The Emancipated Player

Gerald Farca

Ph.D. Candidate, English Literature and Video Game Studies

University of Augsburg, Germany

Presentation at CEEGS 2015: Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland

gerald.farca@phil.uni-augsburg.de (old) new mail: gerald.farca@vitruvius-hochschule.de

The emancipated player

1. <u>Empirical player</u> who is critical about her involvement in the virtual game- and storyworld.

   - Who (primarily) wants to <u>experience</u> play's aesthetic effect / meaning.

2. <u>A method of analysis</u> for virtual game environments in general and virtualized storyworlds in particular.

➢ A (emancipated) **phenomenology of play**.

- <u>Latin for:</u>

- to free oneself from paternal authority

- to declare freedom

- to become independent

Emancipare

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 the player actually *free* herself of?

On the concept of emancipation in representational art

- <u>Argues against</u> the perception of the passive spectator.

- "Emancipation begins when we <u>challenge the opposition between viewing and acting</u>".

- "It begins when we understand <u>that viewing is also an action</u> …"

- "The Spectator acts, … <u>She obverses, relates, selects, compares, interprets</u>. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on stages, in other kinds of places" (Rancière, 2009, p.13).
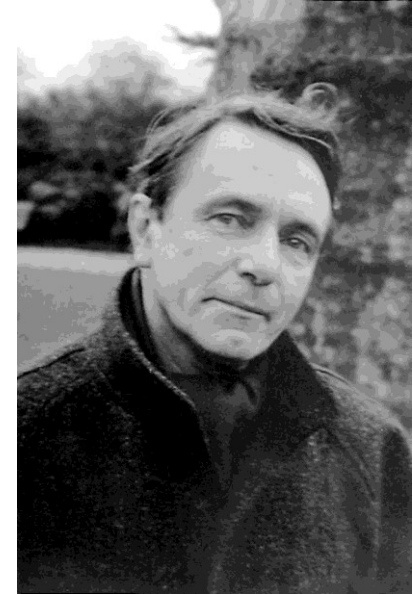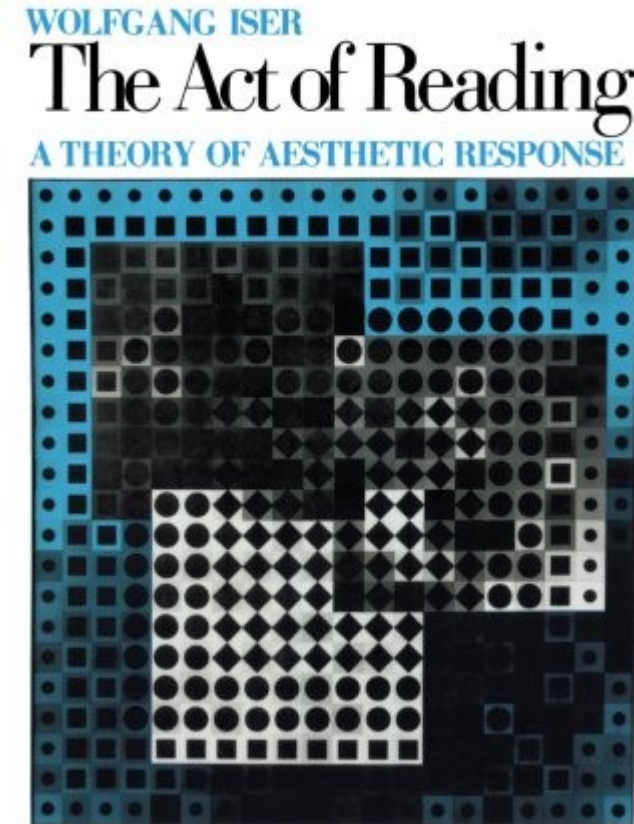
Jacques Rancière
Born 1940
French philosopher

On the concept of emancipation in representational art

An "emancipated" reader

- The imaginative and interpretative involvement of the reader, who in interaction with the text contributes to the creation of the "aesthetic object" (Iser, 1978, p.92)(x).

- closure on "the level of the plot" and "the level of significance" [the level of concept] (123).

WOLFGANG ISER
The Act of Reading
A THEORY OF AESTHETIC RESPONSE

Wolfgang Iser
Born: 1926
Deceased: 2007
German literary theorist

➢ **aesthetic effect!** The lasting influence on the reader created in the interaction with a literary work.

On the concept of emancipation in representational art

<u>The imaginatively and psychologically active appreciator</u> of representational art (fiction).

- "Work worlds" and "game worlds" (Walton, 1990, p.215).

- <u>Dual perspective</u>: "He observes fictional worlds as well as living in them" (273).

- We (simultaneously) play two sorts of games: 1) participatory games that involve us on <u>a basic level of entertainment and affective emotions</u> and 2) <u>games of higher significance</u> that allow for the close examination and reflection of props (cf. 285).
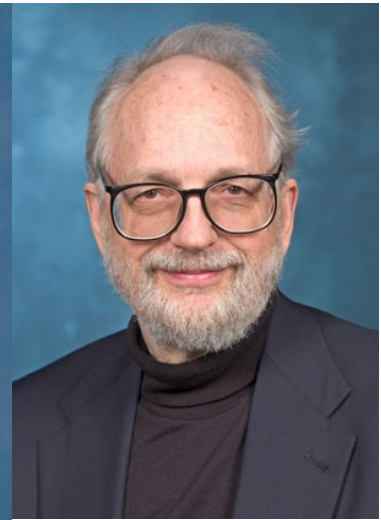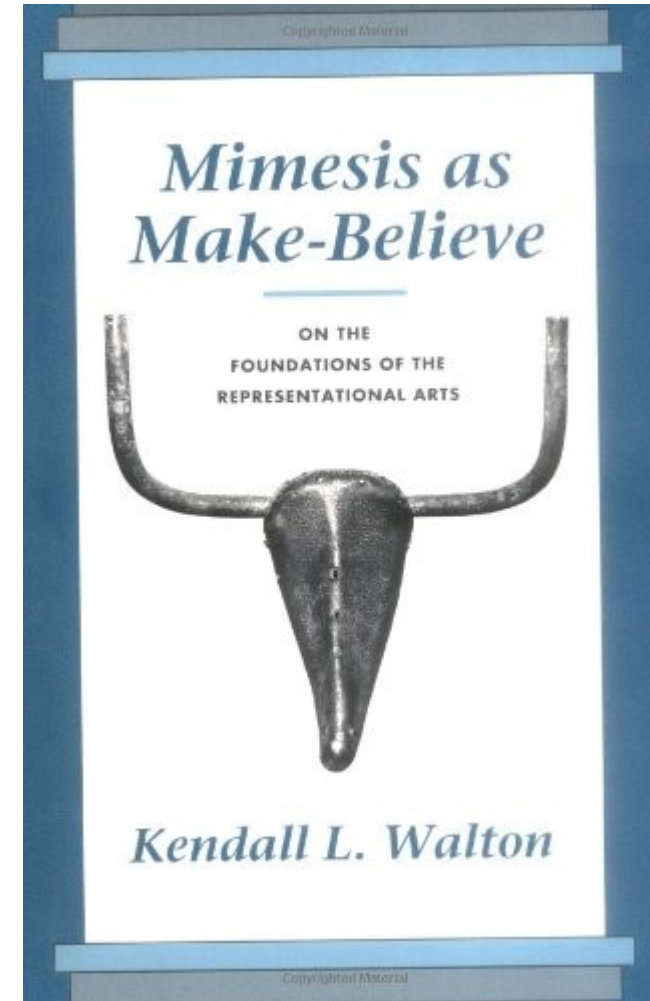
Kendall Lewis Walton
Born: 1939
American philosopher

Imaginative involvement on the level of plot and concept

- To engage with representational art resembles a play between <u>proximity and distance</u>.

- All three theorists seem to be aware of it, as they accentuate primarily <u>two sorts of involvement</u>:

1. <u>Involvement on the level of entertainment /plot</u>: the <u>imaginatively and psychologically active</u> reader, spectator, appreciator.

2. <u>Involvement on the level of concept / significance:</u> it is only through the closure of an <u>additional gestalt</u> that we may experience art's aesthetic effect.

➢ <u>Emancipated involvement</u>.

Emancipated involvement in video games

- We have to **emancipate ourselves** (and I think we have) from a linear perception of player involvement.

- The player's involvement designates an **intimate game of proximity and distance** (cf. Neitzel 2008, p. 100ff.), as she lives on the fragile border between **inhabiting and observing a virtual world**.

- **Emancipated involvement** as an **extension of Gordon Calleja's forms of involvement**: kinesthetic, spatial, shared, narrative, affective and ludic involvement (Calleja, 2011).

- Emancipated involvement may potentially occur as part of all the forms Calleja observes.

- Emancipated involvement differs from Calleja's established forms of player involvement in that it **may fertilise each and every one of them**.

The emancipated player: hypothesis I as vital premise

- <u>Refrains from</u> accepting a languid attitude towards representational art.

- <u>Participates to her fullest potential</u> in the video game.

- This means it will not satisfy her to be exclusively involved on a basic level of entertainment and affective emotions, but only the <u>thrills of higher levels of significance</u> will suffice.

- Emancipated play may occur only through <u>the player's active reflection</u>.

The multifacetedness of the implied player

- "a theory of why some games are art is an important step" (Tavinor, 2014, p.61).

- ➤ Close analysis of the implied player and its aesthetic complexity!

- "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'" (Aarseth, 2007, p.132).

- Begs the questions: what effect?   Because there are many!

On the multi-layered qualities of representational art

Postscript to the Name of the Rose (1986)

- Postmodern texts, so Eco, are <u>multi-layered works of fiction</u> that <u>allow for a variety of different readings</u>.

- In this sense, an adventure story can either be read for entertainment purposes only (reader involvement is limited to the *<u>level of the plot</u> and <u>affective emotions</u>*) …

- or, and on an additional plane, can be understood <u>on a higher level of significance</u> (reader involvement extends to the *<u>level of concept</u>*).

Umberto Eco
Born: 1932
Italian philosopher, literary theorist, novelist

The implied player

Influenced by Iser (1978), Aarseth (2007), Domsch (2013), Calleja (2011), Tavinor (2014), Walton (1990), Salen and Zimmerman (2004, Bateman and Boon, 2006), Eco (1986).

- Potentially <u>multi-layered</u>.

- <u>Intersubjective and dynamic framework</u> (work world).

- that <u>outlines</u> the empirical players interaction with the game- and storyworld on all levels of involvement (game world).

- Rules and resulting play styles, signs and architectural structure of the gameworld, and (potentially) dynamic plot structure.

The emancipated player: hypothesis II

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 (inscribed into the implied player) that we may experience **play's aesthetic effect**.

The emancipated player: hypothesis III

- The emancipated player is necessarily <u>a knowledgeable being</u>.

- Only when the player shows a certain state of knowledge, the <u>appeal structure</u> of the implied player can be read in the first place and an <u>intellectual richness of plays and interpretations</u> becomes possible.

- This sort of emancipated involvement demarcates the emancipated player from popular culture player types.

Gameworlds as systems of signs and perspectives

<u>Participating on the level of the level of the plot</u> (playing for entertainment and affective pleasures).

- Player <u>tries to make sense of the diegesis</u>: what happened here? What is going on? Where am I? Why am I here? What am I about to do?

<u>Participating on the level of significance</u> (critical play):

- Linear structure with larger multicursal areas for exploration.

- Constantly alternating ups and downs.

- The foregrounded goal in the distance (the mountain).

- A (potential) second player to share the experience with.

➤ <u>Perspective segments</u>.

The player's process of ideation
influenced by Iser (1978), Calleja (2011), Nitsche (2008), Domsch (2013)

- The virtual desert of *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012) represents *a blank space* for imaginative expression and interpretation.

- The player's wandering viewpoint travels between the perspectives segments and tries to arrange them into a coherent whole:

Mountain as foregrounded goal, the segments of the world, the constant ups and down, the potential companion(s), the steps of the Hero's Journey, rules and resultant play styles.

- Between the several perspective segments, blanks invariably arise. These can only be closed through the player's imaginative and physical interaction with the virtual world.

The emancipated player: hypothesis IV

- Expresses herself through play as she engages in a **creative dialogue with the implied player**.

- Resembles **a scientific investigator** who employs her world knowledge to establish links and associations.

- She **participates, observes, selects, interprets**. She constantly compares and relates the diegetic events to facts about her empirical present or other works of art she has previously encountered.

Journey and the search for happiness
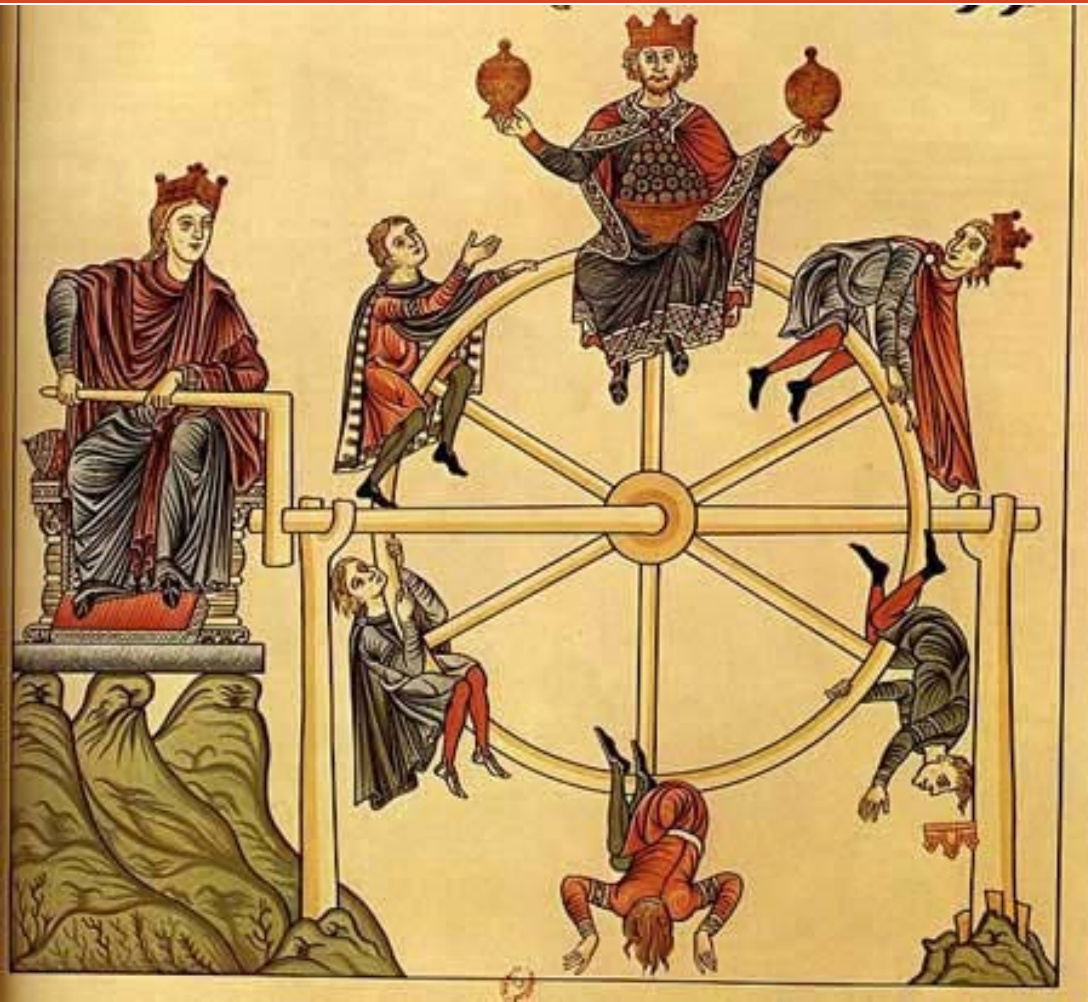
The Wheel of Fortuna: The Goddess of Fortune and Luck

- <u>Ancient conception</u> of "connecting happiness to luck and fate" (McMahon, 2006, p. 10).

- Luck => <u>randomness</u>

  Fate => <u>"preestablished order"</u> (10), no agency.

➤ Happiness is not in our hands (cf. 10).

➤ <u>Implied by *Journey*'s structure</u>, alternating between preestablished ups and downs.

Journey and the search for happiness

The Potential Philoi

- "Arguably, there is no greater modern assumption than that <u>it lies within our power to find happiness</u>" (Mc Mahan, 2006, p. 12)

- <u>The philoi</u> (Aristotle, 2009, pp. 142- 183): mutual friendship (love), "the luck of finding", "sharing", "mutual pleasures and advantages," "to trust one another", "kind of openness and receptivity", "changes for better and for the worse, … divisions, quarrels and reproaches". (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 354 – 359).

- (helping, waiting, giving life power, ecstatically flying through the gameworld …)

- <u>Potential because outlined by the implied player</u>: the player of *Journey* might find *happiness* in a couple of aspects, the most important of which probably lies in <u>her agency to find a virtual friend</u>.

Putting player types / play styles into perspective
Bateman and Boon (2006), Kim (1998), Bartle (1996)

- <u>Gamist / achiever</u>: focus on rushing towards the end or collecting scarf pieces distracts from savouring the gameworld's aesthetic beauty its particulars.

- <u>Killer</u>: works against the potential coop player or NPC companions => the lone wanderer.

- <u>Wanderer / explorer</u>: a romantic wanderer of life and its aesthetic pleasures. Stops for a moment to enjoy beauty.

- <u>Socializer</u>: in search for philoi, spends the journey with a companion.

- <u>Emancipated player</u>: puts these play styles **into perspective (reflects on play styles)** and **compares** them to other perspective segments she gathers.

The emancipated player: hypothesis V

- The emancipated player <u>frees herself</u> <u>of a confining and linear perception and interpretation of video games</u>.

- Instead of solely analysing a particular aspect of the video game (its procedural rhetorics or semiotic layer, for example), the emancipated player <u>tries to see the video game (narrative)</u> <u>in its entirety</u>.

- Consequently, <u>a variety of different perspectives</u> on the virtual world appear (including play styles), the combination of which may create <u>the most interesting blanks to fill in.</u>

Thank You Very Much!

A further playing / reading of *Journey*

- From a psychoanalytical point of view one could argue that the <u>player's route in *Journey* metaphorically stands for the sexual act</u>.

- It begins in the lower regions of sexual arousal – the desert – and steadily makes it way up towards the mountain's peak; thereby leading through the underworld's lower regions to the intense and exhausting ascend of the mountain's upper parts.

- After having exerted considerable effort, the player finally reaches ecstatic climax and is rewarded by the frenzy of flying towards the mountain's voluptuous peak.
  And indeed, on closer inspection, the mountain bears striking resemblance to the female's genitals.

➢ <u>The intersubjective structure of the implied player</u> in *Journey* allows for a variety of play styles and aesthetic reflections / interpretations.

Bibilography

Aarseth, E., "I fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player," in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference.* Available at http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07313.03489.pdf Aristotle,

Bateman, C. and Boon, R., *21st Century Game Design. Game Development Series*, Ed. Hingham, MA: Charles River Media, 2006.

Bartle, HEARTS, CLUBS, DIAMONDS, SPADES: PLAYERS WHO SUIT MUDS, http://mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm, 1996.

Calleja, G. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.

Domsch, S., **Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games.** Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter, 2013.

Eco, U., *Nachschrift zum >Namen der Rose<*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag GmBH Co. KG, 1986

Iser, W., *The Act of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Kim, J., "The Threefold Model FAQ". http://www.darkshire.net/~jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold/faq_v1 .html, 1998.

McMahon, D. *Happiness: A History*. New York: Groove Press, 2006.

Neitzel, B., "Medienrezeption und Spiel", *Game Over!? Perspektiven des Computerspiels.* Eds Jochen Distelmeyer, Christine Hanke & Dieter Mersch, Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 95-113, 2008.

Nitsche, M., *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds*. Massachusetts: Mit Press, 2008.

Nussbaum, M. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

Rancière, J., *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2009, London: Verso, 2009.

Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

Tavinor, G., "Art and Aesthetics". The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies. Eds. Mark J. Wolf and Bernard Perron. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Walton, 1990, Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1990.