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Computer games and the constitutive act of diegetic pretence

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Introduction

In video games, what would the concept of a *diegetic* world be referring to? Can we put this idea to productive use in the theory and philosophy of games, and if so, how should we define it? The standard definition of the diegetic, which is most influential in film theory, can be intuitively grasped. The *diegesis* of a novel or a film, Gerald Prince (1987) and David Bordwell (1985) explain, is the fictional world in which the events of the story unfold. Intuitively, in our imagination, we think of this world as existing independently of its telling. We imagine characters not as characters, but as persons, as people. This intuitive idea allows film students to discuss diegetic versus non-diegetic music, and it may also lead them to conclude that the characters in Tom Hooper's *Les Miserables* (2012) probably are *not* people who live in a world in which talk doesn't exist. And so on.

Diegetic world do not only appear to exist independently of their telling, they also appear to exist independently of our emotional engagement with them. Their existence as imagined actual worlds do not seem to depend very much on things like identification, or immersion. Take Peggy Olsen, for example. In a conversation, anyone who has seen *Mad Men* may happily go on to discuss what she is like, and maybe check her family background on Wikipedia (her real name, by the way, is not Peggy but Margaret, and she is of Norwegian heritage). There is no need to immerse ourselves to do this. As through some sort of weird logic, we seemingly snap into diegetic mode, as if by a secret signal.

In an important sense, diegetic worlds are medium-independent. A story about an imagined group of persons in an imagined world can be told through a number of different means; it could be writing, feature film, animation, comics, oral storytelling, or performed drama. Games have the opportunity to utilise a range of such established media forms as means to convey a story - in this traditional, diegetic sense. The new kid on the block, however, is graphical real-time

environments, which I will here call virtual environments. Is a virtual environment in this context just another medium, just another potential vehicle for evoking a diegetic world?

Diegesis in computer game theory: the continuity view

One could say, plausibly, that hands-on engagement with real-time environments is a diegetic supergenerator, that it contributes very strongly to evoking a diegetic world, due to its perceptually immediate and immersive qualities - especially in its 3D-navigable version, and even more especially in its full-body immersive VR versions. Let us call this view the *continuity* model of the relationship between virtual environments and diegetic worlds. In 2003, Bob Rehak employed the notion of diegesis to "designate the narrative-strategic space of any given videogame - a virtual environment determined by unique rules, limits, goals, and "history"" (Rehak, 2003, p. 124). Rehak's quotation marks around "history" indicate that he does not refer to any actual history of the virtual environment but to an imagined history, which is nevertheless integral to it. In a similar maneuver, Alexander Galloway, echoing Bordwell's definition, defines diegesis as "the total world of narrative action", onscreen and offscreen, or, in other words, "the portion of the apparatus that constitutes a pretend world of character and story" (Galloway, 2006, p. 8).

The continuity model implies that graphical environments can be virtualisations of the diegetic imagination, to the extent that storyworld and virtual world consists of the same settings, the same characters, and the same events. In his book Video Game Spaces (2008), Michael Nitsche sees this duality as a happy marriage of gaming and cinema:

> As the audience steps through the screen into the world behind, they take the camera with them and enter a continuous navigable diegetic world like a never ending film set. The camera remains a narrative device" (...) .The player experiences game spaces in a combination of both, continuous navigable space and cinematic space (2008, p.85).

The dual aspects of the cinematic and the navigable, according to this account, ensures that we can have it both ways: we can be in the imagined world of the film, and we can be at the film set, at the same time. Hence the continuity model is a very optimistic, almost celebratory, conceptualisation of how games are able to fuse imagined worlds and virtual worlds. A diegetic world is not only realised, but *augmented* and as such revitalised through its virtualisation in real-time graphical environments. The continuity model also sits well with the common idea that gaming in virtual environments is like being in a movie.

The alternative view, which I have argued elsewhere, is that because virtual environments are neither imagined nor narrated, they are completely distinct from diegetic worlds. A similar position has been advocated by Espen Aarseth (2007) and Kristine Jørgensen (2013), among others. We may call this the discontinuity account of the relationship between the diegetic and the virtual. According to this view, any attempt to conceptually merge or harmonise the two will be theoretically misleading, and the idea of *diegetic virtualisation* is a misunderstanding. Hence we should not be too optimistic about the capacity of virtual environments to function as a vehicle of diegetic immersion. Indeed one could argue that the whole point of a virtual environment is precisely that it is *not* imagined, not diegetic in nature, and that is why we can engage with it and play with it.

Still, the idea of continuity should not be brushed off too easily. In certain types of games, the two modes of engagement, however different, do seem to blend in intriguing ways, at least on occasion. Technically, cinematics and gameplay in virtual environments twist into each other in ever more sophisticated ways. In game studies, the continuity view is mostly a pragmatic assumption rather than an ontological commitment, and it could be taken to mean that virtual environments are particularly well suited to evoking our diegetic imagination - in roughly the same way that film sets or theatre stages do, only in a more active and immersive fashion.

In any case, I will argue that looking again at the intuitive concept of diegesis from film and literary studies can bring some useful clarification. What are the characteristic features of the diegetic imagination, and how does it come about? This implies that we clarify its status with respect to narration, and with respect to the concept of a fictional world.

Etienne Souriau: The Cube and the Sphere

To clarify, my concern here is the notion of the diegetic as *fiction*, not the diegetic understood as story, as any narrated world, in the meaning established by Gerard Genette (??) The story of Winston Ch, for example, as told by W Churchill, is not fictional. On the other hand, it seems strange to think of storyworlds *entirely* as a matter of imagination and fictionality, and not being dependent on narration in any way.

In film and literary theory, what I have labeled the “intuitive” meaning of the concept of diegesis goes back to Etienne Souriau. In a 1948 lecture on theatrical space, named “The Cube and the

Sphere" (1952), Souriau starts out by offering a general definition of the imagined space of the theatre, as he sees it:

> I submit the principle that in all the arts without exception, but particularly in the art of the theatre, the main business is to present a whole universe - the universe of the work - *en patuité*, in a state of patency. This rather rare philosophical term must not frighten you. It denotes manifest existence, existence that is clearly evident to the mind. (1952, p. 11).

Clearly, this is not a world that is constructed, piece by piece, through a set of elaborate descriptions. Apparently, it does not need to be described at all, it just *exists*, when it is evoked. The world of Hamlet and Ophelia, Souriau explains -

> ...is also the embankment at Elsinore, the waves that break against it, the cloudy sky overhead, the earth " under which the ghosts make their way. All of this must exist for us, surround us, take hold of us, be given to us. But given - *ab ungue leonem* - in the form of a tiny fragment a nucleus cut out of that immense universe, whose mission will be to conjure up for us, all by itself, the universe in its entirety (1952, p. 11).

There is no mention here of narrative structure or the process of narration. A tiny fragment of theatrical performance brings about an existence that is *given*, clearly evident to the mind. What is it that conjures up this existence, this universe in its entirety?

The answer is, according to Souriau, "a small bit of realized reality", the presentation of a temporary grouping of actors on a stage (??). A classical stage architecture, he proposes, can be seen as a tiny *cube* cut out from an imagined universe. This nucleus then exerts its power, its authority over the audience through the principle of spectatorship. Alternatively, the theatrical performance can can conjure such an imagined universe through the principle of the *sphere*, which is not about spectatorship, but is an invitation to play along, to be immersed, to take part - or, we could say, to role-play.

But if this is not a process of narration, conveying the unfolding of events in time, then what kind of act is it? What is the general principle, not just at the theatre but in any art form, that allows us to enter into this effortless game of universe-conjuring? The answer, it seems, must be

fictionality, or, at least some form of fictionality, which makes a fictional world appear as an actual world.

Searle: pretended reference

Looking for ways of developing the intuitive concept of diegesis, I suggest we first go to John Searle's "The logical status of fictional discourse" (1975). Like Souriau, Searle is concerned with what we may call the *autonomy* of a fictional world, its immediate givenness or imagined independence from the act of presentation that creates it. To Searle and many others, this question can be formulated as question about fictional truth. How is it that we can intuitively make true statements about what is or is not the case in a fictional world?

"How is it possible for an author to create fictional characters out of thin air (...)?, Searle asks (p.329), in a phrasing reminiscent of Souriau's phrase "a tiny fragment". With reference to the novel The Red and the Green by Iris Murdoch, he proposes the following answer:

> By pretending to refer to (and recount the adventures of) a person, Miss Murdoch creates a fictional character. Notice that she does not really refer to a fictional character because there was no such antecedently existing character; rather, by pretending to refer to a person she creates a fictional person (p.330).

On this account, Souriau's *presentation* of a group of actors on stage is not just generally an act of pretence (which we kind new already), it is crucially an act of pretended reference, that is, a particular kind of *statement*, or speech act, as Searle would call it. The nature of diegetic fiction, in other words, is that we pretend to be referring to real people. The idea of a fictional *world* then follows from the idea of a fictional *person*; a person is a person in a world.

Again, we note that this is not seen as a matter of narrative process. A fictional person is not created through characterisation, but through reference. A fictional world is not created through description, not through an exposition of a chain of events, but through a kind of statement that can be most adequately explained, according to Searle, in terms of its logical function. Fictional people and the world they inhabit is the logical product of a special kind of pretended assertion.

This constitutive act must not be confused with the idea of suspension of disbelief in the *psychological* and emotional sense - something we often refer to as narrative immersion, which

is contingent and gradual, and closely linked to the machinery of the narrative process. Nor should it be confused, let me add here, with immersion in the perceptual sense, which is obviously medium-dependent.

Lewis, re-centering, and worldness

The concept of *world* or worldness is not made explicit in Searle, other than that it follows from the concept of fictional person. Let us look at David Lewis' classic article "Truth in fiction", from 1978, which asks the same basic question as Searle: How can we assert, for example that Sherlock Holmes liked to show off his mental powers, but that he did not work in close cooperation with the police? Like Searle, Lewis suggests that narrative fiction is constituted through pretended reference: "The storyteller purports to be telling the truth about matters whereof he has knowledge. He purports to be talking about characters who are known to him, and whom he refers to, typically, by means of their ordinary proper names" (Lewis, 1978, p.40). Lewis then offers a possible world account of the nature of this act of pretence:

> The worlds we should consider, I suggest, are the worlds where the fiction is told, but as known fact rather than fiction. The act of storytelling occurs, just as it does here at our world; but there it *is* what here it falsely purports to be: truth-telling about matters whereof the teller has knowledge (p.40).

The worlds of fiction, according to this view, are established in the same way that counterfactual possible worlds are established, that is, roughly, as versions of the actual possible world. The key difference the pretence position. A fictional non-actual world is told from a position within it, a position from which the storyteller is referring to actual people and events. On this account we can also explain the character-centric nature of fictional worlds. A non-actual possible world of the fictional kind, unlike a counterfactual possible world, is imagined as being our world, and by implication, the world in which *someone* exists. A useful word for this kind of immersion in the logical sense, is re-centring (Ryan, 2001, p. 103). In diegetic fiction, we re-center our position in possible world terms, so that a non-actual possible world becomes, temporarily, our our new epistemological centre, our actual world.

When we pretend that an alternative world is the actual world, it follows that this world is a *complete* world, of which everything could be, in principle, described, and of which we can only describe and know of the tiniest fragment. Remigius Bunia, in his discussion of Genette's concept of diegesis (Bunia, 2010), argues that this intuitive givenness and fullness of diegetic

worlds is rooted in a general concept of worldness, a general concept of what it means to be a world. Bunia refers to this as world semantics:

> The concept of world makes us assume that a truthful (or, if one denies the idea of truth for epistemological reasons, at least plausible) description of the world is possible. And in this sense, world semantics requires not only the real world but every fictional world to be coherent and complete. Coherence and completeness complement each other: coherence excludes contradictory descriptions, while completeness means that nothing fundamentally resists description (p.699).

On this account, it is world semantics that allows us to evoke, out of thin air, from a tiny fragment, the autonomy and completeness of a pretended actual world. Bunia speculates that world semantics plays into the general nature representation, in the sense that anything represented can be conceived of independently of its materiality. In light of Searle and Lewis, however, I want to emphasise that something much more specific is going on when we imagine storyworlds. The key difference is in the *position from which* one imagines characters and events. In diegetic fiction, we re-center our position, thereby evoking an alternative world as being our actual world. The things that we imagine are not just pretended events, but pretended real events. If we are looking at, say, a ship on a painting, the diegetic pretence does not just say "We see a ship", but rather "There is a ship at sea" - or maybe even: "There *was* a ship at sea", or "There was a ship at the high seas". The point is to be able to signal, and to be able to pick up the signal, of a very particular kind of pretence agreement. Through an explicit or implicit constitutive act, we establish that what will follow is a true recounting of events. In this act, this *game*, we establish, with authority, the logic of pretended real-world reference.

It is this diegetic game of make-believe that Noel Burch (1979) famously refers to as the diegetic *effect*, which hides the art that produces it. Whenever we refer back to fictional world as if it were our actual world, as we may do when we discuss Peggy Olson, we evoke the diegetic pretence, we re-activate the game, however fleetingly.

Games and diegesis

So what does the concept of diegetic pretence imply for computer game theory?

Whether we should reserve the concept of fictionality to *diegetic* fiction, which many in effect have done, and say that diegetic re-centering *is* fiction, I take to be a pragmatic question. There

are obviously other accounts of fictionality, which attempt to capture other phenomena than narrative fiction - including gaming and virtuality. In any case, my point here is that diegetic fiction is a game of make-believe of a very particular sort. While it is not dependent on the narrative process, or immersion in the psychological sense, the world-conjuring in itself is definitely a narrative act, carrying the expectation and promise that something will be recounted about persons in the world.

Nor is the diegetic pretence intrinsically related to the nature of real-time environments in any way - whether we choose to name such environments virtual, fictional, real, or some other category. Diegetic worlds are not particularly related to the kind of worldness that we may talk of as quasi-physicality, embodied presence, or the like. Their worldness is of an entirely different kind. It is a matter of world semantics, produced in statements of pretence. The assumption of a seamless continuity between virtual space and diegetic space is therefore slightly misleading. Going back to the context of Souriau's theatrical stage, it is not the stage in itself that evokes the logic of an as-if actual world, or the film set for that matter, but a particular act of presentation, some kind of implicit or explicit statement that constitutes the game of diegetic pretence.

In games, virtual environments can be used as a medium for the diegetic imagination, like any other, but then someone needs to speak; someone needs to take the *authority* and establish this particular type of game. There needs to be a voice, a game master, a storyteller. In theatre or cinema, the default method of stabilising and upholding the game of diegetic imagination spectatorship, or in Souriau's terminology, the principle of the *cube*. Through spectatorship, everyone but the storyteller waves their authority to make true statements about the fictional world, with the benefit that they do not have to simultaneously engage from a position inside and outside the diegetic world. In computer games, the principle of the cube would correspond to the theatrical or cinematic modes of presentation that are particularly prevalent in single-player action-adventure formats. As on a theatre stage, these modes of presentation are often scripted and real-time generated.

Alternatively, the game of diegetic pretence may follow the principle of the *sphere*, which requires that participants play along, giving them the authority to take part in the creative generation of pretended real events, typically by enacting roles. In contrast to the kind of game we evoke when arguing over what is true and not true of Peggy Olson, games of enactment are not just games of imagination, but games of authorship. Such games may be taking place in virtual environments as in any other environments, and from an artistic point view there are particularities of the medium that can be exploited. By default, however, gaming environments are not primarily designed to facilitate such kinds of diegetic enactments. It is rarely the case that

we role-play in video games. We do not pretend to be doing what we are doing, do not enact dramas.

Diegetic worlds and virtual environments are entirely different things. This divide is not a matter of technological limitations. In order to be able to constitute and uphold a diegetic game of make-believe, games depend either on some kind of theatrical or cinematic staging, or mechanisms that encourage and support imaginative role-playing. More sophisticated AI, or more lively facial animations, is not going to affect the difference, at the ontological level, between "world" understood as a virtual environment, and world understood as re-centred world semantics. Outside theatrical and cinematic presentation, gaming in virtual environments is all about the here and now of the actual present. When we engage the diegetic imagination, in contrast, we are by definition elsewhere, even if we may sometimes, as actors on the stage, or as role-players, *enact* characters and events in the present.

Correspondingly, virtualised characters, whether they are player-controlled or AI-controlled, are ontologically separate from diegetic characters. There is no troublesome dissonance between Ellie the AI agent in *The Last of Us* (Rockstar North, 2008) and Ellie the person in the world of *The Last of Us*, there is simply just disconnect, juxtaposition. We can use AI agents or playable characters (or avatars) to *project* imagined persons, in the same way that we can use actors (or robots) to project imagined persons. But the actor, the npc, or the avatar figure, *is* not itself that person. Peggy Olson could never be among us, here today, even if Elisabeth Moss could, because Peggy Olson does not exist. Or to put it differently: Ellie the AI agent does exist, but the person Ellie does not. If you as a game designer find this lack of existence troublesome, or artistically frustrating, then I am sorry, technology cannot help you.

You *can*, though, engage your players in the game of diegetic imagination, so that your Ellie or Joel come alive as real people, with a past and future, but then the virtual environment must be a medium of presentation, or a medium of imaginative authorship. Ellie the real, existing AI agent must act her part in such a way that the player either plays along, or goes into spectatorship mode. If not, then anything that Ellie the agent, or Joel the player figure, might be *doing* in the game environment, is disconnected from and irrelevant to the persons Ellie and Joel.

On this account, no activity of in-game character-building (Vella, 2014), however rich or complex, can impact on the characters as persons in a diegetic world, unless there is space for imaginative role-play.

In conclusion, narrative fiction, in the traditional sense, is a constitutive act of diegetic pretence, and as such disconnected from worldness offered by virtual environments. This theoretical position does not imply a bleak view on the aesthetics of computer games, preoccupied with limitations, tensions and contradictions. Let me end by just pointing to a couple of aesthetic implications.

First, within the broad tradition of action- , sport- and action-adventure genres of gaming, the default paradigm of character implementation, from Pac-Man onwards, is not of the diegetic kind. In games as in other media, characters do not have to be imagined as part of a complete, actual world, in the way we imagine Peggy Olson. In this respect, it seems to me that Mario is roughly of the same ontological kind as early computer therapist Eliza, or Borat in the studio with Letterman, or - although possibly at a stretch - Tom & Jerry (and Tuffy).

Non-diegetic characters have no past and no future, but a sort of ad-hoc existence, confined to a particular context or environment. They live their lives always in the present, and we engage with them wholeheartedly in the present, in the here and now of virtual or physical environments. Arguably, characters like Ico and Yorda also belong to this category, of characters living a lifetime during our play time. While there is undoubtedly also a diegetic aspect in *ICO* (SCEI, 2002), this comes merely as a hint of an undefined beyond, a feeling, a sense of the otherworldly.

Finally, if we see diegesis and virtuality as a matter of hybridity and juxtaposition rather than continuity, we can analyse how games like *The Last of Us* stage a dialogue across the ontological divide. In essence, the gap that separates us from the storyworld during play, is the same gap that separates our lives from the fictional worlds of novels, films, or games. I will therefore speculate that games of this sort re-construct within themselves the general relationship between life and diegesis, in a compressed and artificially staged form. Travelling with Ellie and Joel is not so unlike travelling round the world in 80 days in the manner described by the novel, while reading the novel. During the journey, there would be a total disconnect between you and Phileas Fogg (who does not exist), but also a very acute resonance with the real-life experience of your adventure.

GAMES

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