

PEEP SHOW

How focalisation can be leveraged to highlight the player's role in story generation

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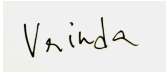
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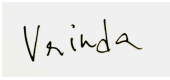
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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine how to highlight the player's role in story generation through utilising focalisation theory and other techniques aimed at creating reflective play. I will begin by discussing the contested theory of focalisation, and how it has been adapted for ludonarratological studies. I will then explore the role of the player in crafting the experiential narrative of games and the synthesis of meaning. Next, I will discuss the novel technique of embodied focalisation and the ways in which it makes the player cognisant of their efforts in story generation. Lastly, through discussion of my project "Peep show", I will explore principles of abusive game design in creating a game that largely revolves around shifts in focalisation and highlights the dialogic relationship between player and game designer.

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Introduction

*"Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles."*¹

At the most fundamental level, the "unnecessary obstacles" in a narrative game is the limited point of view. The player cannot, for obvious reasons, see the whole story. When playing *L.A. Noir* (2011)², the player is not privy to the suspect's thoughts because if they were here would be no hoops to jump through, and there would be no game. The manner in which the story is presented, the provision and limitation of information, has been studied under focalisation theory. Progression through, and the unravelling of, the narrative is ultimately the experience of the game. However, I refer to story generation not merely as the development of narrative but as a synthesis of meaning that occurs in the players' mind in the process of this advancement. I position games as a collaborative and dialogic relationship between player and game designer, a dialogue that the player participates in through interpretation. I will argue that games have developed new techniques of focalisation to create novel opportunities for the player to participate in story generation.

It should be noted that this paper is a study of games that are driven by narrative. To make such a distinction, I will borrow Gordon Calleja's definition of virtual environments as "Computer generated domains which create a perception of traversable space and afford the exertion of player agency. They are populated by objects and often human or AI controlled entities with whom players can interact."³ Thus, when I refer to "games" I am not taking into account games such as *Chess* or *Tetris*, which have little to no narrative significance. While players can certainly impose their own narrative onto a game of a *Chess*, the game is at its core purely a functional one, rooted in mechanics alone.

Lastly, it bears mentioning that I refer to the dialogic relationship between player and designer as one that the player engages with in their mind. It occurs not with the real designer but with an Implied Designer. As defined by Nele Van de Mosselaer and Stefano Gualeni, in 'The Implied Designer and the Experience of Gameworlds' - "The implied designer is the conceptualization of a designer that the player constructs on the basis of their dynamic interpretation of the game. In digital games, the implied designer not only guides the interpretation of the presented gameworlds, but also the ways in which players position themselves (and orient their goals) within those worlds ... determining the way they interactively traverse that world and give meaning to their own existence within it"⁴. Thus, the interaction between player and designer occurs as a synthesis of meaning in the player's mind, with an implied designer.

¹ Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2005), 55.

² Rockstar Games. *LA Noir*. Rockstar Games. PlayStation, Switch, Xbox, Microsoft Windows. 2011

³ Gordon Calleja, "Digital Games As Designed Experience: Reframing the Concept of Immersion," Academia.edu - Share Research, last modified January 1, 2007, https://www.academia.edu/2962494/Digital_Games_as_Designed_Experience

⁴ Nele Van de Mosselaer and Stefano Gualeni, "OAR@UM: The Implied Designer and the Experience of Gameworlds," L-Università Ta' Malta, last modified October 10, 2020, <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/59531>.

Focalisation

The focus of this paper, the contested theory of focalisation, is a term coined by the narrative theorist Gérard Genette (1980)⁵. It refers to the selective presentation of narrative information in relation to the knowledge of the narrator and other characters in the story world. The concept is similar to perspective but makes a distinction in that it relates to what aspects of a scene can be observed in relation to a character. Genette delineates three categories for focalisation. Simply put, focalisation refers to *how* a story is presented.

Genette delineates three categories for focalisation. The first category, zero focalisation, is a narrative wherein the narrator can be said to be omniscient, possessing and supplying more information than any of the characters themselves know. The second category, internal focalisation, is one where the narrative is presented through the point of view of one or more characters. The narrator only divulges what the character(s) know and the point of view is thus restricted. The third term, external focalisation, refers to narratives where the narrator discloses less than the character(s) knows. Such a narrative can be described as 'behaviorist', wherein audiences can merely observe a character's actions and not be privy to their mental processes.

The theory of focalisation has been adopted for use in video game studies, not without controversy, due to complications arising from the ludic affordances of the medium. As stated by Aarseth (1997) in *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, "The question of interpretation is specific to ergodic texts such as video games"⁶. Games complicate a simple reading of focalisation.

However, Gordon Calleja (2009)⁷ argues that focalisation remains a pertinent concept for describing and designing video game experiences. Calleja coins the term "alterbiography" when discussing the challenged notion of experiential narratives. He argues experiential narratives are one wherein the story is formed in the process of the player's interaction with the text, where "interaction generates, not excludes story". He defines alterbiography as 'the active construction of an ongoing story that develops through interaction with the game world's topography, inhabitants, objects, game rules, and coded physics.'

To this end, Calleja advances three new levels of focalisation: of self, entity, and miniatures. Autobiography of self refers to the player's evolving construction of their own personal narrative in the game world. It functions as a reflection of the player's personality, identity, and goals. Autobiography of entity refers to the player's construction of a narrative around the gameworld's characters. The player's interactions with the in-game characters builds the

⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

⁶ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1997).

⁷ 1. Gordon Calleja, "Experiential Narrative in Game Environments," L-Università Ta' Malta, last modified 2009, https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/26653/3/Experiential_narrative_in_game_environments_2009.pdf.

narrative of the game world. Alterbiography of Miniatures refers to the player's construction of narrative through interaction with smaller elements in the game. Usually environmental elements and objects in-game. For example, diary entries or posters. These miniatures function as stimulants for the creation of mini stories that the player attributes to the broader narrative of the game. The concepts of alterbiography and focalisation are intricately linked, as the perspective of the game greatly influences the disposition of the player and their understanding of their role in the game world.

Story Generation

In 'Experiential Narrative in Game Environments', Calleja (2009) thus goes on to describe alterbiography as "A cyclical process afforded by the formal properties of the game; it's representational, mechanical and medium specific qualities; and actuated in the mind of the player." He came to this conception of alterbiography by combining the characteristics of game environments with Iser's proposals of phenomenology of reading, which states that - "The text itself, however, is neither expectation nor memory- it is the reader who must put together what his wandering viewpoint has divided up. This leads to the formation of syntheses ... neither manifested in the printed text, nor produced solely by the reader's imagination, and the projections of which they consist are themselves of a dual nature: they emerge from the reader but they are also guided by signals which project themselves into him. It is extremely difficult to gauge where the signals leave off and the reader's imagination begins in the process of projection"⁸ Thus, story generation and the synthesis of meaning can be understood to be the joint effort of both the designer and the player, the fruits of which become manifest in the player's mind.

This understanding of how meaning is synthesised is not singular to games, and is common in any representational media. More often than not the reader/watcher is not cognisant of their role in the synthesis of meaning. However, I assert that games have the singular opportunity to make players aware of their efforts in story generation. I will argue that highlighting the player's role in story generation, and thereby forming a dialogue between player and designer, is best done through a unique method of focalisation, one only impossible in the interactive medium of games - embodied focalisation.

Embodied Focalisation

Games are often designed in such a way that players are afforded control of a central protagonist but are denied access to the character's consciousness. This perspective is not unique to contemporary games, having a place since the dawn of video games. For example,

⁸ Dagmar Barnouw and Wolfgang Iser, "The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response," *MLN* 94, no. 5 (1979): 135, doi:10.2307/2906576.

as stated by Karhulahti (2012) in TEXT⁹, text adventure games such as *Zork* (1977)¹⁰ present narratives seen from the perspective of "you". However, this "you" often lacks any defining characteristics.

In such scenarios, the medium of the game provides for a perspective not possible in literature and not covered under narratology. The question arises over whether it is a technique of external focalisation, due to the behaviourist point of view, or internal focalisation, wherein the player is privy to the interiority of the character through having control over their actions.

To address this, building on Gennete's theory, Jonne Arjoranta (2015)¹¹ prescribed a fourth category of focalisation dubbed embodied focalisation. Arjoranta goes on to prescribe that this "... is usually done for a specific meaning-making effect: the player is supposed to identify with the tabula rasa-like (blank slate) character (the anonymous you) through viewing the actions of that character as their own."

It is my position that this unique perspective, embodied focalisation, provides space for the player to participate in story generation, as they can project their own mental processes onto the character. For example, the hugely popular *Dark Souls* (2011)¹² series contains dense, rich lore, however the player character is largely a blank slate and the player is denied access to their mental landscape. Much of the story is conveyed through environmental storytelling, item descriptions, and NPC dialogue. The lack of a defined personal history and voiced protagonist allows for greater interpretation, implicating the player in story generation.

Through the study of the *Fallout* (1997)¹³ franchise we can observe that some players greatly enjoy collaborating with the game designer to create stories, so much so that departing from their minimalistic storytelling style led to negative feedback. *Fallout 4* was the first in its franchise to have a fully voiced protagonist with a defined personality. This shift from tradition elicited some disappointment from fans, who expressed dissatisfaction over the limitation imposed on projecting their own interpretations onto the character.

Another example is the game *Journey* (2012)¹⁴. The player plays as a silent protagonist whose goals are stated and emotions or thoughts are never displayed. This invites players to project their own meanings onto the character and interpret the (implied) designer's intentions. For example, the player may choose to infer that their character has set out on a

⁹1. Veli-Matti Karhulahti, "Feelies: The Lost Art of Immersing the Narrative," Research Gate, last modified January 2012, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273946589_Feelies_The_Lost_Art_of_Immersing_the_Narrative.

¹⁰ Infocom. *Zork*. Infocom. PC. 1977.

¹¹ Jonne Arjoranta, "Narrative Tools for Games," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 7-8 (July 2015): 7, doi:10.1177/1555412015596271.

¹² FromSoftware Inc. *Dark Souls*. FromSoftware Inc. Multiple platforms. 2011.

¹³ Bethesda Softworks. *Fallout*. Bethesda Softworks. Multiple platforms. 1997.

¹⁴ Thatgamecompany. *Journey*. Sony Computer Entertainment. Multiple platforms. 2012.

journey after being scorned by a past lover. While nothing in the game explicitly supports this alterbiography, the player is free to create it and progress through the game through this interpretation.

Embodied focalisation can also be used to deceive the player, in a manner akin to unreliable narration. Several games have successfully employed this technique to create unique metanarratives and alterbiographies, casting the player as an unwitting antagonist of the game world, implicating their actions in ways unanticipated by them.

An example of this is *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005)¹⁵. Presented as an archetypal tale of noble heroism, the player plays as the central protagonist Wander, a young warrior on the singular quest to resurrect a girl named Mondo. To this end, the player is directed by a mysterious entity named Dormin to slay sixteen colossal beings. Player expectations are subverted through subtle visual cues, and the game's metanarrative begins to unfold. The player learns that the colossi were peaceful beings and their quest was one of slaughter and not nobility, unleashing a terrible evil entity in the process. The game casts the player into the role of antagonist of the game world and raises questions about the implications of complicity.

Another example of this narrative technique is *Assassin's Creed III* (2012)¹⁶. The player plays as a time travelling protagonist called Desmond, who is part of an organisation dubbed the Assassins. He is pitted against the series' antagonists, the Templars. However, *Assassin's Creed III* subverts player's expectations by having the player play as a Templar protagonist, Haytham Kenway. For several hours of the gameplay, the character, Haytham, is cognisant of the fact that he is working for the Templars, the player is not. As stated by Arjoranta in "Narrative Tools for Games", "Haytham's allegiance is neatly sidestepped: 'Who should I say you are?' a character asks him. 'You don't. They'll know,' ... Haytham does not need to state aloud something that is obvious to him."¹⁷

The technique of embodied focalisation to trick the player is not limited to video games and can be seen in the board game *Train* (2009)¹⁸. Initially a largely simplistic game, with minimal storytelling, players are tasked with loading as many passengers as possible onto trains and efficiently managing logistical strategies to efficiently deliver the trains to their destination. However, the narrative sharply twists when players realise they are transporting passengers to concentration camps during the time of the Holocaust.

All the above games are excellent examples of the use of embodied focalisation in creating metanarratives that create space for interpretation. While I have so far placed heavy emphasis on the efforts of the player in story generation, it should be noted that these efforts do not

¹⁵ Team Ico, Sony Interactive Entertainment. *Shadow of the Colossus*. Sony Computer Entertainment. PlayStation. 2005.

¹⁶ Ubisoft Montreal. *Assassin's Creed III*. Ubisoft. Multiple platforms. 2012.

¹⁷ Jonne Arjoranta, "Narrative Tools for Games," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 7-8 (July 2015): 8, doi:10.1177/1555412015596271.

¹⁸ Romero, Brenda. *Train*. 2009. Board Game.

occur in a vacuum, but in tandem with the efforts of the game creator. To that extent, creators should employ care in crafting game experiences that allow reflective play. In this next section I will discuss some techniques used in my project to create spaces for reflection and synthesis of meaning, with special consideration given to methods of establishing a dialogic relationship between player and designer.

Reflective Design

I will now discuss my project, a vertical slice created with the intentions of exploring shifting degrees of focalisation to make the player cognisant of their role in story generation. In order to do so, I employed techniques of abusive game design, as identified by Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart (2010) in “Now it's personal: on abusive game design”¹⁹, creating a deliberately dissatisfying game experience at the conclusion of the game. I contend that in creating a "negative" game experience, I made the player more aware of their participation in the synthesis of meaning, and spotlighted the dialogic relationship between player and designer.

My project, *Peep Show*, is an interactive narrative game created using Twine. The main themes of the game are perspective, knowledge, and voyeurism. The game is set in a fictionalised version of early mediaeval Southern India. Civilisation is primitive, largely agrarian, organised around micro kingdoms. Great liberty is taken with historical accuracy, incorporating terms from different cultures. The player's entry into the game world positions them as an outsider, removed from the consequences of interfering with the kingdom. They are tasked with one simple goal - snoop around the kingdom and glean the secrets of its inhabitants.

The player plays as an entity with the power to occupy "vessels" (inanimate objects and other in game characters), experiencing shifts in perspective with each new vessel. This process is dubbed "capturing". The player avatar, the Deva, lacks any defining characters and is devoid of any backstory, having been just born. The mechanic of capturing allows the player to exist in the game world not as an avatar of their own but as multiple NPCs instead. While initially the player merely captures a vessel to gain access to new areas in the game, the player gains greater power the more they "know" a vessel, which is accomplished through gleaning information about a vessel or merely observing them. "Knowing" a vessel allows access to its interiority, such as thoughts and dialogue options. As such, through progressing the narrative and learning more about the game world's inhabitants, the player directly influences the focalisation of the game, shifting from external focalisation to internal focalisation to, ultimately, at the game's conclusion, zero focalisation.

¹⁹ Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart, "Now it's personal," *Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on the Future of Game Design and Technology*, 2010, doi:10.1145/1920778.1920785.

This shift in focalisation is paired with increasing agency. The theme of unrestrained voyeurism traverses from its initial form of simply viewing, to hearing whispered conversations, to gaining access to other's thoughts, to outright making decisions for them. At the outset of the game the player is merely a spectator, watching the character's from a behaviourist point of view. Through capturing NPCs they are given access to the thoughts not being voiced by said character. The next increase in agency comes with the added ability to control dialogue choices, guiding the conversation in some particular direction to uncover information, diffuse a tense situation, or further some agenda. At the final stage in the game, the player is granted unrestrained agency through being given control of every action and word of every character. Through the use of text boxes, they may have any character do or say what they please. In doing so, all NPCs turn into playable characters. It was my intention to hand over the reigns of story generation in its entirety to the player, turning them into both designer and player. It should be noted that my project is a demo, and for the purpose of the focus of this paper I have introduced the final stage, the handing over of all control to the player, earlier than is planned for in the final version of my game.

The granting of complete agency will be a dissatisfying and anticlimactic experience. The player will mourn the loss of obstacles and ability to fail that makes play inherently fun. As stated by Jesper Juul "Failure in games tells us that we are flawed and deficient. As such, video games are the art of failure, the singular art form that sets us up for failure and allows us to experience and experiment with failure."²⁰ Through a version of zero focalisation, one where the player has unrestrained access to characters' lives, they have lost the ability to fail. Additionally, the player will naturally be bored by having to craft their own narrative. Play is inherently fun due to the lusory attitude, as defined by Bernard Suits's celebrated analysis, the lusory attitude is the 'voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles'. The loss of obstacles equals the loss of play.

Creating a purposefully frustrating experience goes against conventional game design practices. However, I will argue that doing so helps to position a game as a dialogue between player and designer. In talking of non conventional game design, Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart (2010)²¹ state that "In the logic of conservative game design, the designer advocates for the player by creating a tool for predicted pleasures. That is, players engage with the game system, and are encouraged to instrumentalize their play by means of system procedures that reinforce the intended experience. In this view, the power structure is between a player and a system, with the designer vanishing into the background." Miguel Sicart advocates for games that are not systems-centric, dubbing the design of such games as 'Abusive game design'. Due to points of friction and frustration, the player is forced to form a connection with the designer to grasp the nature of gameplay. Gameplay becomes personal, arising as an interaction with the (implied) designer, instead of a system. Establishing a personal

²⁰ Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 30.

²¹ Douglas Wilson and Miguel Sicart, "Now it's personal," *Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on the Future of Game Design and Technology*, 2010, 6, doi:10.1145/1920778.1920785.

connection with the designer repositions the game experience as a dialogue, one that the player engages in through reflection and interpretation.

Through losing the ability to fail, the player will be displaced. Immersion is ruined and the player is forced to view the game as a designed experience. As discussed in “A Design Framework for Reflective Play”²², strategic disruptions interrupt the player experience and draw attention to particular aspects of the narrative or gameplay, thereby stimulating players to engage more deeply and analytically with the content. Highlighting the game as a designed experience will stimulate player's reflection on the part they play in an interactive narrative. The player's role in story generation is made blatant, as they are thrust into the role of game designer. Thus, the player is made self aware of how they were contributing to story generation all along, starting from the early stages where synthesis of meaning was merely occurring in their minds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper examines the role of the player in story generation in video games through the lens of focalisation theory. It highlights the collaborative and dialogic nature of the relationship between player and game designer in the construction of narratives. Through theories developed in the study of phenomenology of reading and alterbiographies, I position the synthesis of meaning to occur as a result of the dual efforts of the player and designer, becoming manifest in the player's mind. While this theory is common to any representational medium, the paper discusses the concept of embodied focalization as a tool for making players cognizant of their efforts in meaning making. Through case studies of games that have used embodied focalisation, I explore the creation of metafictional games that encourage reflection on the nature of the player's complicity in the game. Finally, in discussion of my own project, the paper illustrates how to make player's self aware of their efforts in story generation through spotlighting the dialogic relationship between player and designer. This dialogic relationship is brought to the forefront through techniques devised in abusive game design, the creation of a deliberately negative game experience in order to draw attention to the constructed nature of gameplay and the player's efforts in this construction. Ultimately, this paper outlines a non-conventional approach to game design aimed at promoting players' self-awareness and curiosity about the nature of the medium of games.

²² Josh A. Miller et al., "A Design Framework for Reflective Play," ACM Conferences, last modified May 11, 2024, https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3613904.3642455?casa_token=a6tR59QandMAAAAA%3A9XD07bMpMbulpddfsJDsFXBRqS1diS_hEmJYTPG1SSAzT6ZOrMQgP43-Z8PAdxS11WoofekK4IN.

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Game Demo Project

Title: Peep Show

Link: <https://viwoo.itch.io/peep-show>