JAN-NOËL THON

(Hamburg)

Perspective in Contemporary Computer Games[1]

1 Toward a Model of Perspective in Contemporary Computer Games

While the relatively new medium of the computer game has elicited an increasing amount of academic attention from a variety of disciplines in the last few years, research on perspective and point of view in computer games generally focuses on questions regarding the presentation of space, i.e. on perspective as being determined by a point of view in the purely spatial sense[2]. Within narratology, on the other hand, it is quite common to conceptualize point of view and perspective as multidimensional phenomena, both with regard to literary texts[3] and, albeit to a lesser extent, narrative films[4]. It therefore seems as if our understanding of perspective in computer games could benefit from the complex models of perspective that narratology has developed. Computer games, however, are neither literary narratives nor narrative films, and although the results of narratological research on perspective are doubtlessly inspiring, most of the models developed for the description of literary texts (or narrative films, for that matter) cannot be directly applied to computer games without missing some of their most central characteristics. Hence, the present paper proposes a multidimensional model of perspective in computer games that takes into account their specific medial properties.

For this purpose, we distinguish between three dimensions of perspective. The first dimension is that of spatial perspective, which is determined by the point of view, i.e. the spatial position from which the game

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[2]   See Poole (2004); Rumbke (2005); Wolf (2001).
[3]   See Chatman (1978); Schmid (2005); Uspenskij (1973).
[4]   See Branigan (1984); Mitry (1998); Smith (1995).

space is presented audiovisually (this includes the presentation of sound which is often presented from the same position that the game space is presented from). Since the presentation of space in computer games is audiovisual instead of verbal and therefore closer to the movies than to literary narrative texts, we will mainly draw on film theory and works on perspective from computer game studies, rather than try to adopt models developed in literary narrative theory. The second dimension is that of actional perspective, which is determined by the point of action, i.e. the position from which the player can interact with the game space. Here, we will mainly refer to Neitzel's work on the point of action in computer games (cf. Neitzel 2002). The third and most complex dimension is that of the ideological perspective structure, which is determined by the various positions from which the events in the game are evaluated. Although we will focus mainly on the question of how characters in computer games evaluate events and situations, this dimension also refers to other positions within a game, namely that of the player and the implied game designer. With reference to the spatial perspective determined by the point of view and the actional perspective determined by the point of action, we will here speak of an ideological perspective that is determined by the point of evaluation.

Before we discuss these types of perspective in more detail, it has to be stressed that the three dimensions of perspective distinguished here are not all that could be considered. Although the spatial, actional and ideological dimensions of perspective seem to be most central, the analysis of particular games might well make it necessary to examine dimensions of perspective not treated in this paper[5]. Especially the analysis of the ideological perspective structure of a game may make it necessary to describe other forms of perspective that may be used in the presentation of fictional worlds in contemporary computer games. Our main aim, however, lies in the introduction of the idea that perspective in computer games consists of more than just spatial perspective, and the distinction of three dimensions of perspective seems to be enough for this purpose.

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[5] With regard to additional dimensions that could be considered in the analysis of computer games, one can examine the narratological models of perspective already mentioned. Schmid (2005), for example, distinguishes between five dimensions of perspective in literary narrative texts, namely spatial, ideological, temporal, linguistic and perceptual perspective. Both the linguistic and temporal perspective may occasionally be worth analysing, especially with regard to the narrative elements of computer games.

2 Point of View and Spatial Perspective

There is a wide variety of ways in which computer games can construct the space in which they take place, from "all text-based" (Wolf 2001: 53) via various forms of two-dimensional spaces (cf. 55–65) to "[i]nteractive three-dimensional environments" (65). However, since many if not most contemporary computer games present a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional screen, it is this form of computer game space that the present paper is mainly interested in. Before we can examine more closely the various forms of spatial perspective that can be found in such games, it has to be made clear to which parts of these games we refer. Since many computer games are set in complex fictional worlds, one has to distinguish between the space of the fictional world as a whole and the spaces that the player can interact with through the interface. Jesper Juul draws a similar distinction between "world space" and "game space" (cf. Juul 2005: 164–67). Since most of the events in computer games take place in the game space, it seems to be mainly this part of the space of the fictional world that is of interest with regard to the question of spatial perspective in computer games.

Such game spaces often are three-dimensional environments in which the player can more or less freely move certain objects such as his or her avatar (i.e. representative in the game space) as well as the point from which the space is presented and which, in games using an avatar, is often in some way connected to the position of the latter (thereby moving automatically when the avatar is moved). When referring to the point of view in computer games, one of the more commonly used terms is that of camera position (cf. Rumbke 2005: 244–45). This is not too surprising since, according to Wolf, many contemporary computer games "follow, to some degree, the precedent set by the space represented in classical Hollywood film" (Wolf 2001: 66) and accordingly the presentation of the game space in computer games may at first glance seem similar to the presentation of space in film. But while terminology originating from film theory is doubtlessly useful for describing spatial perspective in audiovisual media, it has to be emphasized that all talk of a camera or a camera position is metaphoric when referring to computer games since game spaces are generally not created by actual film cameras. Hence, it seems more precise to speak of a point of view as the spatial position from which the game space is presented aurally as well as visually and which determines the spatial perspective of a computer game.

One of the most common distinctions between different types of spatial perspective in computer games is that of first-person perspective, where the game space is presented from the spatial (and sometimes even perceptual) position of the player's avatar, and that of third-person perspective, where it is not. Aside from the fact that the category of "third-person perspective" is very broad (cf. Rumbke 2005: 246–48), this distinction is also inappropriate in its reference to grammatical categories that cannot be applied to audiovisual presentations of space in such a straightforward manner. A more appropriate and differentiated categorization of audiovisual point of view in computer games has been proposed by Neitzel (2002). Referring to Mitry's *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* (1998), she distinguishes between subjective, semi-subjective and objective points of view. Although this distinction is relatively broad as well, it provides a good starting point for a description of the spatial perspective(s) used in actual games.

3 Subjective, Semi-Subjective and Objective Points of View

Computer games using a subjective point of view have the position from which the game space is presented coincide with the position of the player's avatar. This perspective is, most prominently, used in so-called first-person shooter games such as *Doom* (1993), *Halo* (2001), or *SWAT 4* (2005). One can, in fact, observe an increasing sophistication in the way first-person shooter games realize their respective subjective points of view. While early games such as *Doom* use nothing more than a hand holding a weapon protruding into the presented space to indicate the existence of the player's avatar, more recent games such as *Halo* show its avatar on various occasions. Nevertheless, the hand holding a weapon is still seen most of the time (figure 1). There is, however, a tendency towards an implementation not only of the spatial but also the perceptual perspective (cf. Schmid 2005: 131–32) of the player's avatar that has led to games such as *SWAT 4*, where grenades, pepper spray and flash packs not only affect the avatar, but also have an effect on the audiovisual presentation of the game space. Another instance of a game that simulates the perceptual perspective of its avatar is *World of Warcraft* (2004), where the avatar's drunkenness affects the presentation of the game space.

Figure 1: Subjective point of view in *Halo* (2001)

According to Neitzel, one can speak of a semi-subjective point of view when the "point of view is connected to the movements of the avatar; it is not a substitute for the viewpoint as in case of the subjective POV, but rather a *viewing-with*" (Neitzel 2002: n. p.) the player's avatar. The camera follows the avatar at some distance, allowing for a better sense of its precise position in the game space than is the case in games with a subjective point of view. This form of spatial perspective is typically used in action adventures from *Tomb Raider* (1996) to *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2005) as well as in more recent role-playing games such as *Fable* (2004), *Jade Empire* (2005) or *World of Warcraft*. A closer examination of these games reveals that although the category of semi-subjective point of view allows for some variation as to the distance between the position of the camera and the avatar or the angle from which the avatar is shown, many games using a semi-subjective point of view use it in quite a similar manner. Most of the time, the camera floats slightly above and some way behind the avatar, showing it in relation to its surroundings (figure 2).

Although the spatial position of the avatar is not the same as that of the camera, the camera's position is always linked to the avatar.

Figure 2: Semi-subjective point of view in *World of Warcraft* (2004)

When the game space is presented from a position that is not connected to an avatar, one can speak of an objective point of view. This "oldest and most diversified" (Neitzel 2002: n. p.) perspective is used in a wide variety of games, but most obviously in strategy games such as *Z* (1996), *Warcraft III* (2002) or *Warhammer 40.000: Dawn of War* (2004). The main aim of these games is to build large armies and take control of the game space, which normally consists of a more or less extensive landscape. Hence, the objective point of view in these strategy games offers the possibility to observe a large game space without being constrained by the spatial perspective of an avatar or comparable entity. The objective point of view shows a game space from a position that is not part of this game space (as is the case with a subjective point of view) and is not connected to an entity in the game space (as is the case with a semi-subjective point of view). However, most strategy games do not show the

whole game space at once, but present only a small part of it at a time, allowing the player to determine which part is shown (figure 3).

Figure 3: Objective point of view in *Warhammer 40.000: Dawn of War* (2004)

4 Point of View and the Player

Although one could further distinguish between various forms of objective point of view (especially when attempting to describe not only computer games presenting a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional screen but also games presenting two-dimensional game spaces), Neitzel's "general distinctions that can be mixed and altered in the games" (Neitzel 2002: n. p.) seem to be appropriate for a categorization of spatial perspective in computer games. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that many contemporary games not only combine various forms of spatial perspective but also allow their players to control camera movements (which is an essential part of the gameplay in most strategy games) and switch between different perspectives themselves. While such a player-controlled change in perspective is naturally rare in first-person shooter

games that derive their name from a constant use of the subjective point of view (although *Halo* switches to a semi-subjective point of view when the avatar is controlling vehicles), it has become common in games using a semi-subjective point of view to allow the player some degree of control over the camera position. There are even games such as *World of Warcraft* that allow their players to switch from a semi-subjective to a subjective point of view if they so desire.

In *Tomb Raider*, which founded the action-adventure genre, the player cannot change the semi-subjective point of view the game uses to present its game space. It is, however, possible to influence the position from which the game space is presented by way of making Lara Croft, the avatar of the game, look in various directions. Without switching to a subjective point of view, the camera will then change its position, allowing the player to see what Lara sees—or would see if she was not an avatar in a computer game but a real person capable of seeing (figure 4).

Figure 4: Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (1995), looking to her upper-left hand side

Obviously, the ways in which the player can influence the camera position have evolved since 1996, the year in which *Tomb Raider* was published. Hence, *World of Warcraft* allows its players not only to change the camera position in order to look at the avatar from virtually all angles but also to change the distance between the camera and the avatar, which can be adjusted on a scale of 15 steps. While the largest distance allows the player to see the most of the surroundings of his or her avatar, the smallest distance makes the position of the camera coincide with the spatial position of the avatar, thereby allowing the player to switch from the semi-subjective point of view (which is the standard mode of the game in version 2.0) to a subjective point of view.

It can be concluded that many contemporary computer games allow their players an ever greater amount of control over the spatial perspective(s) used in the presentation of the game space. While this is particularly the case with action-adventure and role-playing games, it is also true for most other games with the previously mentioned exception of first-person shooters. Since strategy games do not present the player with a single avatar, the occurrence of a genuine semi-subjective or even subjective point of view seems unlikely here. Nevertheless, most of the more recent strategy games, e.g. *Warcraft III* and *Warhammer 40.000: Dawn of War*, allow the player not only to change the part of the game space that is presented on the screen, but also to change the camera angle from which it is presented. Finally, it may be noted that while players generally like the opportunity to take control of the camera, they rarely use the possibility to change the default point of view. This has to do with the fact that the default point of view is often best suited to the interaction with the game space required by the game. And although the appreciation of beautyfully designed game spaces is surely a part of the pleasure in playing a computer game, the interaction with the game space will, of course, be more important to most players than the game space itself.

5 Point of Action and Actional Perspective

Unlike the spaces that are presented in Hollywood film, computer game spaces allow players to interact with them through the interface. The importance of this interactive nature of computer games leads us to the question of how the interaction between player and game can be described in terms of perspective. For this purpose, we will build on Neitzel's notion of a point of action, by which she refers to "the position from which ac-

tion can be taken, and the way it will be taken in" (Neitzel 2002: n. p.), determining the actional perspective of the computer game. So what exactly is meant by "actional perspective" with regard to computer games? Neitzel describes the relationship between the seeing and acting of the computer game player as follows: "The computer takes the effects of the actions out of the spatial-material reality of the player and distributes them in the space of the monitor. This space, including the effects of the actions, is observed and interpreted [by the player, J.-N.T], which then influences the subsequent actions" (Neitzel 2002: n. p.). It is not, however, the case that a player can choose freely what he or she sees or does when playing a computer game. As we have seen, computer games present their game spaces using different points of view that result in different spatial perspectives and thereby determine to a great extent which part of the game space can be seen by the player and how he or she sees it.

In much the same way, computer games use different points of action that result in different actional perspectives and thereby determine what the player can do in the game and how he or she can do it. Neitzel argues that the point of action in computer games can be described using three basic distinctions. Firstly, the point of action "can reside either within or outside the diegesis, so that one can speak of an intradiegetic and an extradiegetic point of action" (Neitzel 2002: n. p.). Secondly, Neitzel distinguishes between a concentric and an ex-centric and, thirdly, between a direct and an indirect point of action. Since an intradiegetic point of action means that the actions of the player result in actions that can be ascribed to some character or object within the game world, every game that uses an avatar automatically uses an intradiegetic point of action. An extradiegetic point of action means that the actions of the player result in actions that cannot be ascribed to some character or object within the game world. This is typically the case in strategy games that do not cast the player in the role of some "ruler character, who then guides the fortunes of his subjects" (Neitzel 2002: n. p.).

The distinction between intradiegetic and extradiegetic points of action is often not very clear-cut, since games such as *Warcraft III* or *Warhammer 40.000: Dawn of War* do not in any explicit way construct a ruler character to whom the results of the player actions could be ascribed, but still have the player-controlled troops react to the players' commands with expressions of obedience such as "Yes Sir!", thereby implying that the result of the player's actions can actually be ascribed to some entity within the game world (the same entity that is addressed as "Sir" in the

above example). Although there seem to be considerable differences between the ways in which the points of action in these strategy games and those in games such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* that have the player control the same avatar through the whole game are related to the entities in the fictional worlds of these games, one would have to describe both points of actions as intradiegetic. Hence, the usefulness of that first distinction may be doubted.

Neitzel's second distinction is much clearer. She proposes to distinguish between a concentric point of action, meaning that the player's actions are executed at only one location in the game space and an excentric point of action, meaning that the player's actions can be executed at multiple locations in the game space. Hence, games such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* which have the player control a single avatar to which the result of the player's actions can be ascribed would be categorized as using a concentric point of action while games such as *Warhammer 40.000: Dawn of War*, where the player uses the keyboard and mouse to control huge armies, taking control of individual troops or buildings as he or she pleases would be categorized as using an ex-centric point of action. While this distinction helps to describe which objects in the game space are controlled by the player, it does not answer the question of how they are controlled, i.e. how the actions of the player influence objects in the game space.

It is this question to which Neitzel's third distinction refers. Many games using an avatar allow the player to control the avatar directly. This means that every press of a button or movement of the mouse results in an instant action of the avatar. Among many other games, first-person shooters generally use such a direct point of action. On the other hand, there are many games where the relation between player actions and avatar actions is not as direct. Strategy games such as *Command and Conquer*, *Warcraft III*, or *Warhammer 40.000: Dawn of War* often allow the player to take control of many different objects in the game world. In these games, a click with the mouse is enough to make a large number of troops move over a large distance, and another click will make them attack the enemy. It is not necessary (or even possible) for the player to control directly every movement of his or her troops. This also means that there is no constant association of the pressing of a certain button with a resultant movement of the avatar. Hence, one can say that these games use an indirect point of action. Neitzel also notes that some games combine a direct and indirect point of action. This is the case, for example, in

World of Warcraft, where the player controls the basic movements of the avatar directly, but also has to employ the mouse to make the avatar use its abilities or interact with other characters by clicking on a variety of icons or on the character he or she wants to interact with.

6 Subjective, Semi-Subjective and Objective Points of Action

Although especially the latter two of Neitzel's distinctions seem quite useful, it is questionable if a typology as complex as the one proposed by Neitzel is necessary. Alternatively, we propose to distinguish between only three different kinds of point of action, applying the distinction between the subjective, semi-subjective and objective point of view to the point of action. In games that use a subjective point of action, the action position of the player coincides with that of the player's avatar. Here, the player has direct control over the movements of his or her avatar, "every press of a button instantly results in an action" (Neitzel 2002: n. p.). This also means that the player can control his or her avatar and nothing else. The player cannot interact directly with the game space.

In games that use the semi-subjective point of action, the interaction with the game world is connected to an avatar, but the player also has to interact with the game space directly. Interaction does not exclusively happen through the avatar, as is the case in games using a subjective point of action. In games such as *World of Warcraft*, the player controls the basic movements of the avatar in the same way as in games using a subjective point of action. He or she does, however, also have to employ the mouse to make the avatar use some of its various abilities or interact with other characters. In games using an objective point of action, the interaction with the game world is not connected to a single avatar. This is, for example, the case in strategy games such as *Warhammer 40.000: Dawn of War* where the player uses the keyboard and mouse to control huge armies, taking control of troops or buildings as he or she pleases.

Although there may be a certain tendency for the three types of point of action to converge with the respective forms of point of view, this is by no means generally true. *Tomb Raider* combines a semi-subjective point of view with a subjective point of action, *Baldurs Gate* (1999) combines a semi-subjective point of view with an objective point of action and *Myst* (1993) combines a subjective point of view with an objective point of action. Furthermore, although of central importance for the gaming experience, the spatial perspective as determined by the point of view and the

actional perspective as determined by the point of action are not the only ways in which the presentation of events in a computer game is perspectivated.

7 Point of Evaluation and Ideological Perspective

While Chatman does not go into too much detail in his treatment of different dimensions of point of view, he rightly emphasizes that the term "point of view" can refer not only to the position from which events are perceived (which he calls the perceptual point of view), but also to the position, from which events are evaluated (which he calls the conceptual point of view). The idea that a character's "world view (ideology, conceptual system, *Weltanschauung*, etc.)" (Chatman 1978: 151) should be conceptualized as a dimension of point of view can also be found in Uspenskij's seminal work *A Poetics of Composition*. Uspenskij claims that one of the most basic aspects of point of view is "manifested on the level we may designate as ideological or evaluative (understanding by 'evaluation' a general system of viewing the world conceptually)" (Uspenskij 1973: 8). While this paper cannot hope to discuss exhaustively the question of how the events and situations in a computer game are evaluated by the avatar and the other characters in the game (or even the game as a system of rules), these questions are nevertheless of central importance for the analysis of perspective in computer games. In order to distinguish these evaluative positions from the notions of point of view and point of action already discussed, we will refer to them as points of evaluation. However, ideological perspective as determined by a point of evaluation is not as easily identified in the analysis of computer games as is the case with the dimensions of perspective in computer games already discussed.

According to Ryan, the observation that events in fictional worlds are connected to certain goals, plans and psychological motivations, which can be ascribed to the characters populating such worlds also applies to computer games (cf. Ryan 2001). The fact that the player can ascribe a specific "world view" to the characters in a computer game does not necessarily lead to a more compelling story, but does function as a means of orientation for the player. The different points of evaluation and ideologyical perspectives of the characters in a computer game result in a certain system of norms and values in which the player has to position him- or herself. Smith notes that, for an understanding of films, it is important "to consider, first, how such 'systems of value' are constructed; secondly, the

range of possible types of moral structure; and thirdly, the different ways in which a narration may unfurl these moral structures over time" (Smith 1995: 189). This is also true for computer games. However, due to the limited scope of this paper and the fact that most systems of norms and values in computer games tend to be rather simple, we will mainly discuss the first question, which is how these systems are constructed with regard to the points of evaluation that can be ascribed to the various characters.

Ansgar Nünning has treated the notion of perspective within the framework of possible worlds theory, emphasizing that it is applicable "not only to the rhetorical structure of narrative transmission," but also to "the world-models of the fictional individuals that populate the represented universe projected in narrative texts" (Nünning 2001: 207). Hence, we can describe the point of evaluation of a character in a computer game as being determined by the character's model of the fictional world. But how can a player ascribe a certain "world view" to the characters in a game? Nünning emphasizes that in narrative texts "each verbal utterance and each physical or mental act of a character provides insights into his or her perspective" (Nünning 2001: 210). Once again this is true for computer games. A computer game's fictional world and its characters are conveyed not only through the presentation of the actual game spaces (to which the previously discussed dimensions of perspective in computer games mainly refer), but also through a variety of narrative techniques. While most of the information about mental acts of characters in a computer game will be conveyed through cut-scenes and other forms of narrative techniques, the main part of physical acts will be presented in the form of ludic instead of narrative events[6]. Therefore, in order to determine the point of evaluation of a computer game character, one has to examine the narrative as well as the ludic elements of the game.

For the purpose of the present paper, however, the actual form of these narrative elements is less important than the function that they have for the rest of the game, i.e. the game space and the ludic events. Narrative events in computer games not only constitute a story and contribute to the construction of the fictional world, but they also convey information about the ludic structure of the game. Rune Klevjer even claims that "giv-

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[6] In computer games, one can distinguish between narrative events that are already determined before the game is played and ludic events that are determined at the moment of playing. Due to spatial limitations, the present paper cannot discuss this distinction in any detail. See Thon (2006 and 2007) for a more detailed discussion of these different kinds of events and the narrative techniques used in their presentation.

ing meaning and sensation to the actions when they are performed by the computer and the player" (Klevjer 2001: n. p.) is the main function of narrative elements in computer games. He distinguishes between three levels on which this "signification" of ludic events takes place. Firstly, on the most important level, narrative (as well as ludic) events introduce a certain evaluation of possible actions. In every shooter-themed game, be it *Tomb Raider* or *Halo*, "it is important for me [the player, J.-N.T] that the objects I [the player's avatar, J.-N.T] 'shoot' are 'bad guys' with 'guns' who 'fight' back, and who can be 'killed'" (Klevjer 2001: n. p.). This is not a question of ethics, but of effective action. The player of *Halo* has to be able to distinguish between his opponents (the "bad guys") and his allies. In order to be successful he should refrain from letting his or her avatar shoot the latter. Secondly, most games will use narrative techniques to give the player "some kind of motivation for performing the specific actions that the game requires" (Klevjer 2001: n. p.). In *Halo*, the avatar is a (super) soldier named Master Chief who, together with his human allies, tries to save the universe from various aliens. Here, we have a more specific level of meaning than is constituted by the mere distinction between opponents and allies. Thirdly, many games use a chronologically and causally ordered chain of predetermined narrative events (which is, of course, continuously interrupted by ludic events) to present a (possibly non-linear but nevertheless consistent) story. This is, of course, relevant with regard to Smith's question of how "a narration may unfurl these moral structures over time" (Smith 1995: 189). One example of a story that forces us to change our initial conception of the ideological perspective structure is *Halo 2* (2004), where it becomes clear during the course of the story that certain aliens are actually allies instead of opponents in that they help the Master Chief to save the universe.

8 Ideological Perspective Structure and the Player

Unlike the point of view and the point of action, which can both generally be determined without too much of a problem, one has to consider the various points of evaluation of the different characters to arrive at an appropriate description of this most complex level of perspective in computer games. According to Nünning, "the term perspective structure can be defined as the general system formed by all the character-perspectives and narrator-perspectives as well as by the patterns of relationships between them" (Nünning 2001: 214). While the present paper can only

sketchily show how a computer game's ideological perspective structure with its various points of evaluation is constructed and can be analyzed, this structure does indeed play a central part in the presentation of ludic as well as narrative events in most contemporary computer games. As we have seen, the first step in the analysis of the ideological perspective structure of a game aims to reconstruct the points of evaluation of the characters in the fictional world of the game. Furthermore, the characters are generally connected to each other, either in a relation of opposition or similarity of the respective points of evaluation. But as the above quotation from Nünning suggests it is not enough to analyze the constellation of the various characters in a computer game. Although one would have difficulties finding a narrator perspective in most games[7], it is nevertheless the case that an analysis of the ideological perspective structure of a game should also consider the choices that the player is allowed to make with regard to his or her actions and the norms and values that are implied by the game itself.

There is obviously a certain relationship between how the avatar evaluates the various events and situations in a game and how the player evaluates them. However, this does not mean that the player uncritically assumes the avatar's position towards these situations and events. Rather, the player will use the ideological perspective structure of a game to orient him- or herself within its ludic (as well as narrative) structure. This also explains why the player of *Halo* will normally act according to the avatar's point of evaluation, and not try to befriend the aliens (which is, as was previously mentioned, different in *Halo 2*). The player acts according to the avatar's point of evaluation since such action is in compliance with the aims of the game. The game itself does not allow the player to choose his allies freely or to decide that shooting aliens is not an action to be evaluated positively. While the player may decide not to make his or her avatar shoot aliens, this will most likely result in the death of the said avatar and the player losing the game. However, we have already mentioned that events and situations in computer games are not only evaluated on the level of character. In many contemporary computer games, one can distinguish between the points of evaluation of the various characters in the game, the point of evaluation that the game constructs for the

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7   There are certain games that use character narrators for their (at least partially linguistic) narration. Here, the notion of "narrator's perspective" may be useful. It has, however, to be emphasized that neither the player nor the avatar are narrators.

player and the point of evaluation that can be inferred from the overall design of the game.

The relevance of a character's point of evaluation for the whole game becomes most obvious in games with a single avatar. The avatar's model of the fictional world determines to a great extent the ways in which the player can interact with the game world. Lara Croft, the avatar in *Tomb Raider*, seems to have no doubt about the appropriateness of shooting the various animals, humans and demons that act as her opponents throughout the game. The game would be entirely different if Lara was a female Hamlet, considering and re-considering the commands given by the player before finally deciding to act. It is clear that the player of *Tomb Raider* is not entirely free in his or her decisions. Lara cannot be made to join the bad guys (the main bad guy being a woman in *Tomb Raider*) in their attempt at world domination. Another example previously mentioned would be the avatar in the science-fiction-themed first-person shooter *Halo*, who is presented as a soldier loyal to the human army. Here, the player is not free to choose the alien alliance as an ally. It is true for most contemporary computer games that many of the norms and values attributable to the avatar are not decided upon by the player. Although the player has not much choice but to follow the avatar's evaluation as far as his (inter-)actions are concerned (since these evaluations generally define the goals of the game), this does not necessarily mean that the player is embracing these evaluation in any other way than with regard to the ludic structure. The fact that a player of *Tomb Raider* makes the avatar of the game shoot wolves does not imply that this player generally believes shooting wolves to be a good thing. Indeed, it does not even necessarily imply that the player believes that the fact that Lara Croft is shooting wolves in the fictional world of *Tomb Raider* is a good thing. It is simply a part of the game rules that Lara has to shoot wolves in order to survive.

While most computer games operate with clear-cut polarities of good and evil, this does not mean that the player never has a choice between the two. In games such as *Fable* or *Jade Empire*, the player can choose which course of action to evaluate as the "right" one. Even in these games, the possibilities for choice are strictly limited by the program, but the player at least partly decides on the avatar's norms and values. Another example where the player can influence the avatar's point of evaluation is *World of Warcraft*. Here, the player gets to choose whether his avatar is a member of the Alliance or the Horde. The player's choice will strongly influence the point of evaluation of his or her avatar, since the

two parties are constantly at war with one another. In these cases, the point of evaluation of the player influences how the avatar evaluates the events in the game and what course of actions it then holds to be the "right" one. However, it has again to be emphasized that what we propose to call the point of evaluation of the player does not refer to the player's model of the actual world. Instead, it refers to the player's model of the fictional game world and his or her evaluation of the events and situations that occur in it[8]. While some games allow their players to influence the point of evaluation of his or her avatar, one should also keep in mind that the choices a player can make in these games are generally choices between narrowly defined alternatives.

We have seen that the player of a game using an avatar usually assumes that avatar's point of evaluation in order to orient him- or herself within the ludic structure of the game. This process of orientation, which is necessary to play a game successfully, is also influenced by those norms and values that are not directly connected to characters (be it the player's avatar or other characters) but can be attributed to the game designer(s). For the purpose of this paper, it is not relevant whether the game designers really subscribed to these norms and values or had any intention to have them ascribed to them. If, for example, no children appear in most parts of the game world in *Fable*, this is a conscious design decision that was intended to prevent the players' from letting their avatars kill children without obviously restricting their possibilities for interacttion with the game world. But, whether there was a conscious design decision behind it or not, the fact that no children can be killed may be read as part of a system of norms and values that includes the norm that it is not acceptable to have children killed, even in the fictional world of a computer game. Another example is that Lara Croft can carry a variety of weapons and kill an impressive number of various beasts in *Tomb Raider* without getting problems with the authorities (or animal rights organizations). The point to be made here is that a particular ideological perspective manifests itself in the overall design and presentation of a game

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8   See also Smith's discussion of allegiance. Smith assumes that "something like a suspension of values must occur, if we are to explain the spectator aroused by a gangster film, against her 'better' (i.e. everyday) judgement" (Smith 1995: 189). Although such a suspension of values in computer games will most likely focus on the necessity to act in compliance with the ludic structure of the game, it nevertheless occurs. See also Schirra & Carl-McGrath (2002) on how the process of identification with characters in computer games differs from the process of identification with characters in film.

world as well as in the rules and goals of the game. Here, one can speak of the point of evaluation of an implied game designer.

A reconstruction of the system of norms and values inherent in computer games might also contribute to one of the most controversial questions concerning this relatively new form of entertainment, namely how their often violent and politically incorrect[9] content should be evaluated from an ethical point of view. Buchanan and Ess claim that

> this debate threatens to become paralyzed on the one hand by simple-minded [...] characterizations of e-games and their impacts, and, on the other hand, by overly simple ethical analyses that would force us to choose between Manichean polarities of absolute evil vs. absolute good. (Buchanan & Ess 2005: 3)

Without intending to further discuss this question here, it seems likely that an (ethical) evaluation of the events and situations in a computer game would benefit from considering how these events are evaluated within the game itself. Sicart claims "that players act as moral beings, that they reflect upon those values that are contained in the system of the game, and that they evaluate them keeping in perspective the values of the game world" (Sicart 2005: 17), but before discussing these questions, one should probably examine exactly how "values [...] are contained in the system of the game" (17).

9 Conclusion

This paper has proposed a model of perspective in contemporary computer games consisting of three dimensions. It has become clear that the presentation of the game space in computer games differs from the presentation of space in narrative films and literary narrative texts. While the perspective of the audiovisual presentation of the game space in a computer game is generally determined by a relatively constant point of view, most games allow the player to control the spatial perspective at least to a certain degree. In fact, the most obvious difference between computer games and narrative films or literary narrative texts is the possibility to interact with the presented space, which makes it necessary to include in a model of perspective in computer games the notion of an actional perspective as determined by the point of action in addition to the spatial perspective as determined by the point of view.

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9   See Jahn-Sudmann & Stockmann (2008).

Although we could only sketch the last dimension of our model of perspective in computer games, it has become clear that the ideological perspective structure that is determined by various points of evaluation and conveyed through narrative as well as ludic elements plays an important role in the perspectivation of events and situations in contemporary computer games. There is still some conceptual and terminological work left to do especially with regard to the ideological perspective structure. Nevertheless, we believe that the three dimensions of perspective described in this paper allow an analysis of the most central ways in which the events in computer games are perspectivated.

In conclusion, it can be stated that models of perspective developed for literary texts and narrative films cannot be directly applied to computer games. It has, however, also become clear that the concepts and terminology developed in literary and film narratology possess considerable heuristic value for the analysis of different media, such as computer games. When attempting to transfer theoretical concepts such as "perspective" to new domains, awareness of the specific characteristics of the respective medium is of central importance. Nevertheless, differences between media do not necessarily prevent such a transfer from being successful.

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