



THE EMANCIPATED PLAYER



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THE EMANCIPATED PLAYER

1. **Empirical player** who is critical about her or his involvement in the gameworld and who (primarily) wants to **experience play's aesthetic effect**.
2. **A method of analysis** for virtual game environments in general and virtualized storyworlds (video game narratives) in particular.
 - Engages in a **creative dialectic** with the implied player: a(n emancipated) **phenomenology of play**.

... but there is more to it.

EMANCIPARE

Latin for:

- to free oneself from paternal authority
- to declare freedom
- to become independent



From what does the emancipated player free her/himself?

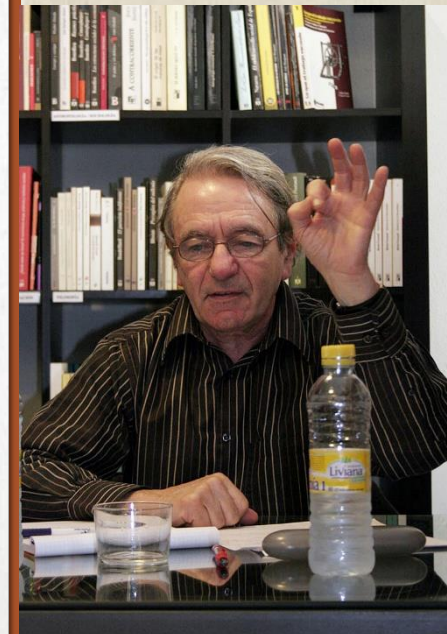
FIVE HYPOTHESES

1. The emancipated player refrains from accepting a languid attitude towards representational art and participates to 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.

ON THE CONCEPT OF EMANCIPATION IN REPRESENTATIONAL ART

The Emancipated Spectator (2009)

- Argues against the perception of the passive spectator.
- “Emancipation begins when we **challenge the opposition between viewing and acting**”. “It begins when we understand **that viewing is also an action ...**”
- “The Spectator acts, ... **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” (Rancière 2009, 13; bold mine).

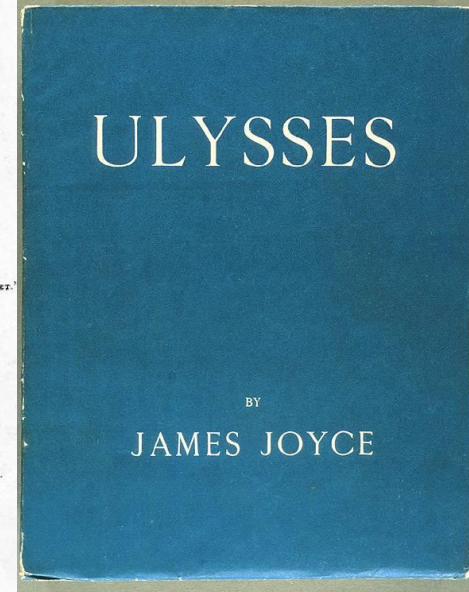
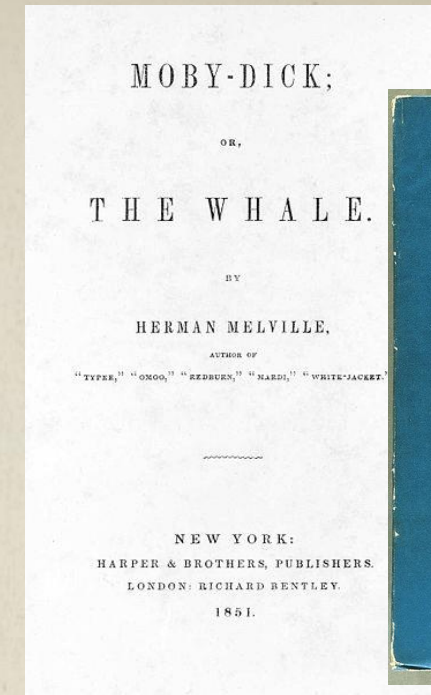


Jacques Rancière
Born 1940,
French
philosopher¹

ON THE CONCEPT OF EMANCIPATION IN REPRESENTATIONAL ART

An 'emancipated', active reader (1978)

- The imaginative and interpretative involvement of the reader, who in interaction with the text contributes to the creation of the “aesthetic object” (Iser 1978, 92)(x).
- Closure on “the level of the plot” and “the level of significance” [the level of concept] (123; bold mine).
- aesthetic effect! The lasting influence on the reader created in the interaction with a literary work.



Wolfgang Iser

Born:
1926

Deceased:
2007,
German
literary
theorist².

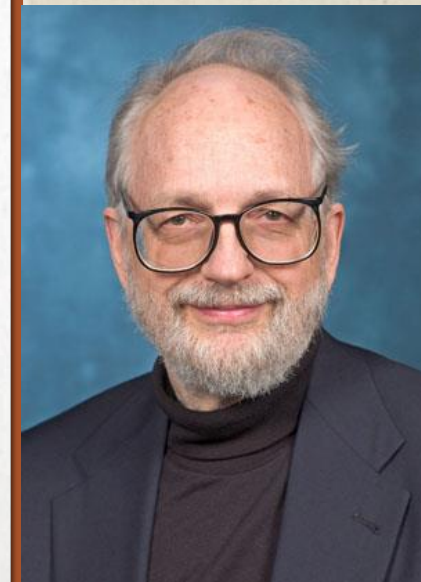
ON THE CONCEPT OF EMANCIPATION IN REPRESENTATIONAL ART

The imaginatively and psychologically active appreciator of representational art (fiction) (1990).

- “Work worlds” and “game worlds” (Walton 1990, 215).
- **Dual perspective:** “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 a **basic level of entertainment and affective emotions** and
 - 2) **games of higher significance** that allow for the close examination and reflection of props (285).



Mimesis as Make-Believe
Props prescribe imaginings



Kendall L. Walton
Born: 1939
American philosopher³

THE EMANCIPATED PLAYER HYPOTHESIS I



- *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.*



EMANCIPATED INVOLVEMENT

Being involved in representational art:
a courtship play between proximity and distance.

Emancipation from the opposition
between inhabiting and observing a virtual
/ fictional world.

- *Emancipated involvement* differs from Calleja's established forms of player involvement (2011) 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 Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) who engages solely for **entertaining purposes** (ludic or narrative entertainment on the plot level) to the **emancipated player** of this critical dystopia who goes on to ponder about the larger significance of her actions within the virtual diegesis.



THE MULTIFACETEDNESS OF THE IMPLIED PLAYER

“a theory of why some games are art is an important step” (Tavinor 2014, 61).

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

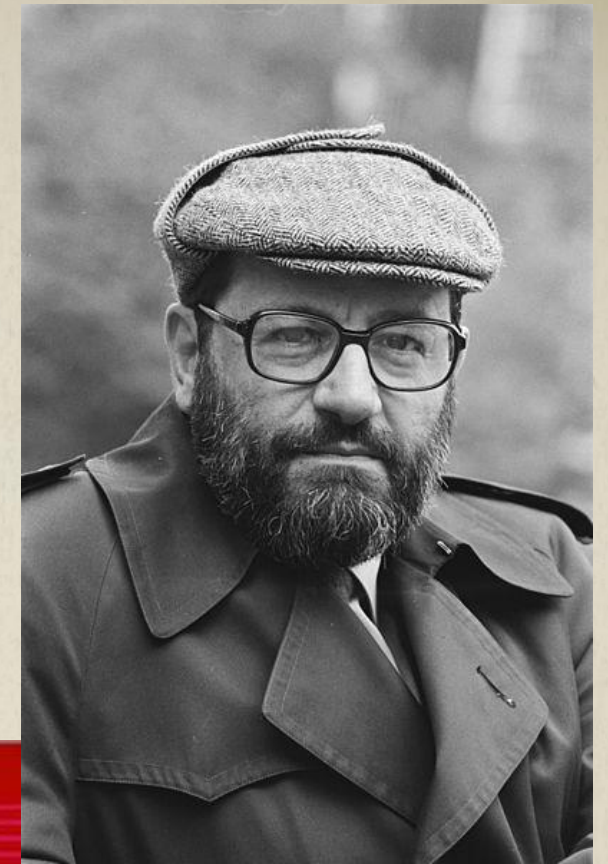
by aesthetic complexity I mean the degree of openness or multifacetedness that allows for a **diverse richness of playthroughs, imaginings, and interpretations**.

- 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’” (Aarseth 2007, 132; bold mine).
- 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 are **multi-layered works of fiction** that allow for a variety of **different readings**.
- An adventure story can either be read for **entertainment purposes** only (reader involvement is limited to the *level of the plot and affective emotions*) ...
- ... or, and on an additional plane, can be understood **on the higher level of significance** (reader involvement extends to the *level of concept*).



Umberto Eco
Born: 1932
Deceased: 2016,
Italian
philosopher,
literary theorist,
novelist⁴



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).

Implied Reader

- “a **textual structure** anticipating the presence of a recipient” which “embodies all those predispositions necessary for the literary work to **exercise its effect**” (Iser 1978, 34; bold mine).
- An **aesthetic effect** to be experienced in the act of reading.
- The *appeal structure* of the implied reader consists of **two interrelating parts or roles**:
 1. “the reader’s **role as a textual structure**” (system of perspectives)
 2. “the reader’s **role as a structured act**” (35) (affecting the reader).

The Implied Player

- ***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).*
- **Intersubjective and (potentially) multi-layered structure** that functions as a dynamic framework of play.
- 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 (thereby affecting the player).

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 (that is, inscribed into the implied player) that the preconditions for experiencing play's aesthetic effect are given.*



THE EMANCIPATED PLAYER

HYPOTHESIS III

- *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.*



GAMEWORLDS AS SYSTEMS OF SIGNS AND PERSPECTIVES

Participating on the plot level

Creating the primary gestalt

Entertainment and affective pleasures

- 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.
- Player **tries to make sense of the diegesis in a process of synthesis**: What happened here? What is going on? Where am I? Why am I here? What am I about to do?



**Perspective segments
the player encounters and
helps create**

- The mountain as foregrounded goal
- The dunes and gravestones
- Various companions
- The player's individual route
- The player's actions

GAMEWORLDS AS SYSTEMS OF SIGNS AND PERSPECTIVES

Participating on the level of significance

Creating the secondary gestalt

Emancipated play

- **The secondary gestalt** is more ambiguous and can be created in a variety of ways (Iser 1978, 123).
- Whereas there is much (more) consent about the plot (**what happens**), there is less consent about the significance of the actions (**what the game means to each and every one of us**).
- Involves the player in **a process of ideation** (**Ideenbildung / a series of images**).



**Perspective segments the
player encounters and helps
create**

- The mountain as foregrounded goal and destiny
- Linear structure with larger multicursal areas for exploration.
- Constantly alternating ups and downs.
- Companions to share the experience with, to befriend.

THE PLAYER PROCESS OF IDEATION

- For the emancipated player, the virtual desert of *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2015) 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**.



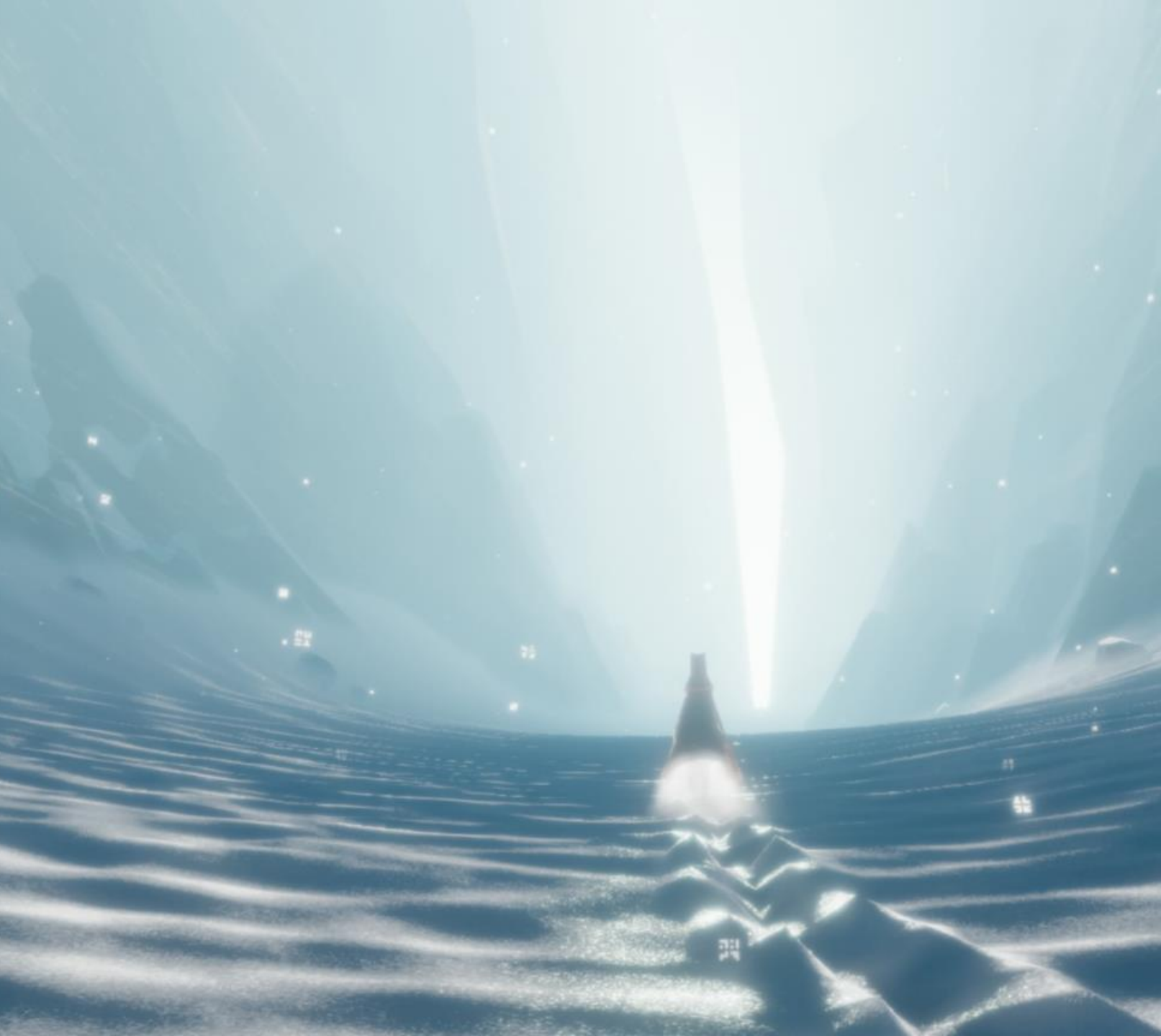
- These **perspectives** (or perspective segments) are cleverly **organised by the implied player's strategies** and include:
 1. **The gameworld** including its spaces, signs, environmental structures, sounds, intradiegetic music, and characters.
 2. **The plot framework** of The Hero's Journey and its several steps.
 3. **The rules of play** and resulting processes and play styles.
- The player's **wandering viewpoint** travels between the perspectives segments and tries to arrange them into a coherent whole.
- Player **imaginatively closes the blanks** between the perspectives s/he has encountered and has helped create.

THE EMANCIPATED PLAYER

HYPOTHESIS IV

- *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 ascend of the mountain illustrates a beautiful metaphor of life and reflects on our innate search for *happiness*.

Journey 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*.

EMANCIPATED PLAY AND THE PLAYER'S JOURNEY TO HAPPINESS

- **Ancient conception** of “connecting happiness to luck and fate” (McMahon 2006, 10).
- Luck => **randomness**
Fate => “**preestablished order**” (10), no agency.
- Happiness is not in our hands (10).
- **Implied by *Journey's* structure**, alternating between preestablished ups and downs.



The Wheel of Fortuna:
The Goddess of Fortune and Luck

EMANCIPATED PLAY AND THE PLAYER'S JOURNEY TO HAPPINESS

- “Arguably, there is no greater modern assumption than that **it lies within our power to find happiness**” (Mc Mahan 2006, 12)
- **The philoi** (Aristotle 2009, 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, 354 – 359).
- Helping, waiting, giving life power, ecstatically flying through the gameworld ...
- **Potential because outlined by the implied player:** the player of *Journey* might find *happiness* in a couple of aspects, the most important of which probably lies in **her agency to find a virtual friend.**

The pleasures of finding philoi



PUTTING PLAYER TYPES, PLAYSTYLES AND PROCESSES INTO PERSPECTIVE

BATEMAN AND BOON (2006), KIM (1998), BARTLE (1996), SICART (2013)

- **Gamist / achiever:** focus on rushing towards the end or collecting scarf pieces distracts from savouring the gameworld's aesthetic beauty its particulars.
- **Killer:** works against the potential coop player or NPC companions => the lone wanderer.
- **Wanderer / explorer:** a romantic wanderer of life, savouring its pleasures. Stops for a moment to enjoy the gameworld's beauty and particulars.
- **Socializer / ethical player:** in search for philoi, spends the journey with a companion.
- **Emancipated player:** 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 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.*



Thank you very much for your attention.

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ENDNOTES

- 1) **Jacques Rancière:** https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Ranci%C3%A8re#/media/File:Jacques_Ranciere-2.jpg
- 2) **Wolfgang Iser:** <http://theorywiki.wikispaces.com/file/detail/Iser.jpg>
- 3) **Kendall Walton:** https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kendall_Walton.jpg
- 4) **Umberto Eco:** https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Umberto_Eco_1984.jpg

Vault Boy Pictures: Bethesda Softworks: <http://www.bethsoft.com>

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Thank you.