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PLAYING BEYOND ONESELF: AN APPLICATION OF COGNITIVE NARRATOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF DIGITAL GAMES

Diana PETERFI MELNIC
"Babeș-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: *Over the past decade, video game studies have largely ignored or underplayed the role of storytelling in the design and reception of digital games, but the industry itself has taken rather a different turn. Wildly popular titles featuring powerful narrative components have become increasingly frequent, while the academic community has been slow in the development of an appropriate response. As part of a larger project that seeks to reaffirm the importance of storytelling in contemporary digital games, the present paper investigates the possibility of applying a form of cognitive narratology to the study of the new medium. More specifically, my aim is to address the question of whether stories explored in digital games may serve for their players a purpose similar to that of traditional storytelling as defined by cognitive narratologists. I place particular emphasis on the importance of storytelling in building and enhancing the player's Theory of mind (ToM), as well as their ability to empathise with the other. I then address certain essential differences between the new medium and traditional forms of storytelling in order to ultimately justify the potential use of digital games in a profound, yet intuitive exploration of one's relationship with alterity.*

Keywords: *storytelling in digital games, cognitive narratology, Theory of Mind, role-playing game (RPG), video game culture, game philology*

From an early stage in the development of game studies, the interactive quality of the new medium has posed uncomfortable questions regarding the nature of the player. For the duration of play, are the player and the real-life individual identical entities or is the player a hybrid between a person, a computer program, and in-game characters? What is, more precisely, the relationship between the player and their in-game avatar or character? What changes when the game proposes a story in addition to a ludic experience? The present paper argues that an application of cognitive narratology to the study of digital games offers one possible set of answers. Cognitive narratology, especially as defined by David Herman, investigates the intimate connection of stories and the workings of the mind. On the one hand, it considers the manner in which the mind understands stories, and the tools at its disposal in this respect. On the other hand, and of particular interest for this paper, cognitive narratology explores the idea that the human being employs narrative in order to make sense of themselves, of the world around them, and of the other's behaviour. Through narrative across media, the "reader" may uniquely experience what it is like to be someone else. As of yet, this theory has not been considered in the study of digital games. It is the aim of this paper, therefore, to explore the possible implications of cognitive narratology for the understanding of the new medium, as well as to propose that the unique characteristics of the latter facilitate, even further than traditional texts, the experience of the qualia or of another's consciousness. Ultimately, through the lens of cognitive narratology, I suggest that, where storytelling is involved, gameplay facilitates the temporary de-centring and displacement of the player's identity, thereby raising questions about the self and, most importantly, the self's relationship with alterity.

Of course, not all games are made the same. Cognitive narratology itself is most relevant when applied to literary genres which feature protagonists as experiencers (Herman, *Basic Elements* 141-2), and this is no different in the case of digital games. As such, I focus, in what follows, particularly on role-playing games (RPGs). Furthermore, I argue that relevant differences are

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observable even amongst story-driven titles. The Dragonborn, the player character in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011), is largely customizable and generally portrayed as the typical, recognizable hero. It is more likely, therefore, to represent an extension of the player into the game world, rather than an instance of alterity. Geralt of Rivia, the protagonist of *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015), is a fictional character proper, which must be embodied by the player, but cannot be customized by the latter. Moreover, Geralt features a strong personality, as well as a personal history, which can be altered by the player only mildly throughout the game. Differently put, though the player controls Geralt, the protagonist does represent an other, albeit a rather heteronormative, typically heroic one. Departing from the norm are the protagonists of *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), Kara, Connor, and Markus. They too are stand-alone fictional characters, inviting the player to slip into the skin of another, but unlike Geralt and many characters like him, they are robotically engineered, and therefore non-human. Their story is set at a time of rampant discrimination against androids, some of which become conscious and are consequently branded as "deviants." Still, even Kara, Connor, and Markus are humanoid in appearance and, as the game title suggests, similar to humans in behaviour and consciousness. This is no longer the case with *Inside* (Playdead, 2016). The protagonist here is a faceless boy with no story, heading towards no palpable goal, but constantly chased by ferocious animals, eerie-looking characters, or brainwashed humanoid husks, in a minimalist, largely colourless environment. The player, who is likely used to relatable characters, is prompted to empathise with the unknown boy, but the latter resists identification and opposes to it a painful void of meaning. The result is a bizarre experience of otherness, which culminates, throughout the last 20 minutes of gameplay, in the player assuming control of the Huddle, a repulsive mass of combined human body parts and organs that squishes and squashes when moved along in the environment. In comparing the few examples above, it is notable that the player may experience various degrees of otherness by engaging with different games. In all of these cases, however, the question remains of how we might define the relationship between the player and the player character or avatar. Is it possible, furthermore, to employ cognitive narratology in order to better explain the latter?

According to David Herman, cognitive narratology is organized around two broad questions regarding the link between narrative and mind. First, how and through which categories of cognition do narrative experiences occur? Second, to what extent is narrative useful in making sense of the experience itself (*Cognitive Narratology* 1)? Throughout the present paper, I focus on the latter question, and thus begin from the premise that "stories do not merely evoke a world, and thereby constitute a target of interpretation; they also afford resources for sense making (…)" (Herman, *Cognitive Narratology* 36). To better understand this point, I first resort to Herman's definition of narrative itself. For Herman, a text must feature three core elements in order to be narrative. It must present events in a certain structured order, it must describe a disruption of the normal order of the fictional world, and finally, through the latter, it must convey "what it's like to live through that disruption, that is, the 'qualia' (or felt, subjective awareness) of real or imagined consciousnesses undergoing the disruptive experience" ("Introduction" to the *Cambridge Companion* 9). Although all three components are necessary for narrative to exist, the third is of particular interest for this investigation. Through this third feature, which stipulates that any narrative must impart not only events, but the effects of these events on a human or human-like consciousness, Herman suggests that stories are a possible locus for one's encounter with the other. In doing so, he relies primarily on the work of Monika Fludernik, who proposes a model that

> constitutes narrativity not – as is traditionally the case – in reference to *plot* or *story*, but in reference to what I have called *experientiality*. This term (…) describes the typical quality of natural narratives in which surprising events impinge on the protagonist (usually coterminous with the narrator) and are resolved by his (or her) reaction(s) – a sequence that

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> provides an illustrative "point" to the story and links the telling to its immediate discourse context. (Fludernik 245)

For Fludernik, experientiality is the core feature of narrative, whereas for Herman, it represents only one of three necessary characteristics. In both cases, however, stories are provided their specificity through the fact that they represent the conscious experience of a humanoid mind, with which the reader can empathise. Indeed, according to Herman, stories "in fact enable us to know 'what it is like' to be someone else, and maybe also ourselves" ("Cognition, emotion, and consciousness" 256). Put differently, narrative is unique because of its connection with "qualia" or "quale," two terms which "are most commonly used to characterise the qualitative, experiential, or felt properties of mental states" (Levin 669). Qualia, therefore, denotes the very personal, subjective quality of an individual's conscious experience at a given time. Because it is entirely unique to each person, in theory, the qualia or the "raw feels," as Herman refers to it, cannot be shared by any person other than the experiencer themselves. However, Herman suggests that narrative fiction is uniquely equipped to explore qualia in that it "provides a sort of dialectical synthesis of the third-person orientation of scientific discourse (…), and the first-person orientation of consciousness itself" (*Basic Elements* 147). To quote him at length, stories,

> thanks to the way they are anchored in a particular vantage-point on the storyworlds that they evoke, and thanks to their essentially durative or temporally extended profile, do not merely convey semantic content but furthermore encode in their very structure a way of experiencing events. To put the same point in other terms, narrative, unlike other modes of representation such as deductive arguments, stress equations, or the periodic table of the elements, is uniquely suited to capturing what the world is like from the situated perspective of an experiencing mind. (*Basic Elements* 157)

As we read stories, Herman argues, we observe characters and especially protagonists of the "reflector" type, their consciousnesses, and the way they make sense of the world around them. In turn, this helps us formulate reasons about why different people engage in particular behaviours given certain sets of circumstances (*Storytelling* 296), which we can then employ in order to make sense of ourselves and those around us. In psychology, this is referred to as "Theory of Mind," the "fundamental, generic processes by which humans attribute mental states, properties, and dispositions both to themselves and to their social cohorts" (Herman, "Cognition, emotion, and consciousness" 253). Throughout the quotidian, such processes play essential roles. We use them to judge others, their behaviours and goals, to evaluate our own conduct, as well as to make predictions about our or others' future reactions to given events. Theory of Mind, then, rests at the foundation of our self-understanding, but most importantly, it provides the basis for our interactions with alterity. Herman proposes that across media, narrative enhances the individual's Theory of Mind, and allows for the exploration of one's relationship with the other. Implementing such an argument in the study of digital games leads, as we shall see in what follows, to several noteworthy conclusions.

To begin with, the attempt to apply cognitive narratology in game studies must be motivated. This is not a difficult task, even though the role of storytelling in the design and reception of digital games has certainly been downplayed by scholars over the past decade. Glancing briefly at some of the most popular releases since the 2000s, it is readily observable that the new medium is making increasingly complex use of narrative in its development. This is particularly the case with role-playing games, as well as with other, similarly story-driven genres. There is, in other words, a narrative component to the majority of digital games, yet the question remains whether David Herman's stipulations about narrative and qualia are relevant for understanding the new medium.

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Stories in digital games are similar to their traditional counterparts in that they feature events, characters, and a chronotope, amongst others. Pertaining uniquely to the new medium, on the other hand, are its immersive and interactive qualities (Murray 71). By means of the latter, digital games propose a relationship between "reader" and character which diverges from traditional forms of storytelling. Indeed, according to Hefner et al.,

> [t]rough interactivity, (…) video games override the distance between media users and media characters: Players either control directly one specific character or take on a social role represented in the game world. In both cases, players do not observe autonomous social entities performing on screen, but they make characters perform or actually perform themselves. (41)

Unlike the reader of traditional text or the viewer of a film, the player of video games and most notably of RPGs, takes control of in-game characters and drives the story to various degrees, depending on the affordances of specific titles. This leads to an interaction between player and in-game character which is unique and often described by scholars in terms of "identification." For instance, Jessica Aldred contends that a video game character is a dual entity, both an extension of the player's self, which with the latter can identify, and a separate, fictional entity (356). The player, on the other hand, constantly shifts between identifying with their in-game character or avatar and recognizing its otherness. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman refer to this fluctuation as the "double-consciousness" of play. In their view, the player alternates between placing themselves "inside" the character and viewing it as an object of agency, a mediator between the self and the game world (453-55). Alternatively, Felix Schröter and Jan-Nöel Thon propose a tripartite model of the video game character. For them, the in-game character features a "mode of narration," which allows it to be constructed as a fictional character, a "mode of simulation," which represents it as a functional piece of the game world, and a "mode of communication," which permits the player to project themselves through the character into the social space of the game (23). Especially relevant for the present discussion is, of course, what Schröter and Thom describe as the mode of narration, wherein "the player perceives game characters as identifiable fictional beings with an inner life" (28). In the authors' own words,

> [w]hen characters are experienced narratively (or fictionally, or representationally), event or story schemata are employed to establish mental representations of chronological and causal relations between characters and events, which might lead, for example, to expectations concerning future narrative happenings (…). (Schröter, Thom 28)

Already, the description of the player – in-game character interaction as presented above is notably similar to David Herman's understanding of the qualia. The player, like the reader, draws from the game interpretations about their character and the latter's experience of the surrounding world, with the added proviso that, in the case of the new medium, the player is no longer a passive observer, but rather assumes control of the character itself.

In virtue of such agency, Zach Waggoner argues that players cannot help identifying with their in-game avatars, which they have created and through (or for) which they have taken decisions throughout the duration of play. For Waggoner, these decisions "made by each user allow for the many psychic self-reflections needed for identification (…) particularly if the outcome of a decision is not desirable. At the same time, the user remains aware that the (…) gameworld is not of their own creation – it exists outside of themselves (…)" (173). Particularly in RPGs, the player's real-life and in-game identities tend to form a hybrid entity, referred to as a "projective identity" by James Gee (56). The player maintains awareness that the character is a separate, fictional entity, yet

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in virtue of their constant interventions upon the latter, a blend of identities takes place, which often translates into alterations of the player's non-virtual self.

It is furthermore significant that, through role-playing games, users gain the "opportunity to 'try on different hats' of selfhood, experimenting with the adoption of personality characteristics that either amplify or contradict aspects of their primary identities" (Bowman 127). Differently put, not only do RPGs afford player-character identification, but they also encourage players to experience otherness in a safe environment. Most notably, a study by Casey Hart sampling 54 subjects showed promising results towards confirming such a hypothesis. Indeed, Hart has found that a single personality trait was projected by players onto their in-game characters, namely that of "openness to experience." For the scholar, this suggests that "instead of using avatars as vehicles for projecting their personality into digital space, players use avatars as a means by which to explore alternative versions of themselves or even anti-projections of their personalities" (28). In turn, when digital games propose protagonists which are deliberately other, it is likely that players "internally simulate the condition of the character or role they enact during game play," thereby experiencing a shift in self-perception over time, borrowing characteristics from their in-game identities, and forming powerful bonds of identification with their in-game characters (Klimmt et al. 332-3).

To return to David Herman and bearing in mind the above, I propose that the relationship between player and in-game character can, indeed, be explored from the viewpoint of cognitive narratology. In digital games, like in traditional narratives, the player "feels" what it is like to be another. After all, "gameplay, as a human experience, is instilled with emotions, from fierce to mild in their intensity, and from persistent to fleeting in their temporality" (Järvinen 86). Although occurring in a virtual world, emotions, thoughts, and experiences provoked by digital games are no less real than those transpiring in real-life. This is prevalent especially in role-playing or other story-driven games, where the player has access to the perspective of an experiencer. There is, furthermore, a tendency for the player to identify with their in-game character to a larger extent than they would with characters of traditional texts, which seems to indicate that in digital games, qualia is more intensely experienced. This is not necessarily the case in games where the player's avatar is largely customizable, because the player will likely interact with the former as a projection of the self or of an alternative self. On the other hand, in games that propose distinct protagonists, there remains sufficient distance between the player and their in-game character in order for the former to be able to experience qualia or the "raw feels" of another consciousness. This distance is ensured by the situatedness of the in-game character, which often points to its separateness and fictional nature, as well as by the very anatomy of role-play, which forces the player to *assume* the role of another rather than simply *project* the self. In addition, several digital games directly thematize the issue of alterity and one's rapport with otherness, which implicitly brings up questions regarding the player's control of their in-game character.

Several examples already mentioned in this paper may be used in order to illustrate the productivity of applying the model of cognitive narratology to the interpretation of digital games. For instance, in *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, the player experiences the world through the character of Geralt, a witcher trained from an early age to slay monsters and employed for his services by farmers, generals and kings alike, but who ostensibly chooses to stay out of domestic, political, or military conflicts pertaining to the issuers of contracts. The in-game society functions largely through the marginalization of what is generally referred to as "non-human." This discriminatory category includes anything from the monsters slain by Geralt to non-human races, such as the elves or dwarves, sorceresses or even witchers, the latter of whom are brought up in the trade, often against their own will. Running through most of Geralt's interactions with other characters is an almost compulsive hate of witchers. Though the protagonist of the story, Geralt is, in this world, an outsider, not only due to his profession, but also due to his methodical, almost scientific, and often emotionless take on events, as opposed to a worldview steeped in superstition, prejudice, and fear. Throughout the game, the player maintains the awareness that they, of course, are not Geralt, and

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that the latter is a fictional character in a virtual world. At the same time, however, the player can participate in Geralt's experience from a vantage point. Indeed, they can "feel" the character's situation, his qualia, not so much in virtue of his reactions being described in words, but precisely because the player themselves must react for him. The interaction resulting therefrom is not a simple one, as the real-life user does not merely project their own personality upon Geralt. Instead, what the player becomes is a hybrid of real-life identity, in-game character, and the technical affordances of the game. Their consciousness is therefore de-centred and displaced. Practically speaking, during each decision, the player is influenced by their real-life identity, by the personality of Geralt, whom they have become attached to through tens of hours of gameplay, as well as due to the interactive options made possible through the game's programming. To give only one example, during the game Geralt must take several decisions regarding Ciri, his protégée and adoptive daughter, all of which eventually lead to one of three possibilities for her fate in the conclusion of the story. When Ciri is battling a negative mood, as a result of her not being able to control her own powers, she eventually confides in Geralt, who is a father figure for her, but who is unable to fathom the extent of her abilities. The protagonist can then tell her that she needn't be good at everything or he can resort to one of their playful rituals and start a snowball fight. The first decision further breaks down Ciri's spirit, while the second, especially if Geralt chooses to let Ciri win the fight, provides her with strength. Nearly ten such decisions, scattered throughout the game, participate in deciding Ciri's fate. In the worst case scenario, which results from the player constantly making choices that let Ciri down, the female character eventually dies in an attempt to use her powers to preserve the world as they know it. Returning to the example above, the player is obviously influenced in their decision by their non-virtual identity, according to which the majority will desire to help, rather than hurt Ciri. At the same time, however, the player will bear in mind the nature of the two fictional characters, and the lasting relationship between them. The player might consider, for instance, that Ciri is not the type of character who can accept failure, and that Geralt's role, therefore, is to provide her with enough strength to keep bettering herself in spite of her shortcomings. Finally, the player will be limited by the programming of the game, which offers only two options. The player, as such, will become a hybrid of at least these three elements. In the process, they will make several assumptions about the characters, as well as about their own behaviours in given situations. They will, in other words, empathise with Geralt, Ciri, and others, while concomitantly exploring issues such as discrimination or, more generally, one's relationship to alterity.

This is even more readily observable in the case of *Detroit: Become Human*, where the player takes up the perspective of three androids, Kara, Connor, and Markus, in a world where conscious machines are yet to earn rights. The story moves forward in an episodic fashion, while the experiencer role is alternatively played by one of the three characters. Throughout, the player witnesses acts of violence against intelligent machines, which are widely blamed for crippling unemployment and, in general, for society's most pressing issues. Kara's storyline, for instance, begins inside an android shop, where, the player soon finds out, she has spent the past two weeks being repaired following an alleged car accident. Kara's memory is wiped out in order for her to be reset, but it is revealed later in the same episode that she is a housekeeping android model whose owner, an alcoholic and drug abuser, physically assaults her and his own daughter when drunk. Ordered around by the owner upon reaching home, the player, through Kara, tidies the house. They wash dishes, clean and take out the trash, do laundry, all the while witnessing the owner as he slips into ebriety. The android's programming prevents her from taking any action, and the player equally experiences this helplessness. Later that night, as the owner becomes increasingly violent and threatens his daughter, Kara's programming destabilizes for the first time as she begins to experience consciousness. A series of decisions and actions follow, whereby the player can save Kara and Alice, who then run away from home, or witness either or both of their deaths. On most occasions, the time afforded by the game for these choices is minimal, of the order of seconds.

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Furthermore, the player controls Kara through intuitive movements and button presses on the PlayStation console, so that if Kara is to dodge, for example, the player must push or pull the console in the appropriate direction. The possible actions to be taken by the player are displayed on screen just as they are about to take place, and must be completed immediately in order to be successful. The effect is that, in high-pressure moments such as that experienced through Kara at the beginning of the game, the player is more likely to "feel" the situation as it takes place. As events unravel and Kara seemingly has no control over the situation, she might experience confusion and panic, which are replicated for the player not only visually and narratively, but also through the game's fast-paced, intuitive controls. Throughout the stories, the verbal and physical abuse of androids becomes poignantly evident, particularly because the player witnesses them through the eyes of such machines. In addition, the player is constantly hindered from completing their objectives by discriminatory practices designed to keep androids under control, such as the fact that they are programmed to wear distinguishing clothing, that they cannot fend for themselves or others if this involves causing harm to a human attacker, that they are not allowed to rent rooms in hotels, that they cannot possess weapons, and numerous others. Finally, the story is designed in such a manner that nearly every player decision determines its course. From the beginning of the game and until its conclusion, any of the three protagonists, alongside other characters, can die, and their fates rest with player choice, usually presented under conditions of stress. As such, a powerful empathy develops between the player and the in-game characters, even though the latter maintain their quality of otherness. Even more so than Geralt's story, *Become Human* is masterfully designed to afford the player's experiencing of the protagonists' qualia. However, in terms of how it depicts this alterity, it might be argued that, although non-human, "deviant" androids deeply resemble human consciousness. They may be other, and they certainly provoke difficult questions about the future of humanity, as well as about discrimination and violence in present societies, but, like Geralt in *The Witcher III*, they function in virtue of their similarities to the player.

This is less so with *Inside*, a 2.5D side-scroller puzzle game which disturbingly combines an impenetrable alterity and the player's tendency to identify with the character they control. The player interacts with a minimalist, eerie environment through a young, faceless boy. There is no introduction to the game, nor are there any specified goals. The only aim is to move forward in what looks like the boy's escape from something unknown. From the very beginning, the boy is chased by animals, as well as by bizarre, masked men, and must solve various puzzles in order to progress through the world. Several situations require that the boy connects himself to a mind-control device, which determines other present human-like figures to behave in desirable ways. Although the story begins in a forest, the landscape soon becomes more familiar when the character crosses a deserted farm, a derelict city, and finally arrives at a grotesque brainwashing facility. Here, the boy makes his way to a large, spherical container, where he finds the monstrous-looking Huddle, a mass of combined human body parts, connected to four mind-control devices. The protagonist sets the Huddle free and is absorbed into it as the latter breaks out of its container, carefully observed by scientists. Under the player's control, it eventually escapes the facility, tumbles haphazardly down a hill, and crashes just short of the sea, on a beach. In an alternative ending, which can only be completed through a second run of the game, the boy finds a secret room before encountering the Huddle, where a mind-control device is connected to wires and several computers. Nearby is a power plug, which the boy can disconnect. Upon doing so, the boy shuts down, the lights go out, and the game is concluded. Given its abstract content, as well as its open endings, the game offers itself to numerous interpretations. It can be read, for instance, as a meditation on the dystopian future of human society, where human beings are brainwashed into submission for higher efficiency in their respective lines of work. The long queues of seemingly brain-dead people being led into the facility, which are observable several times throughout the game, seem to encourage such an interpretation. The Huddle, in this scenario, could be a scientific experiment involving mind-control gone wrong, and thus a metaphor for human greed unbridled. On the other hand, the game can be

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interpreted more broadly, as a comment on the terrifying ramifications of control, conformity, and determinism. The boy, after all, seems to be able to control other humanoids through specific devices. It appears, furthermore, that the boy himself is being controlled by the Huddle, which wants to achieve freedom and requires help to do so. Or it may be that the Huddle is designed by scientists to absorb the fitting human beings, in this case, the boy, and that therefore the events were planned by scientists all along. Most importantly, however, in its alternative ending, the game suggests that, ultimately, there is only one certain manipulator of the protagonist – the player. When the boy unplugs himself from the system, the game ends because the player can no longer exercise control over him. The game itself, then, brings up the question of the player's relationship to their in-game character. Furthermore, both the boy and the Huddle are deliberately and starkly other. The faceless boy is not an empty site for the player's self-projection precisely because the character is *too* empty, *too* devoid of features to allow identification. The in-game world is too abstract to allow interpretations that focus merely on its assimilation to a dystopian version of human society. The potential for interpretation is present, but even though not one word is said throughout the entire game, *Inside* features imagery and mechanics which resist reductionist, explicative discourse. At the same time, it is impossible for the player not to feel deeply anxious alongside the boy. Even while controlling the Huddle, which is, at first, truly repugnant in appearance and movement, the player can experience its desire for freedom, its desperate attempt to achieve it, and a sense of overwhelming failure at its stopping just short of its goal, the sea.

Thus, each title described above tells a story through the mediation of an experiencer and allows players to feel the various circumstances of the latter. Furthermore, whether from the perspective of Geralt in *The Witcher III*, Kara, Connor, and Markus in *Become Human*, or the faceless boy in *Inside*, the player comes in contact repeatedly with the theme of otherness, as well as with that of one's relationship to alterity. Notably, the above are not by far the only digital games that put the unique features of the new medium to excellent use in terms of storytelling. Indeed, the industry is becoming increasingly focused on providing powerful narratives for each game, whether the genre is role-playing or otherwise. In order to respond, game studies must propose models by means of which such titles can be interpreted, and their effects on the player understood. Cognitive narratology, already defined by David Herman as spanning across media, is one framework which is particularly effective in explicating the player's unique interaction with in-game stories, as well as characters and avatars. Perhaps more than traditional textuality, digital games are experiential. As I have showed thus far, narrative remains singularly suited to express qualia in the new medium wherein the tendency to identify with the protagonist, to evaluate and understand their worldview is maintained and even enhanced, alongside and in tension with the player's awareness of the protagonist's distinctiveness and fictional nature. Ultimately, through this combination of the very anatomy of the player–in-game character relationship and stories overtly assuming the theme of alterity, digital games offer themselves as a means to intuitively, yet profoundly explore one's relationship with the self and with the other.

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