows an open-minded and critical attitude towards play in particular and representational art in general (hypothesis 1).

During her experience in the virtual diegesis, the emancipated player can be described as a reader and creator of perspectives who *tries* to attain a transcendental viewpoint on the gameworld. In doing so, s/he resembles a scientific investigator who actively reads and combines the perspectives s/he encounters and helps create. Her activity thus comes close to the active reader's participation in the literary text (or any other appreciator of art) and is best described in the process of ideation. Though similar to the reader's efforts to experience meaning, the emancipated player exerts ergodic effort in addition to imaginative one. In doing so, s/he engages in a creative dialectic with the implied player whose persuasive attempts are both accepted and critically scrutinised (hypotheses 2, 3, and 4). Due to such a dialectic, the meaning of a particular video game is not something to be found or extracted. On the contrary, it is created in the interaction between emancipated and implied player, and thus resembles an experience and a dynamic happening (as described by Iser). Meaning, in other words, can only be experienced in the act of play and comes into being through the player's ideational efforts, closing the blanks between the perspectives s/he encounters and creates. The emancipated player, therefore, and most importantly, represents a particular view on video games, and one that frees itself from a unilinear perception of them (hypothesis 5).

I have shown an example of emancipated play in my personal experience of *Journey*. Naturally, it's not the only conclusion to be reached, but as a potentiality deeply ingrained in the intersubjective structure of the implied player. The meaning of *Journey* can thus not be ascribed to any single object, but is created in the act of play and in the dialectic I have previously described. Correspondingly, the mountain reminds us that the journey towards it assumes individual meaning for each and every one of us. It therefore takes on the role of a floating, indeterminate signifier, always in the player's mind, but never to be entirely grasped. What this does not mean, however, is that meaning assumes a free form, but quite the contrary is the case. When the player steps foot in the gameworld, her potential playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations are already outlined by the persuasive rhetoric of the implied player. The mountain, again, assumes a vital role in this respect and represents a point of orientation in the player's process of ideation. Constantly shifted into the foreground by the implied player, its splendour is presented in various instances. And even when not visible on screen, the mountain irrevocably slumbers in the player's imagination, only then to make a pompous return. Whether this necessarily endows it with the quality of a final destination or something else, the mountain represents a constant landmark in the player's imagination, whose image, however, finds itself in continuous renegotiation. It is through this "sequence of mental images" (Iser 1978, 38), constantly changing and shifting, that the emancipated player creates something new and experiences the aesthetic effect s/he so intensely work for.

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