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Term Paper

Player-Avatar Relationship and the Cinematic Platformer Genre: A Case Study of Inside

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Introduction

The video game platformer genre developed its own norms and criteria in terms of character controls. This development led to a normatised type of avatar, that has superhuman agility (high jumps, high speed). When platformers are action-oriented, they also might add the capacity to shoot and kill enemies. In the opposite direction, the cinematic platformer genre offers weak avatars who are laggy and fragile, often surrounded by a dystopian world and, most of the time, offering a disempowering experience. In this paper, we will focus on *Inside* (Playdead 2016), a cinematic platformer with a mind-control mechanic taking place in a world populated by humans and mind-controlled zombie-like creatures who are the result of scientific experiments. Through the analysis of *Inside*, we will explore the player-avatar relationship, from mechanic, narrative, and psychological perspectives.

As an interface, the avatar situates itself between the real and the digital worlds. This implies multiple double definitions of the avatar: tool and character, with and without agency, and dead and alive. It also implies double definitions for the player who is both actor and spectator, emotionally attached and distanced, in control of and limited by the avatar. These hybrid identities, breaking the usual human-machine binary, reinforce a cyborgian play. Depending on the identity and representation of the game's avatar, the play of avatar-based games offers a large variety of digital flexible subjectivities, human or non-human, that make video games a post-human experience.

Throughout this paper, we will first define avatar-based games, focusing on the subgenre of cinematic platformers and analysing how they allow for more diverse virtual bodily experiences than traditional platformers. In the second part, we will see how narrative devices are used in *Inside* to transgress the game's diegesis to reach the player. We will then see how identification and distanciation are happening in *Inside* and their effect on the uncanny experience. Lastly, we will focus on the roles of deaths in *Inside* and how they produce a meaningful experience.

Avatar-Based Games

In avatar-based games, players interact with the game's world through a character who has its own agency and is used as a tool that "mediates fictional agency" (Klevjer 2022, 94). In the next section, we will study how *Inside* (Playdead 2016), as an avatar-based game, gives the player room for reflection on the ambiguous agency of the avatar.

Minimal Characterisation

From one of its Sanskrit meanings, the avatar is the descent of a deity on earth and its incarnation (Monier-Williams, 2005, 90). In its most common sense, a game avatar is the character controlled by the player. In its minimal characterisation, the *shell avatar* (see Schallegger 2017), the avatar can be reduced to a tool or a "prosthetic extension of the body-in-the-world " (Klevjer 2022). Even in its *shell* form, I would consider two essential characteristics of the avatar-based game that make it different from a simple tool or a mouse cursor. As much as avatars affect the game's world, they are also affected by it. In this sense, the god-like extradiegetic mouse cursor, for example, the one in *Populous* (Bullfrog Productions 1989), will not be considered an avatar in this paper. This is important for a phenomenological approach to the avatar that will be discussed in the subchapter *Duality of the Avatar*. The second one is that the *shell* avatar's "correspondence to embodied reality consists of a mapping not of appearance but of control" (Rehak 2013, 107). This has its importance from a psychoanalysis perspective because the uncanny effect relies on the process of identification and distanciation through the design of appearance and control of the avatar.

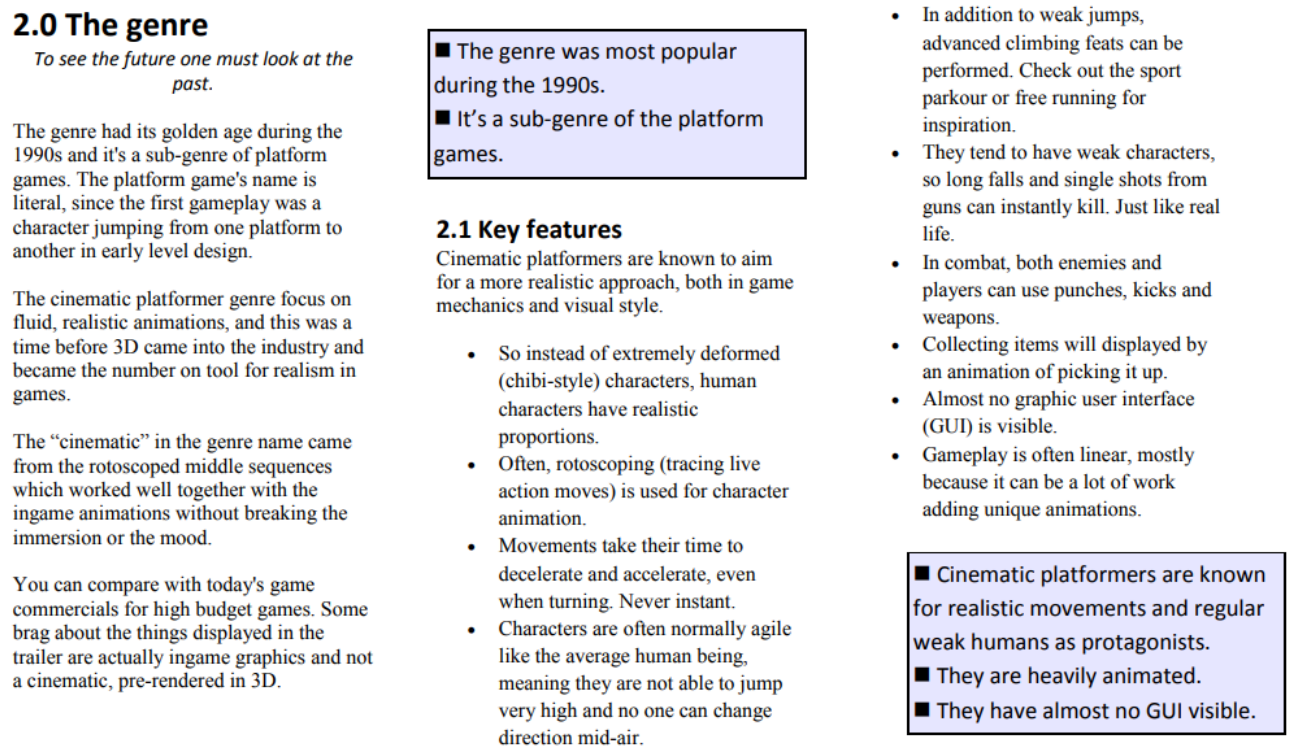
In *Inside*, the avatar is a faceless boy that has very few characterisation elements on its appearance or thoughts but a very distinct way of responding to the player's inputs. The characterisation is done through a peculiar *character autonomy*, a game design device that limits the player's control and strengthens the character's complexity (see Willumsen 2018). It is through the limitation of control that the player understands the bodily identity of her avatar. This device belongs to the cinematic platformer genre, which will be analysed in the following section.

Cinematic Platformer's Bodily Characterisation

Inside is a cinematic 2d platformer (hereafter CP), a genre that promotes more diverse bodies of avatars than the usual platformer. The genre goes against the expectations of the real-time controlled avatars by proposing weak and autonomous ones. Despite these attributes, these games aim to offer a more enriching than frustrating experience for the players about new kinds of virtual bodies.

The CP is virtually not explored in academia but has been defined from a game design perspective in Bexander's bachelor thesis (2014). Some points of her "Cinematic Platformer Art Guide" (figure 1) are to be highlighted for the specific kinds of avatars present in this genre:

- Movements take their time to decelerate and accelerate.
- Characters are often normally agile.
- They tend to have weak characters.



2.0 The genre

To see the future one must look at the past.

The genre had its golden age during the 1990s and it's a sub-genre of platform games. The platform game's name is literal, since the first gameplay was a character jumping from one platform to another in early level design.

The cinematic platformer genre focus on fluid, realistic animations, and this was a time before 3D came into the industry and became the number on tool for realism in games.

The "cinematic" in the genre name came from the rotoscoped middle sequences which worked well together with the ingame animations without breaking the immersion or the mood.

You can compare with today's game commercials for high budget games. Some brag about the things displayed in the trailer are actually ingame graphics and not a cinematic, pre-rendered in 3D.

■ The genre was most popular during the 1990s.
■ It's a sub-genre of the platform games.

2.1 Key features

Cinematic platformers are known to aim for a more realistic approach, both in game mechanics and visual style.

- So instead of extremely deformed (chibi-style) characters, human characters have realistic proportions.
- Often, rotoscoping (tracing live action moves) is used for character animation.
- Movements take their time to decelerate and accelerate, even when turning. Never instant.
- Characters are often normally agile like the average human being, meaning they are not able to jump very high and no one can change direction mid-air.
- In addition to weak jumps, advanced climbing feats can be performed. Check out the sport parkour or free running for inspiration.
- They tend to have weak characters, so long falls and single shots from guns can instantly kill. Just like real life.
- In combat, both enemies and players can use punches, kicks and weapons.
- Collecting items will displayed by an animation of picking it up.
- Almost no graphic user interface (GUI) is visible.
- Gameplay is often linear, mostly because it can be a lot of work adding unique animations.

■ Cinematic platformers are known for realistic movements and regular weak humans as protagonists.
■ They are heavily animated.
■ They have almost no GUI visible.

Figure 1: The definition of the genre of the cinematic platformer (Bexander 2014, 4)

The description of the CP avatar is "weak", has "fluid, realistic animation", and "never instant" movements. Using Willumsen's terminology of the avatar (2018), this independence of the

avatar's action and the player's input strengthens the *character autonomy*. Willumsen opposes *automated avatar actions* and character autonomy in the following definition:

> *Automated avatar actions are actions that are automatically performed by the avatar promoting the player's focus on actual game mechanics. Character autonomy is reflected in situations where character complexity is emphasized in one or more categories while avatar control is limited or non-existent.* (Willumsen 2018, 9; original emphasis)

One of the cornerstones of the CP is *Another World* (Chahi 1991). In this game, the avatar is mostly defenceless and has rather high latency controls, forcing the player to plan her actions without much possibility to change the plans during the actions. Rather than taking it for a defect, this changes the player's experience of controlling their avatar and creates a distance between them and their digital re-embodiment. Chahi will later develop a similar game, *Heart of Darkness* (Amazing Studio 1998), featuring this time a child as an avatar and protagonist.
In the same category, in *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysey* (Oddworld Inhabitants 1997), the players control a weak avatar who escapes the factory in which he is enslaved as a worker who produces meat with the bodies of his species. Preceding *Inside*, Abe can use telekinetic powers to take control of some hostile NPCs of the game, giving the player more power of action (freely exploring the environment and shooting at enemies). This power has been reused in another popular genre for weak avatars, the horror game, and especially in the *Siren* series (see Gallagher 2017, 115).

Inside slightly de-correlates the player's inputs and the avatar reactions from the very beginning of the game. After making the avatar walk by pressing the right arrow for a few seconds, the player has to hide from soldiers in the background. This time, pressing the right arrow makes the avatar walk discreetly. A few moments later, the right arrow action goes from one extreme to another and the sneaking turns into an escape run from a dog (Figure 2). Later in the game, the player has to cross the quality check of the zombie creatures. In this scene, when the player presses the right arrow, the avatar imitates the movements of the brainwashed creatures to prevent itself from being spotted and eliminated by the machines (Figure 3).

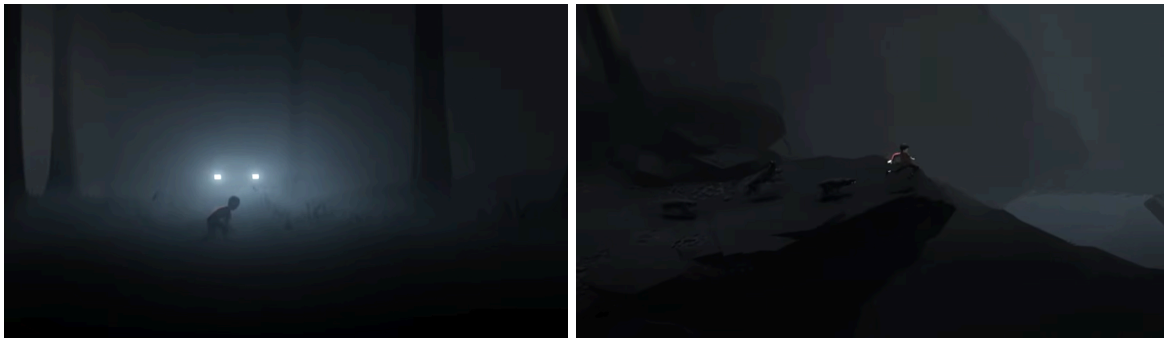


Figure 2: Screenshots from the first sequence of the game, sneaking on the left and running on the right.

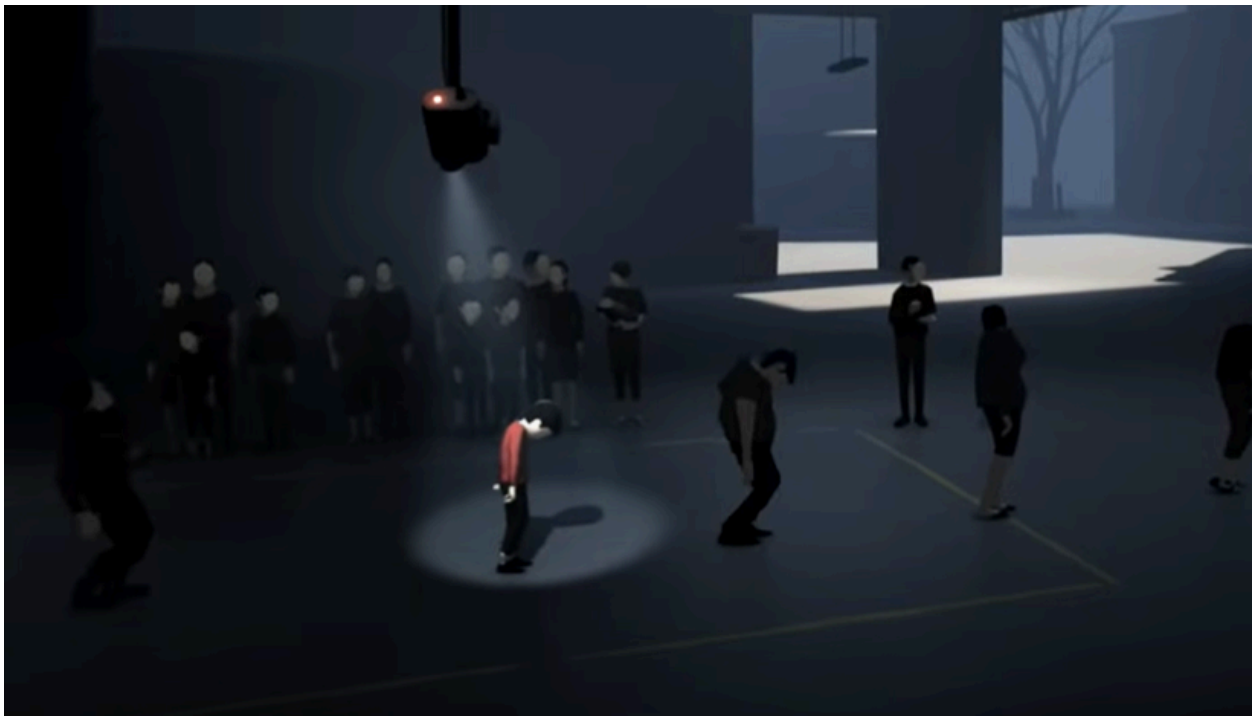


Figure 3: The avatar imitates the movement of the brainwashed creatures.

This decorrelation does not create a frustrating effect but an empathic experience. In their studies, Puglie and Foster (2015) show that "the loss of control does not excessively compromise a state of flow during game play" (429). Furthermore, they suggest that designing avatars with specific motor skills, in their case people with motor difficulties, create an enriching experience especially if it is narratively justified (ibid.). However, this effect is not only possible because of the character's bodily autonomy but also because of the process of identification with the avatar.

The CP is exploring these possibilities of enriching experience through weak avatars.

Weak avatars in video games position themselves in a countermovement of the dominating power fantasies. In this paradigm, some genres have preferred types of avatars. For example, a platformer like *Super Mario* (Nintendo R&D4 1985) needs a reactive character with a wide palette of jumps, while a point-and-click adventure game like *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990) only needs minimal control and reactivity. Incidentally, the representation of the different kinds of avatars follows their role as weak or strong. Most of the action-platformer's avatars are soldiers while most point-and-click avatars are more oriented on their intellect than their physical strength.

> Whatever our avatar may look like, such games tacitly advance an ideal of the body as an obedient vehicle of the will rather than a ponderous, fallible, intractable or inflexible mass. (Gallagher 2017, 107)

The normalised experiences of traditional platformers, due to the power fantasy bodies they offer, may undermine the multitude of possible digital subjectivities offered by video games.

Transgressions

One main theme of *Inside* is the transgression of the player in the game's world be it through interaction or through identification.
Inside has a mind-control mechanic: the avatar can enter a device making it control a zombie-like creature that can in turn enter a similar device to control a third creature (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Mise en abyme of the mind-control device.

This mechanic effectively makes an interactive mise en abyme[1] allowing the player to recursively think of herself as part of the mind-control system as she also uses a controller to control an unnamed avatar.

The other unique aspect of the game is its second ending which brings an unexpected twist on the avatar's identity (from a boy to another zombie) and necessitates the player to use the extradiegetic User Interface as a diegetic tool.

In the next section, we will see that this inclusion of the player in the game's world, or of the avatar in the player's world is inherent to video games. We will understand video games as cybernetic systems and as unnatural narratives.

[1] "Mise en abyme is founded on a relation of similarity between the embedded and embedding stories—"simple," "infinite" or "aporetic" reduplication or reflection" (Pier 2014, 339).

Duality of the Avatar

The player-avatar relationship is a complex one as it relies on the game's world, the real world and the interfaces between the two because of the inherent cybernetic aspect of video games. When playing a video game, the players are engaged in a cybernetic loop (Salen and Zimmerman, 218) between themselves and the game's world through hardware and software. Players use input devices, for instance (motion) controllers or a mouse, to control an avatar that can interact with the game's world. In this sense, avatars can be defined as the interface between the player's input and the video game's world.

Avatars also present duality in their function as they are both subject and object, tool and character (Barnabé and Delbouille 2018). The role of the avatar borrows both from movies and games (or role-playing in general), positioning the player both as a spectator and an actor. Both the avatar and the player's role can be positioned on different nuances of the spectra character/tool and spectator/actor. The degree of control is the main parameter for those roles. We can illustrate this with two extreme examples: in VR the degree of control is close to being a full embodiment of the avatar, the player is placed on the actor side of the spectrum and the avatar on the tool side whereas during a cutscene the player does not have any control over the avatar making her a spectator and the avatar a character. The last one is not to be dismissed under the 'movie' category because the player already identifies the character avatar as her re-embodiment in the digital space.

> Although on the cinema screen Thus film is like the mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the latter, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body. (Metz 1982, 45)

As we will see later, the degree of control can vary (with more subtility than hereabove) in a way that preserves the roles of both the avatar and the player.

The cybernetic loop, necessary for video games, implies what Ensslin calls "double-situatedness" (2009, 158), a concept used to describe the dual existence of the players both in their real-world bodies and in their digital avatar re-embodiment.
I would also consider the avatar double-situated, as Rehak argues through a Lacanian analysis:

> The video game avatar would seem to meet the criteria of Lacan's objet petit a. Appearing on screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as self and other, symbol and index**. As *self*, its behavior is tied to the player's through an interface** (keyboard, mouse, joystick): its literal motion, as well as its figurative triumphs and defeats, result from the player's actions. **At the same time, avatars are unequivocally *other***. Both limited and freed by difference from the player, they can accomplish more than the player alone; they are supernatural ambassadors of agency. (Rehak 2013, 106; my emphasis)

Klevjer (2022) analyses the avatar through a phenomenological lens, which brings to us the question of self-reflection and affordances. Self-reflection is an essential part of the epistemological circle (Schmitt 2006, 287) in phenomenology. It is how humans create knowledge by explaining intuitions, or habits. Controlling a traditional platformer avatar creates a habit among the players so they do not question their virtual body anymore. These habits can be questioned by the player if the designers make non-traditional avatars. When we control an avatar, we are discovering the affordances, the 'I can' of the digital world (Klevjer 2022, 94). Becoming conscious of the affordances of a different digital body, we also bring this consciousness into our everyday lives. It is a common player experience to see the city buildings as bouldering walls after playing a parkour game, as in *Mirror's Edge* (DICE 2008) or *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007). By creating games where the player's vicarious body is not a power fantasy, designers and players can explore a wider and more inclusive variety of identities in their game.

Narratological Approach

It is widely accepted by game studies scholars that there is a necessary distance between the game and the players, allowing them to be conscious of playing (Henriot 1969, Huizinga 1965; Caillois 1961; Fink 1968; Frissen et al. 2015; Barnabé and Delbouille 2018).

> When we play, we can enthusiastically immerse ourselves in the play-world, while at the same time keeping an ironic distance towards our playful behavior, which just for that reason can be termed "playful". (Frissen et al. 2015, 19)

However, this distance coexists with the player's immersion. Games can take advantage of this ambivalence to create unnatural narratives (using second-person narration and metaleptic devices), pushing the player to reflect on her position. This kind of design is the most efficient at conveying the deeper meanings of the game to the players. This is what Schallegger calls "ethical designs"(2023, 6) and they "should reach beyond the diegesis and directly involve the player as such to maximise impact" (ibid.).
The following section focuses on the use of metalepsis and second-person narration in *Inside* while also showing how video games tend to naturalise these unnatural narratives.

Metalepsis

The definition and categorisation of metalepses differ from one scholar to another, but one generally accepted definition includes "the transgression of boundaries which, in principle, are inviolable in narrative" (Pier 2014, 331). Its most common sense is a transgression of one narrative layer to another (Genette 2004). In the case of literature, the operator of the metalepsis is the narrator. Except for textual games and a few exceptions, most video games do not have a narrator. However, we can consider the avatar as the diegetic narrator, and the UI as the extradiegetic narrator.
Because the second ending of *Inside* uses the UI for loading the different game locations, the barrier between diegetic and extra-diegetic is blurred. In the player, this creates an "unacceptable and insistent hypothesis that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to the same narrative" (Genette 1980, 236).
Barnabé and Delbouille argue that the avatar, as a medium between the player and the game and between their two realities, is an "operator of metalepsis" (Genette 2004, 110; my translation).

> I argue that, rather than interactional metalepsis being caused by an interaction between 'text' and reader and thus between the material object used to describe the storyworld and

> the reader, interactional metalepsis occurs when the ontological boundary between the reader (in the actual world) and the storyworld is crossed. **Thus interactional metalepses, while facilitated by interactivity, are, like all forms of metalepses, ontological in nature**" (Bell 2016, 4; my emphasis)

Second-person narration

The novel *La Modification* (Butor 1957) uses second-person narration not only to address the reader but also the protagonist. This ambiguous usage of the "you" can be traced back to the first textual adventure games.

The representation of the avatar can also be minimal in a textual game where "[i]magining ourselves as the addressee of the computer screen's discourse, the "I" misrecognizing itself in the computer's "YOU," is part of video games' lure" (Rehak 2013, 112). Rehak uses the example of *Adventure* (Micro Power 1982):

> Adventure's interface invited players to imagine themselves as the observing/participating "I" in an unfolding narrative and brought to gameplay a sensation of first-person experience. Produced through textual collaboration between player and program, Adventure's hybrid player-avatar epitomized the simultaneous splitting/suturing at the heart of video games. (Rehak 2015, 111-2)

This mode of narration is very close to the "hetero-communicative narrative where the you is only protagonist and not addressee" (Fludernik 1994) as found in Butor's *La modification* (1957). If this mode is considered an unnatural narrative device in literature (Alber 2013) it is one of the essential parts of the video games' manner of narration from the first textual adventure, making it a natural narration in the digital media. However, because the protagonist, the 'you' of the game, is the avatar and because of the ambiguity of identity between the player and the avatar, it is virtually impossible for video games to write a 'you' that would be only the protagonist and not the addressee.

In other words, the blur and the oscillation between the player's real and digital identity lies at the core of the role of the avatar. This oscillation makes the player alternate between a state of

immersion and self-reflexivity (Barnabé and Delbouille 2018). This ambiguity is what Bell analyses as the *interactional metalepsis* (2016).

As we saw earlier, the unnatural second-person narration is inherent to video games from their early textual version. However, very few of them use the ambiguity offered by this kind of narration, i.e. the ambiguity between the addressee's and protagonist's identity (Fludernik 1994, 455). In the same manner as in *La modification*, *Inside* only reveals at the end of the second ending that the avatar was not a conscious boy but a mind-controlled body like the one we used throughout the game. This creates doubt for the player, as Williams (2019, 62) notes, who does not know anymore who had the real in-game agency in her first playthrough. Using Willumsen's (2018) terminology, the player's understanding of the avatar's movement as character autonomy is revealed to be automated avatar actions.

This shift in identity can be extended to the User Interface part of the narration due to peculiar saving and loading mechanics. To understand its complex hypertext configuration, I will use Ryan's terminology (2001). During her first playthrough, the player experiences *Inside* as a vector with side branches (Figure 5) (250). The main vector is the game's map, from left to right, and the side branches are the hidden collectables (pieces of the mind control machine scattered across the game's world). However, she is confronted with a "fatal aporia" (252), proper to the maze structure (251), when getting to the first ending. This aporia, in the sense of Aarseth (1997), motivates the player to find the missing elements of the story. During her second playthrough, the game's structure changes into a "network with a subset of nodes that are linked to every other one" (Ryan 2001, 247n1) working similarly to a table of contents which "enables the user to return to the table in one trip from every point in the system" (ibid.). In our case, this table of contents appears both in the pause menu and a room toward the end of the game (Figure 6) that shows the location of the pieces overlooked by the player in the different locations that the player can load to find the missed branches of her first playthrough. Whereas space and time are usually connected to a checkpoint, loading a savestate in *Inside* only makes the player travel in space while keeping her real-life time progression. On the vertical axis (layers of narration), the functional, extra-diegetic loading menu transgresses into the diegetic world (metalepsis). On the horizontal axis (time and space), this is a spatial metalepsis because places in the game

transgress their distance without transgressing (although implying a transgression of) the narrative layers.

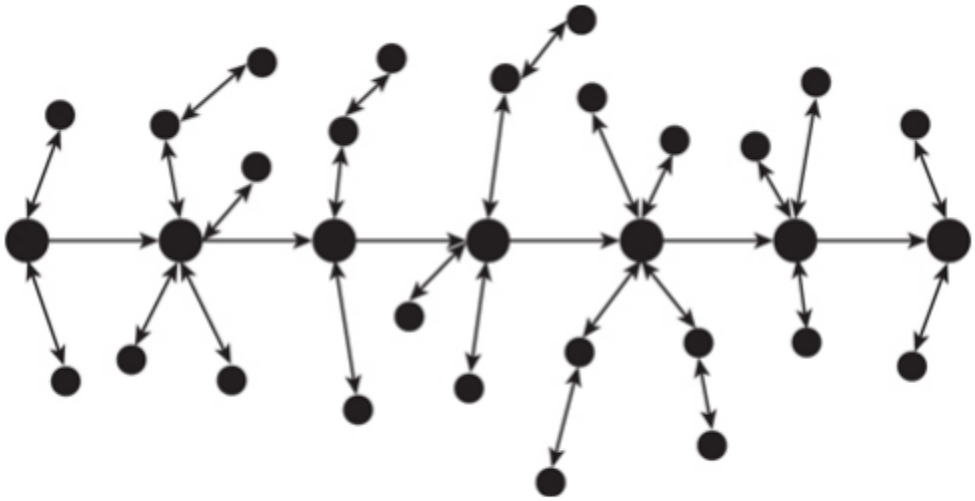


Figure 5*: The vector with side branches* (Ryan 2001, 250)

Figure 6: Screenshot of the room that shows the collected pieces

Uncanny

> Today, the very idea of the biological in what has been touted as the posthuman era seems to be swinging decidedly toward a biocybernetical view both in contemporary scientific work and in mainstream social discourse, which also raises new questions about the uncanny. (Liu 2010, 224)

Inside 'reaches beyond the diegesis' not only with narrative devices but also with psychological ones. For the player, her avatar is both 'I' when identifying and 'it' when distancing depending on how the avatar is represented and controlled. Using processes of identification and distanciation, designers can create deception (Eliza effect) or doubts (uncanny experience).

Gallagher argues that horror games rely on the emotional bonding of the player with NPCs. Using the 'Eliza effect'[2], game designers "draw players into close relationships with NPCs only to expose them to moments of breakdown" (2017, 120). In *Inside*, this is experienced by the player during the second ending, as analysed previously, when she realises that the boy was not his agent.

The Eliza effect of *Inside* also serves a disempowering role. "Games serve as empowering mechanisms, a game that allows people to engage with strange or taboo activities play is an *alibi*" (Montola and Holopainen 2012, 21; original emphasis). The strength of the alibi also depends on the character's *thickness* (or authorial constraints) (ibid.), in a way that the thicker the character is, the more the player feels protected and allowed to act as the character avatar and not as herself. In this sense, *Inside* constitutes a disempowering experience because of the ambiguity of the avatar's agency and thus of its thickness.

The uncanny, in the Freudian sense, effect of the avatar is also due to its mirror relationship to the player, and how death affects it. The "avatars differ from us through their ability to *live, die, and live again*." (Rehak, 107; original emphasis).
The definition of the "uncanny" has been explored and enriched throughout the 20th century through the scope of psychoanalysis. Still, we can find some fundamental elements shared with the definition of the avatar. Firstly, the uncertainty that one has about the definition of an object,

[2] Because computers give the illusion of thinking, "[t]his type of illusion is generally known as the "Eliza effect", which could be defined as the susceptibility of people to read far more understanding than is warranted into strings of symbols – especially words – strung together by computers." (Hofstadter 1995, 157)

especially related to its life status and the experience produced (Royle 2008, 1). The uncanny creates “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate” (Jentsch 1906; cited in Freud, “The Uncanny” [1919] 2003, 111). Parallelly, our definition of the avatar is uncertain about its agency, or autonomy, because of his double role of character and tool.

> Avatars’ combination of 2 life and lifelessness personifies the uncanny as described in Freud’s famous paper. Moreover, the cybernetic interaction between player and machine, whereby the digital figure appears to act as though imbued with life, and the player appears to become more machine-like, unsettles the boundaries between dead object and living person. Donna Haraway in her seminal ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ describes ‘a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction’. The fusion of mind, body and tool which Haraway observes taking place within post-industrial cultures reflects the union of player and avatar’s physical movements in videogame play. (Kirkland 2009, np)

The uncanny is not only concerned with the doubt about the object but also the subject herself. Liu analyses the uncanny as the fear of not being able to recognise ourselves as automatons believing that they have some agency:

> One possible interpretation I propose is built upon his own intuition about the interplay between Olympia and Nathanael but aims to relocate the uncanny from castration anxiety back to the automaton, not so much to reaffirm the uncertainty about the animate or inanimate state of the doll Olympia as to bring Nathanael's fantasies about himself being an automaton to light, which is not a direction in which Hoffmann's readers and critics have been reading the story. (Liu 2010, 220)

The ambiguity between the player’s and her avatar identity leads to the fear provoked by the uncanny. The player is uncertain about her agency when spectating an automaton with a believable agency illusion. Not only does this uncertainty exist with the automaton, but is strengthened by the mise en abyme of mind controls of *Inside*. If the automaton I control can control other automata indefinitely in a recursive manner, how can I be sure I am not just a link

in the chain? This vertiginous question links us back to the uneasy doubt about our existence as described by Borges:

> Why does it make us uneasy to know that the map is within the map and the thousand and one nights are within the book of A Thousand and One Nights? Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is a reader of the Quixote, and Hamlet is a spectator of Hamlet? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious. In 1833 Carlyle observed that universal history is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they too are written. (Borges 1964, 46)

Death

As seen above, one crucial factor of the uncanny experience is the inability to determine if one being is dead or alive. Analysing deaths in the CP games and particularly in *Inside* highlights the roles and effects of the avatar studied in the previous sections. We will first see the peculiar presence of death in CP games, and the systemic impact it has in *Inside*. Finally, we will analyse how the deaths of the avatar in *Inside* have been designed to be meaningful and their impact on the player-avatar relationship, promoting a sort of posthuman empathy.

In Cinematic Platformers

The theme of death, fragility and extinction is also explored in other CP games, as in *Rain World* (Videocult 2017) (ecological disaster), *The Way* (Puzzling Dream 2016) (quest for resurrecting a loved one), *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee* (Oddworld Inhabitants 1997) (enslavement of the protagonist's species also exploited for its meat) and *Deadlight* (Tequila Works 2012) (zombie apocalypse with the death of the avatar in one of the ending). All these games feature a very hostile environment where the protagonist feels inadequate. One eloquent example happens in the first seconds of gameplay of *Another World* (Chahi 1991): if the player does not immediately swim to the surface, she dies and restarts the sequence.

> This is what games do: they promise us that we can repair a personal inadequacy — an inadequacy that they produce in us in the first place. (Juul 2013, 7)

CP games take place in a dystopian setting which, in *Inside*, is terminated in a metaleptic manner. The player is embodying an intruder in a hostile space, a deviant in an oppressive world. A common goal for the player in those spaces is to escape them. To succeed as a player, or to finish the game, is to exit the simulation. The second ending of *Inside*, where the boy terminates the mind control system and thus himself, makes it a peculiar case of metalepsis. This situation when "an event within the fictional world affects the behavior of the system" (Ryan 2004, 459), happens similarly in the game *Deadline* (Infocom 1982) as analysed by Aarseth (1997, 117) and Ryan (2004, 459). In *Deadline*, the avatar protagonist reads a novelization of the game he is in that pushes him to kill himself and closes the program.

The subversive counterpower given to the player in *Inside* is the one of a parasite (Bailey 2018). The same technology that is used by the oppressive authority to transform people into zombie-like creatures ready to be mind-controlled is the main tool for the player's progression and, like a parasite, the avatar dies when the system he is part of dies.

Meaningful Death

According to Klevjer, one crucial defining element for the avatar is that it "can 'die', thereby erasing or ejecting the player's fictional presence from the environment" (2022, 100).

Death is an important part of *Inside*'s narrative. On one hand, as in CP games in general, the protagonist's fragility and the world's hostility make it virtually impossible to not 'die and retry' some sequences. These failure types of deaths are sanctioned in a specific way in CPs, featuring multiple animations to fit the way the avatars die in the game. Taking the opposite approach to arcade action games, the pace of the game is slowed by these animations and drives the player to a morbid curiosity to see them all, making death a desirable but also meaningful experience. Only one death remains part of the normal play through the game. During a scene in which the avatar tries to escape from an underwater monster, if the player gets caught before a certain point, it will result in a traditional failure type of death. However, past this point, the player will

get caught by the monster, at first thinking she failed, but the character mysteriously revives at the bottom of the flooded facility. Taking a closer look at this scene reveals that the protagonist gets his body (whereas he usually plugs his head in it) connected and disconnected to a mind control system device during his fall in the water (Figure 7). This can be interpreted as a liberation of the character's body from the control system, making it not follow the usual game's rules. It also reinforces the character's autonomy, as the avatar's body does not react to death consistently, reducing our agency in the avatar's death.

Figure 7: The boy's body plugged into a mind control device with the underwater monster

Arnold (2018) pointed out that the background music not stopping after a death distances the avatar from the player, "but also that the character may in fact see the player as a malevolent controlling force from which they wish to be freed" (207).

On the other hand, the two endings of the game result in the definitive death of the avatar. The game's full closure is achieved only if the player sees the second ending, where the avatar unplugs the mind control machine and dies. However, the game does not dismiss the importance of the nonhuman beings of its world. In the first ending, the player takes control of the 'huddle', a monstrous amalgam of bodies at the core of the scientific experiments. The player can use her new powerful avatar to escape from the scientific facility. This temporary avatar is the most powerful vicarious body in the game, resists all kinds of hazards and is even able to kill what seems to be the leader of the facility (Figure 8). After the cathartic escape, the huddle reaches the beach at the far right of the game's world and dies there after a last breath.

This is arguably a way to use video game-specific narrative devices to make the avatar's death the most meaningful. The huddle's death is stronger because of the new embodiment and the cathartic destruction of the facility. The boy's death is strong and meaningful because it means the end of the whole system. Having a meaningful death is useful for an empathic experience with the avatar as it makes its life 'grievable', a concept coined by Butler in 2004 and used by Boller and Vogues to suggest a way of strengthening posthuman empathy (2019).

Figure 8: The huddle charging into the CEO[3] of the scientific facility

[3] The name is found in the gamefiles.

Conclusion

By integrating topics of non-human, agency and control, Playdead designed a complex and meaningful 'engine of experience'[4] with *Inside*. Using mechanical, narrative and psychological devices, the players are engaged in questioning their usual relationship with the avatar, developing a critical sense for avatar-based video games or at least for platformers.

[4] The expression was coined by Tynan Sylvester in *Designing games: a guide to engineering experiences* (2013).

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