# Focalization in videogames

Narrative agents, cinematic techniques and gaming experience

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# Focalization
## concept & importance

- perspective through which the narrative events are presented & degree of subjectivity
- creation of meaning & narrative tension building
    - selection of the events & information communicated to the "reader"
    - influencing the structure and organization of the content
    - manipulation of suspense, surprise, curiosity
- determines the roles of the narrative entities (actors, focalizers, narrators)
- affects the 'reader's' positioning and level of participation

# Focalization between media
## a comparison

## Literature

Focalizer as a medium connecting **actors** (characters) **with narratorial "voice"** (narrator)

internal - external - [zero]
always narrated?

## Pictorial narratives

Un-narrated

Story may be altered depending on viewer's choice of the focalizing entity and it's spatial positioning (in/outside the frame-storyworld: viewer's / selected character's PoV)

## Cinematic narratives

**focalization techniques** (i.e. voice-over, explicit narrator or POV)
(deceptively) **un-narrated**

**active role of the spectator**
**strategies that enable the spectator to construct the narration** (knowledgeability, self-consciousness,  communicativeness)

**POV as optical device - cinematic shots**
(Objective, Externally focalized, Internally focalized as depiction of experience of events, Internally focalized as representation of internal events)

**alignment instead of focalization** (spatio-temporal attachment, subjective access) **->**
**allegiance**

## Videogames
## & interactive narratives

**User control of the virtual camera** (PoV)

**Embodiment & interaction**

**Projection into storyworld, spatial positioning** (seeing & acting through / with the character)
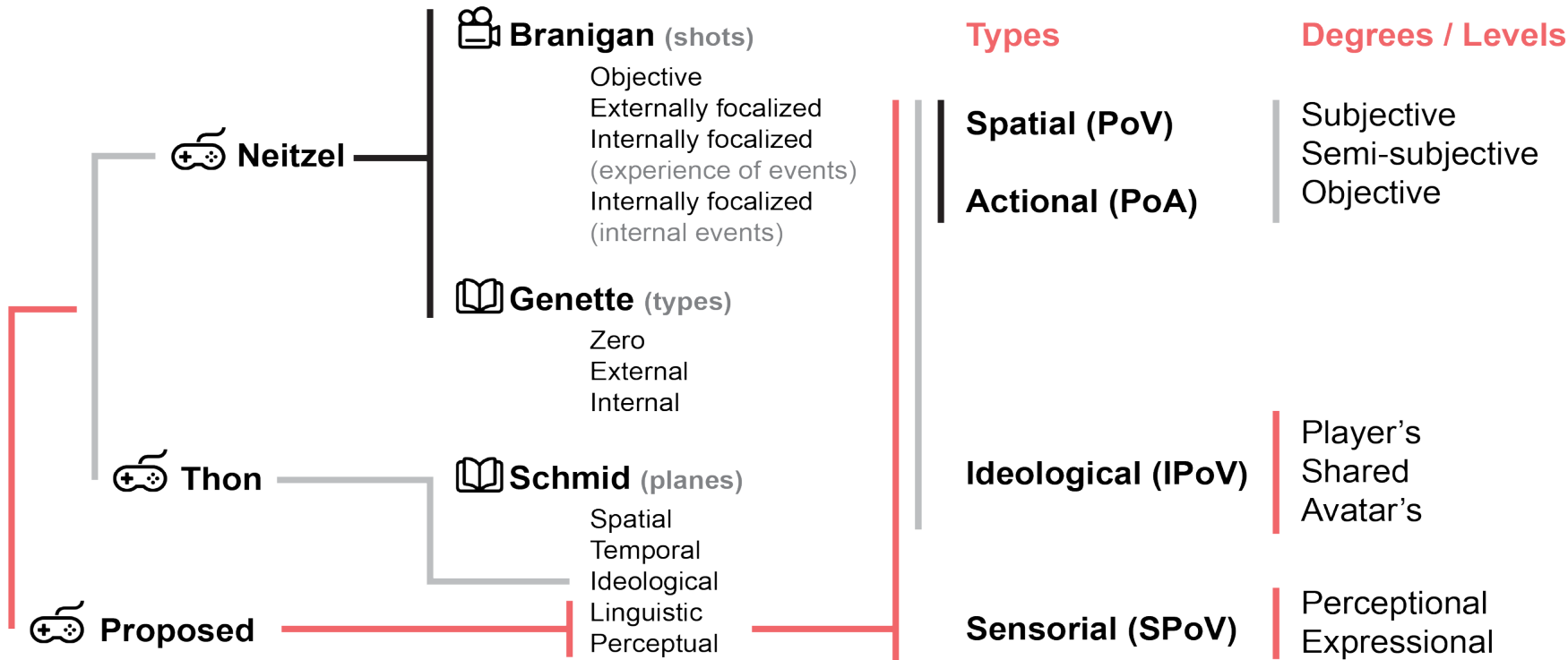
**Break of 4$^{th}$ wall** (porous membrane), **blending of spaces** (world-space / game-space, i.e. diegetic interfaces)

**How user & avatar are related, characterization, alignment / allegiance**

**Player as both actor & focalizer**

# Focalization in videogames
## towards an extended typology

# PoV
## Spatial
## perspective
**who sees & how**

―――

" *the spatial position from which the game space is presented audiovisually* "

Thon, J. N. (2009). Perspective in Contemporary Computer Games: Toward a Model of Perspective in Contemporary Computer Games

- **objective:** the camera is not connected to an avatar
- **semi-subjective:** the camera is connected to the movement of the avatar, PoV as viewing with the avatar
- **subjective:** the camera coincides with the position of the avatar, PoV as substitute to the viewpoint

# PoA
## Actional perspective
**who acts & how**

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" *the position from which action can be taken (and the way it will be taken in)* "

Neitzel, B. ([2002] 2013). Point of View und Point of Action – Eine Perspektive auf die Perspektive in Computerspielen

- **subjective:** interaction occurs through the avatar
- **semi-subjective:** interaction with world space is connected to the avatar but the player can also interact with the game-space (as the interface)
- **objective:** interaction with world space is not connected to a single avatar.

# IPoV
Ideological
perspective
**who thinks & how**

❝*A combination of the values of the character and the player*❞

Thon, J. N. (2009). Perspective in Contemporary Computer Games: Toward a Model of Perspective in Contemporary Computer Games

How the player is projected into the videogame storyworld and how he is related to the avatar may determine the dominant system of values:

- **player's IPoV**
- **character's IPoV**
- **shared IPoV**

**Tools & methods for player's ideological reposition:**

- (Indirect) methods of characterization (character' appearance, actions etc)
- design of the rules and content of the storyworld (i.e. by totally excluding specific entities)
- affordances and mechanics (i.e. the inability to perform certain actions or to interact with entities in manners that do not comply with the designated character's system of values)
- dialogue system design (linear / branching / dynamic…), dialogue content & utterance

# SPoV
Sensorial perspective
**who perceives / expresses & how**

——

*character's unique view as formed from his multisensory perception of the world, reality and events and the ways in which non-verbal sensory elements compose the character's sensory semiotic system that determines his expressive style*

- **perceptual:** how a narrative entity perceives the fictional world and events
  - position of the (virtual) camera, angle and depth of field*
  - Audio and / or visual stylistic variations, distortions, noise etc. (character's subjective way of seeing and perceiving)
  - Shifts between SPoVs or between SPoV and PoV: transitions between the character's view of the world and the 'real', indicate changes in sensory perception and the corporeal state of a character - shifts between SPoVs may indicate changes between multiple characters' perception

- **expressional:** representation of how an entity communicates thoughts, emotions
  - On an expressional level SPoV is used to suggest shifts in a character's mood or inner state.
  - Additionally, or alternatively, appropriate changes in controls and/or interaction mappings

*Perceptual PoV often coincides with spatial PoV; however, the latter does not itself suffice for the representation of perception as *"the narrator can take on a character's spatial position without perceiving the world through his or her eyes"* (Schmid, 2010).

# Types of focalization
## combinations & gaming experience

## Focalization shifts

### *What Remains of Edith Finch*

- **incongruity between the person narrated** (internal POV) **and the person that sees and acts** (external POV & POA)
- **stylistic variations** (visuals, aural) **as focalization techniques**
- **focalization shifts through** (slight) **differentiations in game controls** (combinations of buttons to mimic hand gestures and actions - defamiliarizing effect upon entering different stories)

- **game mechanics and interaction affordances as tools for shifts in focalization** (players use a different device in order to discover how each member of the family died: Odin's story by a view master, Barbara's story by a horror pulp magazine - the player not only reads the comic strip, but also enters the story and interacts with persons and objects in the space etc)

## Perspective shifts

Player choice of perspective (camera position / movement), spatiality and PoA, sensory perception and SPoV

### *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

- **player choice of perspective during gameplay** (1st to 3rd)

### *Total War* series

- **shifts between map view** (for strategic choices) **& overland view and free movement of camera** (for real-time battles, unit control)

### *Discworld Noir*

### &

### *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery*

- **change from 3rd to 1st person perspective**
- **use of visuals** (colours) **to indicate shifts in perceptional SPoV and changes in the heightened senses of a werewolf**

## Non-anthropomorphic experiences

*Stray*

- non-anthropomorphic spatial representation - 'feline' spatial and actional perspective
- Optical PoV in 'observe' mode enhances sensorial perspective - redefinition of spatial affordances
- interaction design (action, movement, reaction) to align player with feline way of thinking (IPoV)
- change in controls as expressional SPoV

*Everything*

- non-anthropomorphic perspective, constant 3rd person perspective, alterations of avatar identity
- changes in optical PoV and representation of space (in scale) as techniques for shifts in focalization

# Types of focalization

## combinations & gaming experience

## Ideological (re)position & ethical choices

### Red Dead Redemption 2

- spatial PoV, PoA and SPoV are used in conjunction
- players have control over their ideological stance: behaviours lead to increases /decreases in honour

### Planescape: Torment

- players moral & ethical choices that determine their character's ideological standpoint
- players' choice of philosophy & ideology as key aspects of the plot
- (at the time) unconventional mechanics

### Soma

- theme (transhumanism), 1st person with indirect characterization (character's corporeal state & identity) as plot focal point and for ideological reposition of the player

# Types of focalization
## combinations & gaming experience

## Cinematic techniques **vs** Videogame narrative language

### Alan Wake

- 3$^{rd}$ **person with intense internal focalization** (1$^{st}$ person voice-over) **and cut-scenes focus on character's face and reactions**
- **Enhanced internal and external POV, no IPOV** (no choices to be made)
- **Cinematic 'feeling': restricted agency** (internal) **and cinematic techniques** (visuals, settings & camerawork)

### Disco Elysium

- **isometric perspective, focalization through PoA and IPOV**
- **emphasis on building alignment / allegiance through mechanics** (mostly based on dialogues)
- **PoA, IPoV, SPoV replace optical PoV and conventional techniques**

# Concluding remarks & future work

- typology applicable to a wide range of videogames
- interrelation of focalization techniques with the gaming experience, user interaction, mechanics and control settings
- application in various components of gaming experience (perceptual, cognitive, and symbolic aspect of gameplay)
- holistic analysis of gaming experience
- extend framework to encompass interactive media and interactive art in general