Virtual Game Spaces and Diegetic Fictionality

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Keywords

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Players' engagement with real-time graphic environments in videogames – which I will refer to as *virtual game spaces* for the purpose of this paper – is usually also an engagement with some kind of fictional narrative, in the sense that we find characters acting and causing events in an environment, in some way. Virtual game spaces are therefore sometimes rather pragmatically referred to as "diegetic" spaces, as for example by Galloway (2006). Yet it is unclear how player- and AI-controlled characters, as they are performing their tasks and routines live in real-time space, compare to the kind of characters we get to know in cinematic fiction or cutscenes, like for example Kim Wexler in the series *Better Call Saul* or Keira Metz in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Project RED 2015). It is also unclear how spaces delineated by virtual environments would relate to the diegetic spaces of Kim or Keira.

My point of departure is the intuition that there is a disconnect between player- or AI-controlled characters in virtual game space, going about their business, and their supposedly corresponding characters living and experiencing in a literary or cinematic universe. In for example *The Witcher 3*, actions and events in the world of Keira Metz, as conveyed through dialogues and cinematic cutscenes, although clearly mirroring actions and events in NPC-Keira's virtual space, nevertheless appear to be taking place in a universe parallel to it.

In the literature, this common perception of disconnect has mainly been explained either with reference to a general incompatibility between games and storytelling (Crawford 1982; Juul 1998), or with reference to a specific kind of flexibility and selective filtering that is characteristic of the conventions of videogames (Lankoski, Heliö, and Ekman 2003; Thon 2017; Van de Mosselaer 2022). In this paper I will suggest instead that the disconnect is rooted in a difference between virtual and diegetic ontologies of fictional narrative. The lack of continuity between virtual character and diegetic character, and between virtual space and diegetic space, should however not be decried or wished away as a troublesome dissonance, but embraced for its unique artistic and creative possibilities.

The first part of the paper will present and discuss the concept of a diegetic world. According to Monika Fludernik (1996), narrative fiction produces "imaginary human beings in imaginary human space" not through narrative sequence, but through the presentation of imagined "anthropological experiencers".

> To the extent that we encounter a setting and an anthropomorphic character, we already project a fictional world in which consciousness and action are implicitly suggested to be "in the wings." Fictions are therefore constituted from projections of a world, not from the delineation of one, two or three events in succession (Fludernik, 1996, page 99).

Similar ideas of world-projection is found in Souriau (1952), Searle (1975), Galbraith (1995), Ryan (1992), Bunia (2010), and others, in a way that also resonates with the established idea in film theory of "story world" or "diegesis" as the world of the characters, the fictional world in which the events of the story unfold (Bordwell 1985; Aumont et al. 1992). Fludernik's central contribution is her emphasis on experientiality. We are able to imagine diegetic worlds, she says (or "fictional worlds" in her terminology), insofar that we can imagine human-like experiencers of this world, in a way that implies personhood and identity. Fludernik's experiential account on this point is close to Remigius Bunia's definition of diegesis as a "world semantics" (2010), and also connect with Dan Zahavi's notion of world-embedded selfhood (Zahavi 2005).

Drawing on these insights, I argue that the traditional diegetic worlds of novels and films are essentially defined by a subject-world semantics, in a way that virtual environments with virtual characters are not. While AI-controlled characters through their live interactions and performances do present some level of imagined experientiality, they do so as personas in a situation rather than as persons in a world. Like the characters in Tom & Jerry and similar cartoons, Mario or NPC-Keira are *deictic* (situation-bound) characters, whose actions and intentions relate to virtual space rather than to diegetic space. Precisely because of their lack of imagined personhood, being decoupled from the constraints of a subject-world semantics, virtual characters can be appropriated as types or *roles* embodied by players, without any need for "in-character" performance ("What is my motivation?"). Deictic role-play of this kind has its historical roots in pre-modern traditions of dramatic contest, ritual, and performance (Spariosu 1989; Redner 2019), and can also be connected to contemporary forms of "non-representational" theatre and artistic performance (Kouratoras 2011).

With respect to cinematic and story-driven singleplayer games, a dual-ontology model of narrative fictionality implies accepting that the stories of diegetic characters like Keira Metz or Ellie Williams are separate from players' fictionalized interactions and experiences in virtual game space via avatars and AI-controlled characters. Games like The Witcher or The Last of Us instead allow players to interpret, in a unique way, their own experience in light of the experiences of imagined people. Maybe this dual ontology is part of the reason why single-player story games still prevail and thrive as an art form, despite their prophesied demise. Virtual-diegetic videogame hybrids are experiential analogies to the way in which life and stories relate and resonate.

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