Perceiving Across Gameworld Boundaries: Actual, Fictional, and Imaginative Perceptions

Nele Van de Mosselaer
Tilburg University
(Tilburg, the Netherlands)
n.vandemosselaer@tilburguniversity.edu

When perceiving objects within digital gameworlds, multiple layers of perception are involved that do not always accord with one another. Think, for example, of a situation where an in-game avatar is hiding behind a wall with their head pointed downwards. Their apparent field of vision covers a piece of the wall and the ground in front of them. The player controlling this avatar from a third-person perspective, however, can peek behind the wall, see the enemies that are there, and adjust to the situation accordingly. This in-game situation exemplifies a discrepancy in perceptions: the avatar, situated within the gameworld, cannot see what the player, external to this world, has perceptual access to.

In my presentation, I discuss the aesthetic relevance of such divergences between player and avatar perceptions. Drawing from a Waltonian framework (Walton 1990), I discern three kinds of perception that are involved in digital gameplay, each of which will be clarified with examples:

1) **Fictional perceptions**, or what the characters within the gameworld, including the avatar, are represented as perceiving. These perceptions do not actually take place, but are themselves part of the game narrative or fiction.
2) Players' **actual perceptions** from their perspective as external observers of the gameworld. This includes perceptions of the avatar, on-screen pixels, glitches, haptic feedback of the controller, and extra-diegetic elements like HP-bars, background music, and subtitles.
3) **Imaginative perceptions**, or what players imaginatively perceive when taking on the role of participants in the gameworld, as so-called 'virtual subjects' (cf. Gualeni & Vella 2020). If players, for example, report "I can see the Erdtree from here" when playing *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware 2022), this "I" refers to the in-game proxy they identify with and this "here" to the position of this proxy within the gameworld. The reported perception is an imaginative one, made possible because players are prompted to imaginatively project into the situation of someone who sees the Erdtree (cf. Walton 1990, 216; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, 22).

Due to discrepancies between what the avatar fictionally perceives (1) and what the player actually perceives (2), it is often hard to reconstruct what players are (supposed to be) imaginatively perceiving (3) when taking on the role of the avatar in the gameworld. Games utilize various strategies to avoid these discrepancies, often with the goal of enhancing the feeling of being immersed in the gameworld. They might, for example, give the player a first-person perspective, realistically mediate players' perceptual capabilities (cf. Tavinor 2021), or completely remove game interface or integrate it within the fictional environment. Technological developments of game

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media, especially VR media, increasingly allow players to perceive gameworlds in ways that are almost indistinguishable from their perceptions of the actual world.

This presentation focuses instead on the various ways in which the three kinds of perception in digital gameplay can interestingly and even deliberately *misalign*. I discuss various game cases in which perceptual discrepancies arise. For each of these, I specify the experiential effects they might have for players, and the difficulties they might cause for the game's narrative.

First, I discuss perceptual inconsistencies that could be interpreted as unintentional consequences or mere epiphenomena of (the technical limits of) game design. In this regard, I discuss the knowledge gap between player and avatar that is inherent to videogames in which the visual field of the player is different from that of their avatar, such as in third-person games. I will also talk about the fictionally inconsistent perception of especially poor representational aspects of gameworlds that occurs when specific assets (e.g. trees in forests) are repeated multiple times. Lastly, I will focus on the comic discrepancy that is caused by perceptions of glitches and bugs, which are not acknowledged (and cannot be perceived) by in-game characters and yet are likely very apparent to the player.

I will then turn my attention to deliberate cases of perceptual discrepancy in games. It can be noted that such discrepancies have previously been used as narrative devices within non-interactive works of fiction such as movies and theatre. These works of fiction already successfully used misalignments between character and appreciator perceptions to elicit suspense through dramatic irony, to create comical situations, or to cause exciting and estranging cases of metafiction. In the last part of my presentation, I detail how videogames can interestingly integrate and further develop such effects. Notable game situations that I will discuss in this regard include the use of pseudo-glitches, visibly censored content, the inclusion of characters who can perceive extra-diegetic elements such as game menus, and in-game narrators that can be heard by the player, but not by the avatar. I will here also focus on the alienating perception of visual paradoxes and optical illusions in games featuring impossible geometry like *Fez* (Polytron 2012) and *Monument Valley* (Ustwo Games 2014) (cf. Wildman 2019). Lastly, I will detail how differences in perception between avatars and players have been used as important game mechanics, such as in the multiplayer mode of *Assassins Creed Revelations* (Ubisoft 2011). With these examples, I want to show how perceptual discrepancies are valuable expressive devices, worthy of the attention of both game scholars and game designers.

Keywords

perception, imagination, fiction, metafiction, avatar, virtual subject

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