

“I’m overburdened!” An Empirical Study of the Player, the Avatar, and the Gameworld

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the first results of an empirical study of how players interpret the role of the player and the relationship between the player and playable figures in game-worlds. In the following, we will see examples of four genres that situate the player in different positions with respect to the gameworld. *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars* illustrates a game where the player does not have a playable figure in the gameworld, while *Crysis* exemplifies a game where player and playable figure viewpoints merge into one entity. *Diablo 2* represents a game with a developing figure, and *The Sims 2* demonstrates a hybrid combination of named, developing figures controlled by the player from a god perspective. The study shows that players tend to accept all features that aid them in understanding how to play the game, and that it does not matter whether features have a stylistic or naturalistic relationship to the gameworld. Regarding the relationship between player and playable figure, the respondents do not see the dual position of the player situated in the physical world while having the power to act within the gameworld as a paradox, but a necessary way of communication in games.

Author Keywords

gameworld, game system, player, avatar, empirical studies

INTRODUCTION

Does the avatar know that it is being controlled? Can the avatar see the health metre? Who are the military units talking to?

These are not the kind of questions players tend to ask themselves when playing computer games, but in a research project studying the relationship between the game system and the gameworld, they can be keys for unlocking how players view the player role in computer games, and how they interpret system information when playing. The questions appear strange, and for some players they may seem irrelevant since games are not realistic representations of the world. Instead they are understood as subsets of the real world, delimited by a conceptual and elastic boundary that defines what should be understood as part of the game and not [10, 11, 17]. Posing questions like those above, the

interviewer raises awareness of that boundary and asks players to consider the idea that they are both inside and outside that boundary at the same time; a real world individual with the power to reach into the gameworld and take actions relevant for its progression. Revealing this duality may disturb the illusion of the game as an isolated universe, but it also enables us to study one of the unique aesthetic techniques of computer games, and how these work in connecting the worlds of the player and the game. This paper presents the first results of a study doing exactly this, with focus on *how the respondents interpret the role of the player and the relationship between the player and controllable figures in gameworlds*. In the following, we will see examples of four genres that situate the player in different positions with respect to the gameworld. *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars* [6] illustrates a game where the player does not have a controllable figure in the gameworld, while *Crysis* [5] exemplifies a game where player and controllable figure viewpoints merge into one entity. *Diablo 2* [3] represents a game with a developing figure, and *The Sims 2* [15] demonstrates a hybrid combination of named, developing figures controlled by the player from a god perspective. The study shows that players tend to accept all features that aid them in understanding how to play the game, and that it does not matter whether features have a stylistic or naturalistic relationship to the gameworld. Regarding the relationship between player and controllable figure, the respondents do not see the dual position of the player situated in the physical world while having the power to act within the gameworld as a paradox, but a necessary way of communication in games.

METHODOLOGY

The study was based on qualitative methods, and the data was collected through semi-structured research interviews between November-December 2008. Seventeen individual interviews were carried out, as well as one group interview of five respondents. The group interview worked as a pilot study in which questions were tested out. Based on the response, the questions were modified and used as points of departure for the individual interviews. The main challenge was to make abstract questions about the player’s double

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role and the relationship between system information and gameworld more specific. However, screenshots were used as centre of attention in the group interview, and the individual interviews focused on gameplay videos captured from the respondents' own playing. This allowed the questions to be associated with specific examples that illustrate system information, player positioning, and the gameworld. In addition to allowing the respondents to talk about specific features, these questions were also meant to provoke discussion, which they successfully did.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In terms of theoretical approaches, the research project is interdisciplinary by taking into account perspectives such as Goffman's *frame analysis* [9], Bateson's concept *metacommunication* [2], narrative theory's separation between *diegetic* and *nondiegetic* spaces [4, 7] and gamestudies' ontological studies of games and what separates them from the rest of the world [10, 11, 17]. Since this paper concentrates on the role of the player, I will take a more narrow perspective in this discussion. As a point of departure for the evaluation of the empirical data and describing players' interpretations of the player role in these games, I will use Rune Klevjer's definition of what an *avatar* is as opposed to related concepts such as *character* and *tool* [12], in addition to Jonas Linderoth's analysis of how players may see controllable figures as *roles*, *tools* or *props* [14].

According to dictionary definitions, *avatar* originally referred to the earthly incarnation of a god in Hinduism, and is today commonly used as a term for graphical image or portrait representing an individual on the Internet and in virtual environments.ⁱ *Avatar* has also become a term for the body that players control in computer games, and which they commonly become associated with. In his PhD dissertation, Klevjer studies the avatar in single-player computer games, and discusses avatar as the vicarious embodiment of the player in the gameworld [12]. In Klevjer's view, there is a prosthetic relationship between player and avatar in which the avatar should be understood as "an instrument or mechanism" that mediates agency and provides a body for the player in the gameworld [12]. In order to count as an avatar, the body must live and exist in the gameworld in the sense that it may affect the gameworld and be affected by it; it must be a functional extension of the player into that gameworld both emotionally and by allowing the player direct action into it; and there must be a real-time and continuous relationship between the player and avatar. Also, avatar is not to be confused by the general term *character*, which applies equally to all kinds of fiction, by being defined as an independent subject with personality, intentions and motivations [12]. Likewise, the avatar should not be reduced to a cursor. Even though the mouse cursor in many games may be the player's primary access point to the game, a cursor is typically positioned as interface overlay and not as a feature that belongs to the gameworld and may be affected by it [12].

Jonas Linderoth has a more general view of what an avatar is, and points out that the term often labels controllable game characters, and that the relationship between player and avatar tends to be described as one of identification [14]. Linderoth uses Goffman's frame theory and argues that this identification may vacillate between three different kinds, depending on how the player frames the game situation. The avatar may become a *role* for social interaction; as an extension of player agency it may become a *tool* for handling the game states; and it may become a *prop* for the presentation of self in the social arena surrounding the game. In the following analysis, I will use *controllable figure* as a general term describing the entities controlled by the player in all games – including avatars, player characters, and units, while Klevjer and Linderoth's terms will be used critically when describing specific interpretations of the relationship between player and controllable figure.

THE PLAYER ROLE IN CRYYSIS

The players take on the role as Nomad, a special forces soldier, of which they have control of all actions and movements. Considering the games of the empirical study and the players' interpretation of their roles in them, it seems that only *Crysis* is completely aligned with Klevjer's definition of avatar. According to Klevjer, in FPSs like *Crysis* "the navigable point of view is controlled directly, and the visible objective avatar is mounted onto the frame of vision as a pair of hands or a weapon" [12]. In this sense, there is a direct alignment of the avatar with the screen that gives the player the impression that the screen is the vision of the avatar, and that screen movement represents head movement. Peter explains the player/avatar alignment thus:

[614]Peter: [...] Here you're supposed to be the character. That's why it's [called] a first-person shooter. [...] You're supposed to get yourself involved in the game.

[639]Peter: Well... the point where you end, basically, the point where you touch the keyboard and mouse, that's where the rifle starts, right. So it's you. [...] It's the closest you get to virtual reality these days.

With a description very similar to Klevjer's, Peter states that the immediate connection between the player's keyboard and the avatar's weapon provides a strong sense of perceptual convergence between the player and the avatar. Seeing the gameworld through the eyes of the avatar creates the feeling that the player becomes the avatar when playing the game, an impression that Peter believes is emphasized through the name of the genre. This sense of unity and integration of the player into the gameworld makes Peter compare the genre to virtual reality, an interpretation that is likely connected to the perceptual closeness and the mode of navigation in the virtual environment. Eric describes navigation in *Crysis* as having close resemblance to the experience of moving around in the real world:

[8]Eric: *I like moving through terrain, basically, where I am, in a sense... [...] Well, the fact that I'm looking through the eyes of the one I control means that the approach is somewhat closer to the ground in relation to what is going on and the enemies you're killing and.... Well, it becomes like... you have to treat these games like real life in a sense, because... Take an office space or a place you need to traverse, or a forest or whatever.... It's easier to relate [when] you can compare it to something real. [...]*

Eric makes a connection between the mode of navigation and the player perspective, and states that the feeling of being part of the virtual world depends on the fact that the player experiences the environment through the eyes of the avatar. Playing an FPS therefore does not provide the impression of being a game where players take on the role as a different person. Instead player and avatar merge into one entity due to the close perceptual connection. For Eric, navigation in the gameworld feels as if he were running through that landscape himself, and in this respect, the players themselves become subject to the events of game-play.

The very close relationship that is established between player and avatar in *Crysis* should be described as that of a fictive character or a *role* in Linderoth's terminology. But even though the players steps into the life of a named soldier, they do not see Nomad as a predefined individual separate from the player. At a point early in *Crysis*, the troop leader is talking to the avatar via wireless communication, and the avatar verbally answers to his command. Eric explains that he finds the sudden autonomy of the avatar disturbing:

[37]Eric: *[...] I'm used to this Half-Life approach to it, where you don't talk at all. You kind of fill the role yourself. So I was actually puzzled when I heard that voice, that they chose that kind of double-sound, in a way. Or, I should have realized that it had to be me though, when it was [presented] this way. But I didn't recognize it. But I do accept it. Alright, this is the way it's supposed to be, in a sense. But it took me some time. I had to consider it a little. [...]*

From Eric's experience, traditional FPSs align the avatar with the player in a consistent way, and making the avatar break from this consistency by allowing it to talk without the player initiating it is a serious deviation from this. A reason why this is in particular disturbing, may be that the avatar gives the impression of suddenly turning from being completely controlled by the player into being an individual and autonomous being with a will of his own [13]. In this way, *role* in this situation is not a fictional role as described by Linderoth, but the Goffmanian role that we take on in social situations [8]. The player becomes a generic soldier

that behaves in the way expected by soldier. His personality as a fictional character, however, is irrelevant.

A method *Crysis* uses for integrating the player perceptually into the gameworld is through a heads-up display (HUD). Although conforming to the overlay interface standards of most games, the HUD of *Crysis* is explained as part of the gameworld as attached to the helmet of Nomad's advanced "nanosuit" that monitors all vital information. In this way, the overlay interface is removed by making it an actual feature of the game universe. However, not all respondents agree that the HUD is part of the nanosuit, but they still accept it because this kind of interface has become a convention in FPS. When asked what they feel about it, two of the group respondents have a clear answer:

[671]Neil: *It's system information. But it's very easy to ignore it.*

[672]Peter: *Yes, it represents information that you would have received by other means. [...]*

In Neil's view, the HUD must be understood as communication from the game system to the player, which he claims is easily ignored. He does not explain why, but I believe part of the answer is found in Peter's statement. The HUD provides important information that a person in the real world would have been able to pick up by other means than through a computer interface. In the real world, we perceive the world around us through our sensory organs, but when playing games we are left with our visual and auditory organs. As long as the HUD provides information that are not well represented by sounds or image alone, we seem to accept overlays and information that is alien to the game environment. In this respect, the HUD is accepted because of its functional properties related to the game system. However, since the interface represents information that one would have received by other means in a real world situation, Peter suggests that the HUD is an *abstraction* of something that indeed may be interpreted as real in the universe of the game. Abstractions are important in players' acceptance of game system features in the gameworld, and help players see them as connected instead of alien to the gameworld.

THE PLAYER ROLE IN *DIABLO 2*

When playing *Diablo 2*, the player selects a figure from seven generic classes and gives it a name. The player controls the figure by using the mouse cursor to select where it should move. The relationship between player and figure is an indirect and non-tangible relationship in which the player is responsible for every action. Klevjer admits, however, that the speed of the interaction and the fact that the player is not restricted to a simple point-and-click interaction with the mouse but may keep the button pressed down to pull the figure around in a fluent motion, provides the player with a more tangible feeling and may be seen as an "avatarial bypass" [12]. Also, as a hack-and-slash roleplaying game, *Diablo 2* is level-based, and the figure develops

by collecting experience points and gaining new abilities. So even though the figure strictly speaking is no avatar in Klevjer's definition of the concept, it may be interpreted as an avatar in terms of functionality and how the player experiences the relationship and the character development. However, the respondents are sympathetic to Klevjer's original definition of avatar, and many object strongly to the figure as having any kind of avatarhood in *Diablo 2*. The relationship between player and figure is described as distant and without involvement, and two respondents compare playing *Diablo 2* to puppet theatreⁱⁱ. Isabel describes:

[87] *Isabel: It's more like, okay, you have puppet theatre, where the hand is the strings, and [the figure] is the puppet.*

Her description does not only cover the relationship between player and figure, but also how the mouse cursor work in relation to the two. Represented as a gloved hand in *Diablo 2*, the cursor becomes the strings attached to the puppet, which implies an indirect relationship between player and figure compared to the direct player-avatar relationship of *Crysis*. This might, however, be more of an analytical perspective of the relationship between the two than it is a reflection of the actual experience. On the other hand, the strong objection by several respondents towards any direct relationship suggests that there is little sense of a continuous relationship between player and figure. In this sense, the controllable figure of *Diablo 2* is interpreted as what Linderoth calls a *tool*: an extension of player agency in handling the game state.

When comparing *Diablo 2* to other games, the group interview respondents go as far as claiming that the player role compares equally well to strategy games as it does to FPSsⁱⁱⁱ. Even though there is one named figure that develops individual traits, that figure does not create the same sense of intimacy to the game as *Crysis*' avatar does. Steve explains:

[107] *Steve: [...] Well, you have the mouse-clicking and stuff. And then it's very much like you play an RTS, an impersonal game where you instruct stuff. But with more personal games, it's [...] ASDW, you're in control, you get a better [sense of] direct control of the person. And it's like you associate that kind of control with a personal involvement to the character. [...] Maybe the feeling from RTS taints Diablo since it's controlled in the same manner where you're clicking the mouse around and stuff. [...]*

Like Klevjer suggested, it seems as though the use of mouse control adds an extra layer between player and figure, and that controlling a cursor in order to control a figure not only removes the direct control of the figure, but also the sense of tangibility. This is emphasized by Steve's reference to the traditional keyboard controls of FPSs that he believes have a closer relationship to the represented actions, possi-

bly because they are the directional equivalents of real world actions. The comparison to RTS, however, is related to the indirect control system of the game in which the player uses the mouse to control the figure, and suggests that the figure in *Diablo 2* is little more than a military unit being controlled. Moreover, positioning the mouse cursor as the main access point in the game implies a closer relationship between player and cursor than between player and figure. The group discusses:

[150] *Peter: It's much easier to identify... identify with the cursor here. Since that's actually what you control.*

[151] *Fred: Well, the cursor [...] interacts with the world and... the avatar makes constraints to what the cursor can do, right.*

[154] *Steve: But the world doesn't respond to the cursor, so it's not part of the world in that respect.*

[156] *Neil: You are the hand, but they don't perceive it.*

While Peter puts emphasis on the idea that the element that is directly controlled should be interpreted as the player's closest point of association in a computer game, Steve notices that the cursor does not fulfill Klevjer's definition of an avatar since the gameworld does not respond to it and it therefore cannot be said to be part of that universe. Neil follows up on this by pointing out that nobody in the gameworld perceives the cursor, and that the player therefore has no direct point of reference within the gameworld. Fred refers to the layered control system and points out that the cursor is dependent on the figure for interacting with the gameworld, and that all player actions therefore are one step removed from the gameworld. In this sense, the group concludes that the player's interaction with the figure will always be indirect and based on the player's direct contact with the cursor.

Another feature that seems to alienate the player from the figure of *Diablo 2* is connected to the use of voices in the game. As John tries to pick up loot from the ground, a female voice is heard saying "I'm overburdened". John evaluates the voice:

[62] *John: She actually says this to the player. Er... and in that case the question is, well, because it is the character's voice [that is] uttering it. But at the same time I don't get the feeling that it's the character who says it. Well, it's like the game narrator's voice provides the player with a hint that, okay, now you have to check the inventory, or now you have to get rid of stuff, because you're carrying a lot of stuff that you don't have room for.*

Even though the verbal message appears to be produced by his female character, John regards it more reasonable to assign the voice to the game system since it provides functional information to the player about inventory space. The

interpretation seems to be produced by the fact that the controllable figure addresses the player situated *outside* the gameworld, and puts further emphasis on the distance between player and figure. John's view also suggests that the use of a female voiceover using the first person personal pronoun is an aesthetic feature that integrates system information into the mood of the gameworld.

THE PLAYER ROLE IN COMMAND AND CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

In *Trigger Happy*, Steven Poole describes real-time strategy games as a genre controlled from a god-like perspective "single-handedly overseeing all military operations" [16], and in which the player commands a number of units by using the mouse to decide their movements. While players are in command from a top-down perspective, the units are semi-autonomous in that once being given a command, they will carry it out until dead or given a new order. There is no continuous, real-time, emotional relationship between player and units, so Klevjer's definition of avatar does not apply. Situated in an external position as an overseer of operations, Carl explains that the player has an ambiguous relationship to the gameworld:

[10]Carl: You're given the role as a kind of commander, so you feel that you're some place in that world, at the same time as you get a... superior overview, you see the world in a way that maybe nobody actually does. But it is very much a divided position, you are very clearly... From the perspective of the game you're addressed as one who is in the world at the same time as you maybe see it in a different way than what is shown here...

The players are given the role of a commander placed in an impossible position distant from the gameworld, at the same time as they are given the feeling of being present to that gameworld. This dual position has no equivalent in the real world, but Carl believes the sense of ambiguity is connected to the fact that the game constantly addresses the players even though they have no avatar or representation in the gameworld. Stuart elaborates that the players are given an *implicit* position in the gameworld [2]:

[30]Stuart: [...] Well, it sounds very strange, but I am me – Stuart – I'm the commander here. Even though I'm not inside a computer game, it's I who move all these people around and make sure all things... So... fictionally in this world I'm a fictional commander, quite simply. But... they don't refer to me as an individual person [...], but to me controlling the mouse.

Without having a figure in the gameworld, the players are still placed in the role of a commander. This implicit position is not represented through an individual in the game, but through an anonymous commander role that can be filled by anyone. Stuart points this out by explaining that it is he that is the commander. In this sense, the players of *CC3:TW* takes on what Linderoth calls a *role* in the game,

even though we should be careful to point out that it is not the role of a fictional individual, but the Goffmanian social situation role of a commander. The player is not expected to play out the commander's personality and moods, but is expected to behave professionally and strategically as a commander. In describing this role, the group states that there is a *character*, but no *avatar* in *CC3:TW*.

[912]Steve: Yes, you do have a character, but you don't have an avatar.

[913]Neil: Yes, you don't have an avatar. But you have a character. Right.

[915]Fred: No, do you really have a character, aren't you [supposed to be] you? When they speak to you...

[916]Steve: You're the commander – the commander is obviously a person they address. So if you play.... If you for instance play the Russians, they will have a Russian commander. That's who you are.

Without specifying what an *avatar* or a *character* is, Steve and Neil agree on this idea. The lack of specification makes Fred question the concept of character, and in supporting Stuart's view that the player is himself and not a set individual, he seems to understand the word *character* as equivalent to Goffman's *role*. This is emphasized by the following discussion about what kind of role the player is given and how it is situated within the game universe. Steve explains that there is some loosely defined character or stereotype that the player takes on the role of. By positioning the player in this way, the genre puts emphasis on full integration of the players into the gameworld by making them invisible.

Concerning the relationship between player and units in *CC3:TW*, respondents clearly state that the units are not any form of representation of themselves in the gameworld. Instead they are regarded not as individuals, but as expendable resources:

[16]Eric: [...] In strategy games like this, you are as I said before situated on the outside. If any of these individual units die, it's kind of... of no consequence to you, except that if you lose them all, you're game over, but you can try again. [...] It's more of a tactical approach to the game. [...] You watch from the top down and you can control them all there. [...] Well, you're not able to get a personal relationship to these units, except in strategy games where there maybe is some kind of superunit.

[6]Stuart: [...] In general, there are some units that you use as cannon fodder, and it's.... going a little against ethics, but... They provide responses and do exactly what I say, so they are in a sense

conscious towards my presence, but they're not exactly very perceptive.

The units' relationship to the player is distant; even though they respond to player commands, they are not believed to realize that they are being controlled by an external being. As pawns of strategy, they are a means to an end; a resource to be spent in the pursuit of winning the game. Eric and Stuart claim that the player do not form an emotional bond to the units, since losing one is of little consequence to the game. According to Eric, the player's tactical perspective when playing RTS suggests that the sense of involvement is more connected to mastering the rule system and mechanics of the game more than following some kind of fictional narrative. In this sense they share characteristics with Linderoth's *tools* by being equipment used for a purpose.

THE PLAYER ROLE IN THE SIMS 2

Like *CC3:TW*, *Sims 2* is a game in which there is no avatar, and the player commands one or more figures from a top-down perspective. However, the "units" of *Sims 2* are even more autonomous than those of *CC3:TW* by having clear intentions that they will pursue even without the player's help. The game may be seen as a dollhouse simulator, in which every family member has an individual name and personality and is clearly positioned in the game as individuals. The player controls one "sim" at a time, but may switch between individuals in a household at will. It is not only the autonomy of units that make *Sims 2* and *CC3:TW* different. The top-down perspective also situates the player in different positions in the two games. The group respondents each provide a different description:

[1158]Fred: *It's a little like, when you play with Barbie dolls. Where is the player? Where is the person playing [with the toy]?*

[1159]Peter: *Well, it's... well, The Sims is the ultimate... god sim where you really can express your extreme desire for power.*

[1174]Neil: *You're the little voice in their heads, and their architect.*

[1175]Steve: *And their god.*

[1276]Neil: *And their gardener.*

[1233]Neil: *Honestly, The Sims.... Sims is the little sandbox of the aliens.*

[1234]Oliver: *I don't know, since I don't play a sim. I play their little household god, so...*

Described as a house god and a child playing with dolls, the player becomes an outsider that intrudes into the life of the sims. The player is not a commander in charge of military units, but an omnipotent god with the power to intervene whenever he considers the actions of his creations unfit. This is emphasised by Peter's description of the player's role as an expression of "extreme desire for power". How-

ever, references to doll play and a sandbox also emphasizes the toylike features of the game, which are not comparable with the strict gameness of *CC3:TW*. The godlike perspective and the toylike features align *Sims 2* fits into what Klevjer calls a *microworld* or a *miniature world*. Adopted from Seymour Papert and Chaim Gingold, the term describes a "hybrid between a world and a toy", and an autonomous system with independent agency, and the player approaches it as a totality from a macroscopic perspective [12].

Neil views the toylike aspects from a different perspective when he describes the player role in creative terms such as architect and gardener, but these words also suggest the player as a *servant* of the sims; someone who is there to assist them in their many tasks. Carl elaborates:

[42]Carl: [...] *I see it as a kind of nudging, that you can sit there... poking them, and yes, you decide to a certain degree, but you're thinking that, yes but this is what he wants, so there is a kind of connection. But at the same time they have their own free will [...]. So it becomes like... in a way you control what they are doing. Yeah, they need... help.*

Carl describes a power balance between player and sims that is not found in *CC3:TW*: while the player is in control, his manipulations are tightly connected to the sims' wants and needs. The autonomous sims are driven by sudden impulses and immediate needs, and the player must coordinate the sims' desires with their career advancement and social progression. While they are capable of monitoring their immediate needs, they do not always make rational decisions:

[86]Faye: [...] *They have like, not always very rational ways of thinking. So I've learned to always pay the bills immediately, because often they are forgotten, and suddenly someone appears to confiscate your TV or piano.*

Faye observes that there are certain tasks the sims often will avoid doing, and these are tasks that have no immediate consequence for them. Their actions related to physical needs are acted upon, but less urgent tasks, such as paying the bills, are often ignored. While the units of *CC3:TW* only respond to player commands, the sims will turn towards the camera with a loud protest if they are given an order that goes against their needs. When this is pointed out for Mary, she is surprised:

[66]Mary: *Yes, they do? They look into the camera? [...] But in that case it's quite clear that I control and intervene in their lives. But, you know what, I've actually not reflected on it much. I kind of go, "no, you have to behave", like, "now do that". [...]*

In this situation, the distance between player and sims become very obvious, and it is suddenly very clear for Mary

that the player is an intruder into the life of the sims. However, Mary finds the idea that the sim appears conscious about the player's presence disturbing, and explains that she normally does not pay attention to that, but steps into the role of their master by demanding respect and proper behaviour from them.

Taking on the god perspective, the player role in *Sims 2* is that of a Goffmanian role, but the sims themselves are not easily described in Linderoth's terminology. However, one of the respondents points out that at times, the player may take on a closer relationship with the sims that reminds of taking on the role of a fictional character. Amy explains:

[58] Amy: [...] Well, if I decide I'm going to play a story or something, I tend to think that there's one character that is important in a sense, and I will be that one most of the time. In that case the others are a little more, uhm, they make things happen [...] to the one I'm most concerned about.

When one sims is more important, the remaining sims become statists in the drama. However, due to the top-down perspective it is hard to interpret this alternative view as one where the sim becomes an avatar in Klevjer's sense. Instead, this becomes just another, more narrative oriented way to understand the dollhouse metaphor.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Through the short analyses of the empirical data presented in this paper, we see that there are huge variations between games regarding how the relationship between player and controllable figures are presented and interpreted. The great differences strongly suggest that there is need to critically evaluate and expand the terminology we use today when talking about the controllable figures of computer games. Of the four games of this study, only one game creates a sense of becoming the figure: Due to the first-person perspective of *Crysis*, the players describe that they merge with the figure in the sense of sharing and taking over its perceptual properties. Also, having a visible controllable figure on screen does not seem to create a sense of identification with it: in *Diablo 2*, the point-and-click interface emphasizes distance between player and figure, and the indirect control mechanisms provide a lack of tangibility and immediacy in the gameworld.

Interestingly enough, the respondents report that *CC3:TW* shares important features with both of the games above. *Diablo 2* and *CC3:TW* both provide the player with a point-and-click control scheme in which the player gets an indirect relation to actions and events in the gameworld, and this leads some respondents to claim that the relationship between player and figure in *Diablo 2* has more in common with the player-unit relationship of *CC3:TW* than it has with the player-avatar relationship of *Crysis*. Comparing *CC3:TW* to *Crysis*, however, we observe that both games make the controllable figure invisible for the player. According to most respondents, the player role in *CC3:TW* is

to be an invisible commander, only *implied* [2] by the units responding to his/her orders. In this sense, the games integrate the players into game by associating them with the graphical user interface (GUI). In *Crysis*, the HUD is part of the player's helmet, and in *CC3:TW*, the GUI is part of the computer system that the commander uses for monitoring the battlefield. This means that both games integrate the player into the gameworld by means of the user interface. Another common ground for *Crysis* and *CC3:TW* is that the role that the player takes on contains no personality, but is associated with a certain behaviour: the commander in *CC3:TW*, and the super soldier in *Crysis*. However, there is also a crucial difference between the player roles in the two games: while *Crysis* provides the player with direct contact with the gameworld through an avatarial position, *CC3:TW* only allows the players contact with the gameworld through monitoring game action from the outside in, and through non-continuous interaction with the game state.

In *Sims 2*, the player role is most easily compared to that of *CC3:TW* in that the players have an external position from which they control "units". The respondents still describe crucial differences between the two: the autonomy of the controllable figures makes the players into *servants* of the sims, whereas they take on the role as *masters* in the RTS. At the same time, however, the players are intruders that meddle with the lives of the sims. This is connected to the idea of the game as a microworld or a simulator that has the ability to run alone, something which is not the case with the RTS^{iv}.

In all games, the player takes on a *role* [14]. However, this is not to say that they take on the role of a *character*. A character needs characterisation [2] or a degree of personality, but a role is a social function and behaviour associated with it. The difference between the games above with respect to player roles, is whether the role has a direct, one-to-one relationship to the gameworld or not. *Crysis* is interesting in this respect, since there is clearly a fictional character called Nomad in the game and that the player is supposed to act as. At the same time, the players do not take on the personality of Nomad when they play the game; instead they become a generic super soldier in the game through which they have direct contact with the gameworld. In *CC3:TW* and *Sims 2*, however, the relationship is indirect in the sense that the players are not represented in the gameworld, but still have an implied role as supreme being. *Diablo 2* poses an exception in that the respondents describe a more diffuse player role compared to other games. While some identify the player with the controllable character, most respondents express a sense of alienation due to the distant perspective. Looking at the relationship between player and controllable figure from an overarching perspective, we see that how the respondents interpret it is partly based on how the game presents the controllable figure, and partly based on the player's individual playing style. Some players tend to focus more on the narrative aspects of the

games, and their interpretation of the controllable characters become more focused around intentions and personality [2].

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ⁱ Avatar. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary1.classic.reference.com/browse/avatar> (accessed: May 18, 2009).

ⁱⁱ Isabel, statement 87, individual interview Dec 1, 08; Peter, statements 20, 49, group interview Nov 11, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom, statement 8, individual interview Dec 3, 08; Sam, statement 14, individual interview, Dec 4, 2008.

^{iv} Carl, statement 22, individual interview, Nov 28, 2008.