Felix Schröter and Jan-Noël Thon

Video Game Characters

Theory and Analysis

This essay develops a method for the analysis of video game characters based on a theoretical understanding of their medium-specific representation and the mental processes involved in their intersubjective construction by video game players. We propose to distinguish, first, between narration, simulation, and communication as three modes of representation particularly salient for contemporary video games and the characters they represent, second, between narrative, ludic, and social experience as three ways in which players perceive video game characters and their representations, and, third, between three dimensions of video game characters as 'intersubjective constructs', which usually are to be analyzed not only as fictional beings with certain diegetic properties but also as game pieces with certain ludic properties and, in those cases in which they function as avatars in the social space of a multiplayer game, as representations of other players. Having established these basic distinctions, we proceed to analyze their realization and interrelation by reference to the character of Martin Walker from the third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), the highly customizable player-controlled characters from the role-playing game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011), and the complex multidimensional characters in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (BioWare 2011-2014).

1. Introduction

Video game characters have come a long way. As early as 1975, the otherwise graphically sparse arcade game *Gunfight* (Taito 1975) drew on what is perhaps film history's most iconic genre setting to stage its simple move-and-shoot gameplay as a classic Western shoot-out, featuring two detailed character 'sprites' as (otherwise nondescript) gun fighters. Five years later, the arcade game *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980) did not only introduce one of the medium's first transmedially represented characters (with the iconic yellow disc inspiring a hit song and appearing in TV cartoons) but also neatly established all of its antagonistic ghost characters as fictional beings with an 'inner life' reflected by their coded behavior in the maze. While later games such as *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981), *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996), or *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) – with their respective protagonists Mario, Lara Croft, and Gordon Freeman – had an equally strong impact on popular culture, academic interest in the ways in which video games represent characters did not stir until the late 1990s.

Since then, the interdisciplinary field of game studies has flourished not only in the humanities but also in the social sciences (see e.g. Reinecke / Klein 2014, Wimmer / Schmidt 2014). At the same time, video games have become

more and more technologically sophisticated, economically successful, and artistically ambitious, leading to *Heavy Rain*'s (Quantic Dream 2010) representation of highly believable protagonists, *L.A. Noire*'s (Team Bondi 2011) superior facial animation system, or *The Last of Us*' (Naughty Dog 2013) seamless integration of gameplay and narrative. However, despite this abundance of 'interesting' and 'complex' representations of characters and despite the ever-growing body of interdisciplinary research on video games, a medium-specific theory of video game characters is still in its infancy. One reason for this lacuna may be the temptation to take theoretical as well as analytical 'shortcuts' suggested by the respective disciplinary context and research objective.

Within media studies, for example, there is a tendency to treat video game characters like 'interactive film characters' focusing the analysis on the (audio)visual surface of their representation, their narrative functions and, at best, character-related game mechanics. Other disciplines such as media psychology or communication studies also address video game characters, yet they are often treated as mere 'independent variables' in these contexts, with empirical studies focusing less on video game characters as such but rather on, say, the feeling of social presence in the game world, parasocial interaction, or players' emotional responses to video games in general. Somewhat surprisingly, though, even among the more interdisciplinary contributions to the field of game studies there have been only very few attempts to systematically think about the analysis of video game characters, let alone to offer a comprehensive theory of the latter.

Against this background, the present essay aims to develop a method for the analysis of video game characters based on a theoretical understanding of their medium-specific representation and the mental processes involved in their intersubjective construction by video game players. Following a survey of previous research that locates our approach within transmedial narratology and game studies, we propose to distinguish, first, between three modes of representation particularly salient for contemporary video games, second, between three ways of experiencing video game characters and, third, between three 'ontological' dimensions within which these characters should be analyzed. Having established these basic distinctions, we proceed to analyze their realization and interrelation by reference to characters from the third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), the role-playing game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011), and the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (BioWare 2011-2014), emphasizing the similarities as well as the differences between these games' representational strategies.

2. Previous Research on Characters across Media

There is still some discussion within contemporary narratology regarding the questions what a narrative representation is and which kinds of representation can or should be described as 'having narrativity' (see e.g. the recent survey in Thon 2014b), but it nevertheless seems fairly uncontroversial to say that prototypical narrative representations represent worlds that are situated in time and space and populated with characters (see e.g. Ryan 2006). Hence, one would expect narratology to have paid equal attention to the space, time, and characters of those 'storyworlds'.[1] This does, however, not appear to be the case, since it is still true that "many have written little and few have written much on characters" (Eder 2008, 40),[2] and at least some of the latter cannot happily be characterized as narratologists (see e.g. Eder 2008). Hence, we would like to begin the present essay by providing a somewhat broader survey of contributions to a theory of character(s) that does not limit itself to strictly narratological approaches.

While fictional characters have been a core aspect of *prescriptive* poetics of drama since ancient Greece (e.g. Aristotle 1982, Horace 1972) and became an important subject of literary criticism in the 17th and 18th century (e.g. Gottsched 1972), *descriptive* theories of character first appeared toward the end of the 18th century in the form of (more often than not atheoretical and unsystematic) 'character studies' (see Weimar 1989, 350ff.).[3] Only in the 20th century did literary as well as theater and film scholars such as Harvey (1965), Pfister (1977), or Tomasi (1988) start to develop systematical accounts of descriptive character theory. This did, however, not lead to the demise of normative poetics and how-to manuals of character conception, which are today as popular as ever, often even drawing on Greek classics like Aristotle or Horace (see e.g. Egri 1946, Isbister 2006, Seger 1990, Sheldon 2004, Vogler 1992).

Despite the fact that prescriptive character theories may also be relevant for a critical analysis of characters across media, though, we will mainly draw on descriptive character theories, which also constitute a rather broad field by now. In the introduction to their recent anthology *Characters in Fictional Worlds*, for example, Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (2010b) identify four dominant paradigms within character theory that differ in emphasis and methodological orientation. These four paradigms are defined by (1) hermeneutic approaches (such as Dyer 1986, Frye 1957, Price 1983), (2) psychoanalytic approaches (such as Creed 1993, Mulvey 1989, Silverman 1992), (3) structuralist and semiotic approaches (such as Barthes 1970, Greimas 1966, Pfister 1977), and (4) cognitive theories (such as Eder 2008, Schneider 2000, Smith 1995). Since we cannot offer in-depth discussions of all four paradigms, though, we will focus instead on the structuralist and cognitive approaches which also provide the theoretical starting point for our own arguments regarding video game characters.

As Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider note, structuralist-semiotic approaches have tended to consider "characters themselves as sets of signifiers and textual structures" (2010b, 5). Particularly noteworthy proponents of this paradigm include Greimas (1966), whose concept of actants has proved quite influential in early structuralism and beyond, Barthes (1970), who describes characters as a web of 'semes' attached to a proper name, Chatman (1978), who advocates a conception of characters as "a paradigm of traits" (ibid., 126) which only "exist at the story level" (ibid., 125), and Branigan (1984), for whom characters are a mere "surface feature of discourse" (ibid., 12). In contrast, cognitive approaches assume that characters are "representations of imaginary beings in the minds of the audience" (Eder et al. 2010b, 8), a theoretical perspective which has been applied to literary theory as well as film studies, and – albeit to a lesser degree – video game studies. Noteworthy examples would include the cognitive theory of characters in literary texts developed by Schneider (2000), the early study of film characters and their relations to film spectators offered by Smith (1995), or the hybrid between a cognitively-informed theory of video game characters and a how-to-guide for game developers that Lankoski (2010) has recently published.

Moreover, post-structuralist and interdisciplinary approaches have also tried to reconcile the different paradigms: Margolin (1983) made an early pioneering attempt to combine elements of structuralism, cognitivism and the theory of fictional worlds to describe characters as "general semiotic element[s], independent of any particular verbal expression and ontologically different from it" (ibid., 7). Jannidis' (2004) historical narratology considers characters to be mental models created by a hypothetical model reader (see ibid., 185). Eder (2008; 2010) draws on cognitivism and analytical philosophy to describe characters as 'intersubjective communicative constructs' – a conceptualization which we will also use as a starting point for theorizing video game characters. Indeed, while generally defining 'character' as "a text- or media-based figure in a storyworld, usually human or human like" (Jannidis 2009, 14) seems to work well enough in most cases, it might be helpful to say a few more words about Eder's considerably more sophisticated account of characters, their prototypical features, and their ontological status.

According to Eder, characters "are set apart from the other elements of fictional worlds – refrigerators, mountains, trees – by their intentional (object-related) inner life; that is, by having perceptions, thoughts, motives, and emotions" (Eder 2010, 17). Against that background, he proposes to "envisage film characters as *identifiable fictional beings with an inner life* that exist as *communicatively constructed artifacts*" (2010, 18, original emphases). While at least one of us remains skeptical with regard to Eder's insistence that characters necessarily have to be fictional,[4] we follow Eder's argument that they are more appropriately defined via their 'intentionality' than via their 'human-ness'.[5] Moreover, we agree that characters need to be 'identifiable', yet we would not require this kind of identifiability to necessarily lead to the 'individuation' of characters, allowing us to speak of (non-individuated) 'characters' even in those cases

where their most identifiable trait is that they are part of a large group of very similar entities.[6]

Perhaps most importantly, though, Eder's conceptualization of characters as 'communicatively constructed artifacts', as intersubjective constructs "based on normative abstractions about ideal character-imaginations" (Eder 2008, 78),[7] allows for a sophisticated description of characters as opposed to their 'external' medial representation by (usually) narrative media and the 'internal' mental representations that the recipients of these media construct of the characters that are thus represented. While video games tend to complicate the "*representational correspondence*" (Currie 2010, 59, original emphasis) that we have come to expect from other multimodal media, we would still argue that an analysis of video game characters needs to aim at the intersubjectively constructed characters themselves as opposed to their medial or mental representation (see also Thon 2015, as well as Schröter / Thon 2013). Even if one follows Ryan in understanding 'character' as one of the core "narratological concepts that apply across media" (Ryan 2006, 6), though, the specific mediality of video games will make it necessary to modify at least some existing theories and concepts that were developed with other media in mind.[8]

Although many contemporary video games are organized around characters, and despite an ever-growing body of interdisciplinary research on video games, a medium-specific theory of video game characters is still emerging. One of the reasons for this might be the uneasy relation to narratological approaches that the by now rather well-tended field of game studies has cultivated over the past two decades. Even though a broad consensus has emerged that it was less about the question whether video games are narrative than it was about establishing an "independent academic structure" (Aarseth 2001) devoted solely to their study, the so-called 'ludology versus narratology'-debate remains an influential 'founding myth' of the interdisciplinary field of game studies (see also Thon 2014a). As early as 1999, Gonzalo Frasca had proposed to use the term "ludology (from ludus, the Latin word for 'game') to refer to the yet non-existent 'discipline that studies game and play activities'" (1999) and while Frasca explicitly intended "not to replace the narratologic [sic!] approach, but to complement it" (ibid.), not all of the self-identified 'ludologists' shared his position.

Commenting on the supposed inadequacy of looking for narrative elements in video games, Eskelinen remarked that "[l]uckily, outside theory, people are usually excellent at distinguishing between narrative situations and gaming situations: if I throw a ball at you, I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories" (Eskelinen 2004, 36). While obviously inappropriate with regard to both form and content, Eskelinen's simile is an especially (in)famous example of the "vehement and often polemic body of criticism […] directed at studies that see the computer game as one possible form of future storytelling, or simply treat the computer game as a narrative medium at all" (Neitzel 2005, 227). By now, however, the debate seems to be largely passé, with key 'ludologists' such as Aarseth (2012), Juul (2005), and even Eskelinen (2012) himself

acknowledging that (some) video games may be narrative (in some way) and that examining this aspect of the medium may actually be interesting. Moreover, there is also a slow but steady increase in explicitly narratological studies dedicated more or less exclusively to video games' narrativity (see e.g. the book-length studies by Backe 2008, Domsch 2013, Neitzel 2000, as well as, once more, the survey in Thon 2014a).

While narratological approaches to video games usually discuss video game characters in some way, the general observation that narratology as such tends not to focus on characters still holds. Accordingly, characters are usually only discussed in passing in more or less explicitly narratological studies of video games. In her otherwise groundbreaking study of 'played stories', for example, Neitzel (2000) certainly touches on video game characters in general and the kind of player-controlled character that is often called the player's 'avatar' in particular, but she does not go into any detail with regard to what characters are or how they should be analyzed. At first glance, one might assume that this lacuna has to do with the pioneering nature of Neitzel's study, but the neglect of video game characters is no less striking in more recent studies. Backe (2008, 330-349), on the one hand, examines the relation between player and avatar without attempting to develop a theoretical account of video game characters. Domsch (2013, 94-98), on the other hand, offers a sub-chapter on characters, but is likewise not providing anything like a theoretically sound account – which is not particularly surprising if one considers that the sub-chapter spans no more than five pages and does not contain a single reference to previous research.[9]

This is even more surprising as the interdisciplinary field of game studies has recently started paying more attention to video game characters (beyond the narratologically-oriented studies mentioned above). While still only very few monographs address characters exclusively, there is no lack of articles and papers dealing with characters in one way or another, with design manuals or otherwise practitioner-oriented accounts of video game characters being particularly widespread (see e.g. Dille / Zuur Platten 2008, Isbister 2006, Lankoski 2010, Rogers 2010, Sheldon 2004), but more theoretical accounts also increasingly being developed. While some discuss the similarities and medium-specific differences of characters in film and games (see e.g. Beil 2010, Eder / Thon 2012, Schröter 2013a), others explore the 'hybrid nature' of game characters as elements of narrative representation and ludic simulation (see e.g. Klevjer 2006, Schröter / Thon 2013, Sorg 2010) as well as a wide range of other character-related aspects like gender (see e.g. Deuber-Mankowski 2001, Richard 2004), avatar-mediated communication (see e.g. Konjin et al. 2008, van Vugt et al. 2010), or para-social interaction (see e.g. Hartmann et al. 2001, Jin / Park 2009).

This plethora of theoretical perspectives has certainly helped to explore the structures, functions, and effects of video game characters in some detail, yet the respective approaches often lack theoretical clarity with regard to game characters' ontological status as well as issues of their systematic analysis. The

following section will propose a method for the analysis of video game characters based on a theoretical understanding of their medium-specific representation and the mental processes involved in their intersubjective construction by video game players. Our integrative approach will connect a cognitivist paradigm with concepts from transmedial narratology and analytical philosophy to discuss (1) different modes of representation in contemporary video games as well as (2) different ways of experiencing video game characters in order to (3) develop a method of analysis that allows distinguishing between different dimensions of video game characters as well as describing the complex relations between them.

3. Toward a Theory of Video Game Characters

As the previous research survey has already established, contemporary video games commonly represent characters as integral parts of more or less complex storyworlds, yet video games' specific mediality leads to these characters and their representation being rather different from those in more traditional narrative media such as novels, comics, or films. Most crucially, video games' interactivity[10] complicates matters significantly, because it leads to the representation of characters not being predetermined to the same extent as it is in other narrative media. Contemporary video games commonly use a variety of strategies of prototypically narrative representation such as cut-scenes or scripted sequences of events and the events thus presented are generally highly determined before the game is played. Still, the actual gameplay mainly consists of representations of events that are determined while the game is played so that the mode in which what may be called 'ludic events' are represented is, perhaps, more precisely characterized as interactive simulation than as narrative representation (see e.g. Aarseth 2004a, Frasca 2003, Ryan 2006, 181-203, Thon 2007).

The player and her actions are doubtlessly of central importance in most video games, yet the range of possible game actions and the resulting gameplay are not primarily defined by the player but, rather, largely determined by the video game's rules. More specifically, the interactive simulation of the gameplay in contemporary video games can be described as being determined by four kinds of game rules: the game mechanics (which determine the actions within the game spaces), the game goals (which sanction certain outcomes in different ways), the possibilities of interaction that a game affords its players (which determine the relation between player actions and game actions), and the rules of representation that determine how the simulated gameplay is represented (see Thon 2007, which builds on Frasca 2003, Järvinen 2003, Neitzel 2007, among others). Ludic events – i.e., the events of which the gameplay mainly consists – emerge through the rule-governed ludic interaction of the player with the game spaces and are represented during this interaction accord-

ing to certain rules of representation. Even though the game constructs the frame within which the gameplay will be realized, then, ludic events are not determined before the game is played.

As far as 'noninteractive' and, hence, more prototypically narrative elements are concerned, cinematographic sequences remain the most common, with pre-rendered cut-scenes increasingly being replaced by 'in-engine' cut-scenes that allow for a greater degree of customization. However, following Hancock (2002), the term 'cut-scene' can be used to refer to any 'noninteractive' element in a video game that is used to either contribute to the unfolding of the story or, more generally, to flesh out the storyworld in which the game is situated (see also e.g. Klevjer 2002, Sorg / Eichhorn 2005, Thon 2007, and the recent survey in Klevjer 2014). Despite cut-scenes remaining an important strategy of narrative representation for many contemporary video games, though, predetermined events are increasingly represented within the actual game spaces as well, allowing the players to continue to interact with the game while the predetermined event takes place. In other words, the representation of these kinds of scripted events or sequences of events can be just as predetermined as the representations of events or sequences of events in cut-scenes, but the former are represented simultaneously to the ludic events of the actual gameplay (see e.g. Thon 2007).

In this context, it might also be worth noting that many contemporary video games – including *Spec Ops: The Line*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* – employ more or less 'nonlinear' narrative structures. A starting point to describe video games' 'nonlinearity' is provided by Juul's distinction between 'emergent games', in which the gameplay is determined by a comparatively small number of game rules, and 'progressive games', in which the player actualizes a predetermined sequence of events. Despite some minor 'branching', the narrative structure of third-person shooters such as *Spec Ops: The Line* tends to progress in a fairly linear fashion. Yet at least some of the ludic events are evidently 'emergent' in these cases, as well, leading Juul to describe these games as "[p]rogression games with emergent components" in which "the player has to traverse a number of areas each of which can be negotiated in a number of ways" (Juul 2005, 71-72). There are less linear forms of 'progression', though, when the quest structure that is characteristic for role-playing games such as Bethesda's *Skyrim* or BioWare's *The Old Republic* leads to a more decidedly nonlinear arrangement of predetermined narrative representations of events (see also e.g. Aarseth 2004b, Walker Rettberg 2008, Tosca 2003 for further discussion of role-playing games' quest structure).

It should also be stressed, though, that the distinction between rule-governed simulation and predetermined narrative representation as two fairly different modes of representation does not necessarily imply that only prototypically narrative elements such as cut-scenes and scripted sequences of events are contributing to the representation of a video game's storyworld and its characters. In fact, the ways in which characters are represented in contemporary video games cannot and should not be reduced to either interactive simu-

lation or 'predetermined' narration, since, on the one hand, it is constituted precisely by the complex interplay between these two modes of representation and, on the other hand, multiplayer games may also employ a third mode, namely that of communication, which entails all forms of communication and social interaction between the players of a multiplayer game (see e.g. Thon 2006, 2007).

Moreover, these three modes of representation are at least loosely connected to three dimensions of video game characters as intersubjective communicative constructs, which we will discuss in more detail below (see also Schröter / Thon 2013). First, the *mode of narration* is primarily used to represent characters as fictional beings to whom the players can ascribe a specific corporeality, mentality, and sociality. Second, the *mode of simulation* – the interactive gameplay as such – primarily focuses on these characters' function as game pieces, which is connected to specific ludic abilities (such as 'running' or 'shooting') and characteristics (such as 'health' or 'accuracy') as well as to the game goals and the possibilities of interaction that the game provides. Third, the *mode of communication* allows for forms of self-representation that let characters function as representations of the players in the social space of the game.

Against the background of the sometimes rather complex processes of the intersubjective construction of video game characters, however, it appears important to ask not only for the modes of representation that video games employ to represent their characters but also for the ways in which these characters are experienced by video game players. Indeed, we would argue that the ways in which players experience characters as well as their representation is even more closely connected to the three dimensions of characters as intersubjective constructs mentioned above than the modes of representation used for the representation of these characters are. Incidentally, the assumption that players can adopt different receptive stances during video game play stems not only from folk psychology,[11] but is also a wide-spread notion within game studies.

One prominent strand of research revolves around Goffman's (1974) concept of 'frames'[12] and its adaptation for tabletop role-playing games by Fine (1983). Studying players of said games, Fine identifies three frames that serve as schemata of interpretation (or rather 'comprehension') for the games' events and existents (including characters): First, gaming "is grounded in the 'primary framework', the commonsense understandings that people have of the real world" (ibid., 186). When players apply this frame to the gaming situation they recognize each other as co-players and act according to the social situation (e.g. a gaming event with friends). Second, players operate "in light of the conventions of the game" (ibid.), their actions are "governed by a complicated set of rules and constraints" (ibid.). Finally, players may apply a 'narrative' frame, 'keying' the events in a game of make-believe: They pretend being characters in a fictional (story)world and act according to its lore and logic.

Following up on Fine's seminal study, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) apply the concept of 'frames' to the players' self-perception in multiplayer video

games: They postulate a three-fold framing of player consciousness "as a *character* in a simulated world, as a *player* in a game, and as a *person* in a larger social setting" (Salen / Zimmerman 2004, 454, original emphases). Similarly, Linderoth (2005) identifies three ways of describing the player-avatar relation: Players recognize the player-controlled character as a *role* ("a fictive character that you can pretend to be", ibid.), a *tool*, ("a piece of equipment, a tool which extends the player's agency in the game activity", ibid.), and a *prop* ("a part of the players [sic!] setting, […] which can be used as a part of the players [sic!] presentation of self", ibid.).

Although Goffman's frame analysis originated from sociology, the notion of different "schemata of interpretation" (Goffman 1974, 186) readily lends itself to a cognitivist perspective. In fact, several studies focusing on the video game experience point in the same direction, when discussing, for example, different kinds of immersion (Ermi / Mäyrä 2005, Thon 2008), involvement (Calleja 2011, Neitzel 2012), or emotional engagement with characters (Frome 2006, Perron 2012). Here as elsewhere, we similarly argue that the 'three-fold framing of player consciousness' not only allows to identify three different ways of experiencing game characters that are at least partially independent of the three modes of representation sketched above but can also be used to explain both the formers' and the latters' relation to the three dimensions of video game characters already mentioned, which, in turn, are closely related to these characters' intersubjective communicative construction (see also Schröter 2010, Schröter / Thon 2013).

First, in what we propose to call 'narrative experience', the player perceives game characters as identifiable *fictional beings* with an inner life. Players construct mental character models that represent, for example, the bodily, mental, and social properties of a fictional entity and connect these with situation models related to diegetic events and existents. When 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 (or ludic events for that matter, see below). Put bluntly, it is the dimension of the fictional being that everyday conversations about characters across media most commonly refer to – but this does not apply to everyday conversations about video game characters to the same extent.

Second, in what we call 'ludic experience', the player's attention is focused on characters as elements of the game mechanics, as *game pieces* that are defined by game-related properties such as 'health points', 'speed', 'special abilities' and so on. In this mode, the player-controlled character is perceived as a tool, which extends the player's agency into the game world. The player constructs a mental model of their character (or of other characters), which consists of game-related features and abilities as well as character-related goals and rules. The representational schemas that include such feature lists are not primarily learned in real life but, rather, are made available to the players by playing other

games and gaining knowledge about rules and game systems. Similarly, (genre-)specific gameplay schemas are employed to generate motor output in response to the ongoing perception of the unfolding game, as well as the mental simulation of future 'moves' (see Lindley / Sennersten 2008, 3).

Third, in what we call 'social experience', characters are perceived as avatars, as *representations of other players* in a multiplayer setting. In this case, players not only form mental models of a fictional being or game piece but also of the player 'behind' the avatar, resulting in a connected or mixed representation which includes features of both. This mode, which directs attention to the real-life context of the game and the forms of communication and interactions that it affords, certainly challenges structuralist-semiotic conceptualizations of character which predominantly rely on textual structures. However, 'textual' features of multiplayer games still facilitate and constrain the possible social interactions – which themselves leave textual 'traces' and, thus, can become a relevant subject for a 'text-oriented' analysis of video game characters.

Distinguishing not only between three representational modes (narration, simulation, communication) but also between three ways of experiencing (narrative, ludic, social) and three ontological dimensions of video game characters (fictional entity, game piece, representation of the player) finally also allows us to emphasize that the relation between the modes of representation and the experiential affordances as well as the ontological status of video game characters are far from clear-cut and should not be conceptualized as being overly stable. While there certainly is an emphasis on 'ludic experience', the interactive gameplay that characterizes the mode of simulation usually also contributes to the representation of video game characters as fictional entities – just as the cut-scenes and scripted sequences of events that characterize the mode of narration and, hence, tend to emphasize 'narrative experience', can also be used to convey specific information about video game characters as game pieces. Moreover, the video game character as a fictional being usually gets features ascribed to it that correspond to certain ludic abilities or characteristics, and *vice versa*.

The possible network of relations becomes even more complex in multiplayer games. Again, it seems clear that the mode of communication tends to emphasize 'social experience' and is particularly well-suited to contribute to the (more or less) intersubjective construction of characters as representations of their players. However, communication between players also commonly fulfills ludic functions, and specific ludic abilities or characteristics may, at least in some genres such as the massively multiplayer online role-playing game, signal a certain social status as well. Moreover, the players of these games may also communicate *as* their characters (in communicative situations that are implicitly or explicitly framed as 'roleplaying'), using elements of the game mechanics (which usually emphasize the function of the character as a game piece) in order to interact with their fellow players (which usually emphasizes the function of the character as a representation of the player) and, thereby, 'acting out' the

personality of their characters (which emphasizes the character's status as a fictional being).

With the previous pages having at least roughly established what we consider to be core aspects of a method for the analysis of video game characters, the following case studies aim to illustrate the heuristic value of the proposed distinctions between, first, narration, simulation, and communication as three fundamental modes in which video game characters can be represented, second, narrative experience, ludic experience, and social experience as three salient ways in which players experience video game characters and, third, the fictional being, the game piece, and the representation of its player as three dimensions with regard to which video game characters may be fruitfully analyzed. The first two case studies, Yager Development's *Spec Ops: The Line* and Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, focus on the relation between narration and simulation as well as between narrative experience and ludic experience. Having thus illustrated the ways in which the video game character dimensions of the fictional entity and the game piece may be intersubjectively constructed, the third case study, BioWare's *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, allows us to further examine the mode of communication, the resulting social experience, and the ways in which video game characters may function as representations of the player.

4. Troubled Fictional Beings in *Spec Ops: The Line*

Yager Development's third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line*, which was published in 2012 by 2K Games, is a metareferential "shooter about shooters" (Keogh 2012).[13] The game tells a rather harrowing tale of a squad of elite soldiers' 'descent into darkness' but does so using highly conventional forms of narration and simulation. Indeed, *Spec Ops: The Line*'s singleplayer mode,[14] which is divided into 15 chapters, employs a fairly linear narrative structure, using a succession of cut-scenes (which are rendered via the in-game graphic engine), scripted events (particularly pre-recorded character speech), sequences with reduced interactivity (which are also well established as a narrative strategy in contemporary video games by now), and unidirectional game spaces to get its story across. Likewise, the gameplay itself is quite conventional for the kind of third-person cover shooter that *Spec Ops: The Line* is, adding nothing much to the game mechanics established by earlier entries into the genre such as those in the *Gears of War* (Epic Games 2006) or *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog 2007) series (perhaps apart from the squad-based mechanics that are, however, also well-established by now).

While the way in which *Spec Ops: The Line* uses narration and simulation to represent its storyworld and, more importantly, its characters may not be particularly noteworthy at first glance, what is represented here differs rather strongly from the stories told by games such as those in the *Gears of War* or

Uncharted series – although there are, of course, other third-person shooters such as those in the *Max Payne* (Remedy 2001) or *Alan Wake* (Remedy 2010) series that easily equal the narrative complexity of *Spec Ops: The Line*. The game's prologue begins with a sequence that lets the player take control of a soldier manning the rotary gun of a helicopter, shooting down several other helicopters during a wild chase through the ruins of Dubai before finally crashing into the sand that has all but buried the city.

This is followed by a cut-scene that lets the game's protagonist, Captain Martin Walker, act as an extradiegetic homodiegetic narrator – a narrator, who is part of the story he tells but who's act of narration is not located 'inside' the game's storyworld (see e.g. Thon 2014d) – presenting the game's back-story: Colonel John Konrad, who once saved Walker's life in Afghanistan, and the 33rd Infantry Battalion he commands were tasked with evacuating Dubai, but instead 'went rogue' and established martial law in the city, after which nothing was heard of them for several months. Eventually, though, a distress signal arrives, leading to Walker and his squad members Sergeant Lugo and Lieutenant Adams being ordered to make contact with any remaining survivors.

Once the prologue has concluded, the first chapter represents the Delta Squad arriving in Dubai and encountering resistance by rather generic Arab 'insurgents' (which are alternatively also identified as 'refugees'). After Lugo's attempt to negotiate with them in Farsi has failed (due in no small part to the fact that Walker and Adams are busy developing a plan to kill the 'insurgents' if the negotiation attempt would fail), a succession of fire fights between the Delta Squad and the Arab 'insurgents' provides the player with ample opportunity to get accustomed to the game mechanics (emphasizing the player-controlled character's function as a game piece rather than its function as a fictional being). After two surviving American soldiers have been killed by the Arabs and a third is kidnapped, Walker decides to change the objective from 'making contact' to 'rescuing the soldier'. In the following chapters, Walker will change the Delta Squad's objectives again and again, leading them ever deeper into the ruins of Dubai and the complex conflict that has apparently taken the whole city hostage.

One of the things that are interesting about *Spec Ops: The Line* is how it offers the player some choice with regard to Walker's actions, yet at the same time lets the latter emphasize repeatedly that he 'has no choice'. While most of the player's choices do indeed not influence the development of the plot all that much, they are still often experienced as carrying significant moral weight. The first salient choice of this kind is offered to the player when the Delta Squad encounters a CIA operative, Brian Castavin, as he 'interrogates' a soldier of the 33rd. After the soldier has taken the opportunity unintentionally created by the Delta Squad to kill Castavin with his own pistol, the player can either make Walker kill the soldier, which elicits shocked responses from Lugo and Adams, or let him escape, which results in the Delta Squad being ambushed by the 33rd later on. One way or another, though, the soldiers of the 33rd turn on

the Delta Squad, thinking they are CIA operatives instigating the local refugees to fight against the 33rd.

Other choices include whether, in chapter seven, the player lets Walker sacrifice the CIA operative Rick Gould in order to save some civilians (which is possible but not particularly obviously so) or attempt to save Gould instead (who is still killed, though); whether, in chapter nine, the player lets Walker follow Konrad's orders to choose one of the two civilians to be executed under martial law or tries to let the Delta Squad kill Konrad's snipers, which leads to the death of both civilians;[15] whether, in chapter eleven, the player lets Walker mercifully kill CIA operative Jeff Riggs after their joint attempt to steal the 33rd's water supplies has failed or lets Walker walk away, condemning Riggs to slowly and painfully burn to death; and whether, in chapter thirteen, the player lets Walker and Adams shoot in the air to scare the crowd of angry civilians that has just killed Lugo away or revengefully murder the civilians, instead.[16]

Fig. 1: The charred corpses of a mother and her child in *Spec Ops: The Line*

However, the game does not leave the player any choice when it comes to the most appalling atrocity that Walker commits, irretrievably tipping him over the edge of sanity. While Walker the fictional being could certainly have chosen a different course of action, chapter eight will always represent him as ordering Lugo and Adams to use a mortar loaded with white phosphorous on the soldiers of the 33rd (who, admittedly, must have repeatedly used it on the Arab 'insurgents' before). After having walked through the area afflicted by the white phosphorous, which is littered by charred corpses and heavily burned soldiers that somehow stayed alive, the Delta Squad discovers that the last mortar round hit a camp of several dozen civilian refugees, who likewise burnt to death. While Lugo and Adams react shocked, Walker only stares at the burned remains of what appears to have been a mother clutching her child – but, as will become clear later on, the fact that his use of white phosphorous has killed civilians heavily traumatizes Walker (see figure 1). Yet instead of re-

considering what he has done or how he might prevent more murder, Walker blames Konrad, pledging to hunt him down.

As it eventually turns out, though, Konrad has committed suicide long ago and Walker is suffering from ever intensifying hallucinations that allow him to avoid taking responsibility for the murders he has committed (and continues to commit). While the extent to which the following events are mere hallucinations of Walker is not entirely clear,[17] it at least appears as if Walker goes on to mercilessly hunt down the hallucinated Konrad, whose likewise hallucinated voice teases Walker via an actually defunct walky-talky he has found. After Walker has helped Riggs to steal water supplies, has used a helicopter to destroy the tower in which most of the members of the 33rd seem to have lived, has allowed Lugo to be killed by a mob of civilians, and has not prevented Adams from getting himself killed instead of surrendering to the 33rd, Walker eventually confronts the hallucinated Konrad in chapter 15, with the latter having busied himself by painting a picture of the scene that has quite possibly tipped Walker 'over the edge' (see figure 2).

Fig. 2: Konrad painting the traumatizing event in *Spec Ops: The Line*

As Walker at least partially comes to terms with his own mental condition, recognizing that Konrad is a hallucination, the player is given a final set of no less interesting choices: Standing in close proximity to the dried-out corpse of the real Konrad, the hallucinated Konrad eventually points a gun at Walker, counting down from 5 and taunting Walker to shoot him first. Initially, this leaves Walker and the player with three options. The player can let Walker shoot himself or wait until Konrad shoots him (which amounts to the same thing), leading to the game's first ending, or she can let Walker shoot Konrad, which leads to an epilogue, presenting yet another set of choices that generate three additional potential endings. When a US Marine unit arrives to evacuate the still heavily armed Walker, the player can let the latter – who has put on Konrad's uniform – be evacuated, make him shoot at the soldiers and get

killed in the ensuing fire fight, or – if her abilities allow her to – make Walker kill all the men that came to rescue him and take Konrad's place in Dubai.

From these brief remarks, it should have already become clear that *Spec Ops: The Line*'s Walker as well as, albeit to a lesser extent, the other members of the Delta Squad are complex characters that go through an amount of development that is still fairly unusual for war-themed shooters, whether of the first- or third-person variety. As has already been mentioned, though, the characters' complexity is largely limited to their status as fictional beings, with the game pieces that they also are remaining fairly conventional genre-fare that can be found in any number of other third-person cover shooters. This is not to say, however, that *Spec Ops: The Line* exclusively uses what we have called the mode of narration to represent Walker and the other members of the Delta Squad as fictional beings. Rather, the cut-scenes and scripted sequences of events frame the interactive gameplay and the game spaces in sometimes rather interesting ways, and how Walker's body as well as aspects of his mind and sociality are represented via what we have called the mode of simulation certainly has an intensifying effect on how players will experience the more traditionally narrative elements of the game.

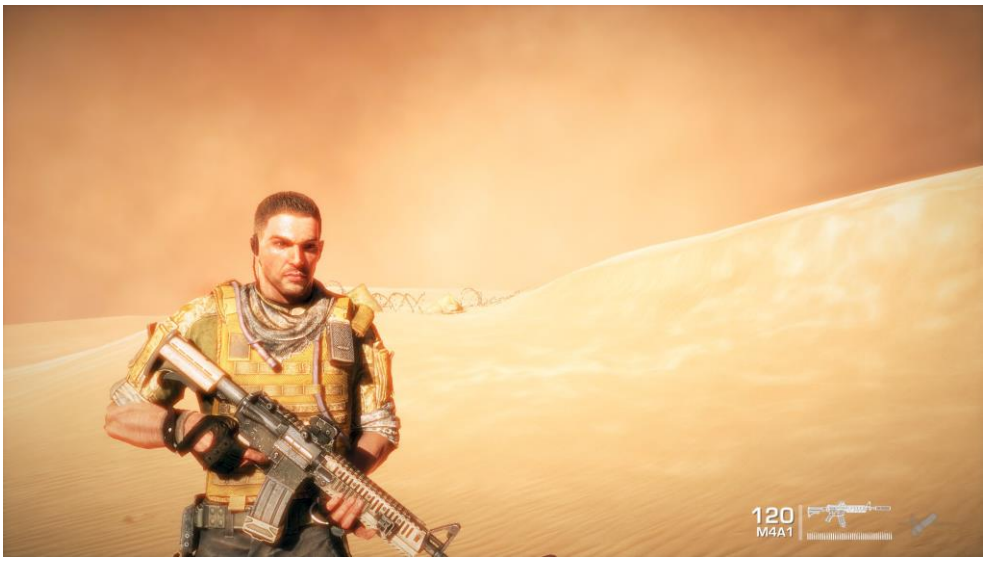

Fig. 3: Initial representation of Walker in *Spec Ops: The Line*

In order to at least briefly illustrate this interaction of narration and simulation in *Spec Ops: The Line* beyond the problem of the player's choices that has been sketched above, we would like to mention two more specific aspects of the game's overall strategies of character representation: the way in which cut-scenes that represent Walker being hurt relate to the representation of his body via the simulated gameplay, on the one hand, and the way in which the tone of scripted as well as non-scripted character speech changes throughout the game, on the other. One of the more obvious, yet nevertheless quite effective, techniques through which *Spec Ops: The Line* emphasizes Walker's decline is defined by the persistence of the various injuries that he suffers. What is particularly noteworthy here is the fact that while the incidents that lead to the injuries

themselves are usually represented via cut-scenes, the following gameplay sequences represent Walker's body using the same textures, generating a high correspondence between the mode of narration and the mode of simulation when it comes to the representation (and intersubjective construction) of Walker as a fictional being.

Fig. 4: Representation of Walker after chapter five in *Spec Ops: The Line*

Accordingly, while the initial cut-scenes and gameplay sequences represent Walker as a clean-shaven and well-equipped Delta Force soldier (see figure 3), the bruises he suffers when he falls to the bottom of "The Gorge" at the end of chapter five remain visible (see figure 4). Likewise, the heavy burns that Walker sustains in chapter ten as well as the additional injuries that Walker incurs during the helicopter crash that is replayed at the end of chapter twelve are represented in the cut-scenes as well as in the gameplay sequences that follow (see figure 5 and figure 6). It might be worth noting, though, that the correspondence between narration and simulation still primarily aims at Walker as a fictional being in those cases. While there are some sequences with 'reduced interactivity' during which the player can only let Walker walk (instead of letting him run, crouch, take cover, jump over cover, and, most importantly, shoot using a variety of weapons), Walker the game piece's ludic abilities are generally not diminished as a result of the various injuries that Walker the fictional being suffers.[18]

Considering that *Spec Ops: The Line*'s story is primarily about Walker's psychological rather than his bodily deterioration, though, it will come as no surprise that other aspects of Walker the fictional being, which are initially represented in the mode of narration, are also taken up and further amplified in the mode of simulation. Perhaps most strikingly, this applies to the way that the tone of Walker's (as well as Lugo's and Adams') character speech changes, both in the cut-scenes and during the gameplay (which uses scripted character speech that always occurs at a certain point as well as 'ludic' character speech

that is triggered by certain ludic events such as the player letting Walker give orders to his squad mates or one of them having killed an enemy).

Fig. 5: Representation of Walker after chapter ten in *Spec Ops: The Line*

Fig. 6: Representation of Walker after chapter twelve in *Spec Ops: The Line*

When Delta Squad has killed the first Arab refugees in chapter one, Walker still perceives this as problematic: "I thought we were rescuing people …" When Adams asks Walker what his plan of attack is at the beginning of chapter fourteen, however, both his evaluative perspective and his choice of words have changed considerably: "Kill everything that fucking moves." Similar observations hold with regard to the 'ludic' character speech. In the first few chapters, Walker's commands and 'kill confirmations' are still characterized by the kind of professional restraint one would expect from a Delta Force soldier (e.g. "Lugo, take him out" or "Hostile down"), but the latter chapters increasingly allow Walker's mental state to express itself in his tone of voice and choice of words (e.g. "Kill that motherfucker!" or "Die, die, die!").[19]

As has already been hinted at, the game also uses considerably more 'direct' strategies of subjective representation to represent Walker's increasing mental instability, with the initially unmarked '(quasi-)perceptual overlay' that is employed in cut-scenes as well as during gameplay sequences to represent Walker's intensifying hallucinations making it rather difficult for the player to figure out what 'actually happened' in the storyworld's 'factual domain'.[20] Even without an in-depth discussion of the game's use of subjective strategies of narration and simulation, though, our brief analysis should have sufficiently illustrated the ways in which *Spec Ops: The Line* employs cut-scenes, scripted events, and simulated gameplay to represent not only the deteriorating body but also the troubled mind and ever more pathological sociality of Walker the fictional being while at the same time leaving the corresponding game piece largely unchanged. In contrast to *Spec Ops: The Line*'s emphasis on the mode of narration in the context of a fairly linear narrative structure and the narrative experience of Walker as a fictional being, then, our second case study will allow us to shed some more light on how contemporary video games may also represent highly configurable characters by way of employing a nonlinear narrative structure as well as by emphasizing their status as game pieces.

5. Configurable Game Pieces in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

Bethesda's *Skyrim*, released in 2011, is the fifth installment in the role-playing game series *The Elder Scrolls*, known for combining a nonlinear narrative structure with first-person action gameplay in large and richly-detailed game spaces. The game is set in the fictional land of Skyrim with its main story revolving around the most archetypical conflict imaginable in the 'high fantasy' genre: the player-controlled character's struggle to defeat Alduin, a dragon that is prophesied to destroy the world. However, speaking of a 'main story' in Skyrim is already problematic, since there are a number of missions or, rather, 'quests' marked as contributing to the main storyline, but the vast majority of quests that the game offers to the player are only loosely connected to one another and can be completed in varying order.

This nonlinear narrative structure allows the player to let the player-controlled character travel (more or less) anywhere in the game world at any time and to ignore the main storyline completely, should she choose to do so.[21] The tension between the game's main story (focusing on the player-controlled character's rise as a 'dragonborn', a mortal with the soul of a dragon, and his or her increasingly important role in the course of events) and the fact, that not only the ludic properties of the character as a game piece but also many of his or her diegetic properties as a fictional being are highly configurable, has a number of interesting consequences for its analysis. A short discussion of the game's beginning will show how the player-controlled character is established

as a fictional being and a game piece, and how both aspects rely on each other as well as on the representational modes of narration and simulation.

Fig. 7: Opening sequence of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

Fig. 8: Customizable player-controlled fictional being in *Skyrim*

The game begins with the imprisoned player-controlled character being led to his or her own execution in some small town in the province of Skyrim, accompanied by more captives, who inform the player about the recent civil unrest via scripted character speech. While *Skyrim* almost completely refrains from using cut-scenes, the player-controlled character's inability to move in the opening sequence is made plausible (in narrative terms) by his or her confinement to the moving prison cart (figure 7). Similarly, the genre-typical 'rolling' of the character – i.e., the selection of the character's diegetic and ludic properties like appearance, abilities, strengths and weaknesses, for example – is integrated into the story: Upon arriving at the place of his or her execution, a guard calls on the player-controlled character to identify him- or herself, which

prompts an interface to appear letting the player select one of ten playable races (see figure 8).

These races not only come with rough descriptions of their respective backstories, but more importantly imply specific differences in terms of ludic attributes of the player-controlled character as a game piece.[22] By scrolling through a number of additional menus, the player will then determine the character's gender, appearance (from general body weight to the length and width of nose and jaw, mouth shape, scars, and eye shadows) and finally name the character. Thus, the player quite freely determines core aspects of the player-controlled character as a fictional being, most prominently their bodily features – but also the mental and social properties that might be deduced from their race's background story, their scars, war painting, or physiognomy.

However, the options to influence the ludic properties of the character as a game piece are limited to the 'race' selection, which 'levels the playing field' before the player will be able to develop her character in a highly adjustable fashion later in the game. For the time being, the player has to accept the player-controlled character's fate and make him or her approach the executioner after watching another prisoner being beheaded in a scripted sequence of events. Again, the linearity of the events represented in the mode of narration depends on the player-controlled character's restricted ability to perform actions in the mode of simulation – to move or look away, that is. These constraints are narratively justified by the guards forcing the player-controlled character down on his or her knees and (supposedly) pinning down his or her head – at least until a dragon 'unexpectedly' interrupts the execution, attacking the town and enabling the player-controlled character to escape the scene.

Just as *Skyrim*'s opening sequence exemplifies the sometimes reciprocal interrelation between narrative representation and simulated gameplay as well as the varying degrees of freedom in determining the properties of characters as fictional beings and game pieces, the game's overall structure makes use of a distinctive interplay of narrative and ludic elements to allow for 'multidimensional' character progression. As a fictional being, the player-controlled character takes on an increasingly important role in the province of Skyrim by fulfilling any of the hundreds of available quests, which typically consist of fairly linear sequences of scripted events (e.g. some townspeople asking for assistance against attacking rebels), motivating passages of simulated gameplay (e.g. combating the attackers), which in turn may trigger yet other sequences of scripted events as well as some kind of reward that is often relevant to the gameplay (e.g. the townspeople giving thanks and money to the character).

Unlike *Spec Ops: The Line*, however, *Skyrim* almost completely refrains from using the mode of narration to represent the player-controlled character – as opposed to the characters not controlled by the player, which are extensively represented using dialogue sequences and scripted events – as a fictional being, instead enabling the player to 'act out' aspects of the character not only by choosing between different dialogue options but also by adapting an aggressive, stealthy, or peaceful playing style, or influencing the outcome of certain

storylines by, for example, killing or sparing defeated characters. Nevertheless, these actions leave 'traces' in the game world that may well affect narrative events like character speech (e.g. villagers greeting the player-controlled character as 'hero' or 'dragonborn'), scripted sequences (e.g. killed characters 'missing' in later scenes) and the general attitude of different factions in the game (e.g. the hostility of the Stormcloak rebels if one chooses to support the Imperial Legion instead).

Fig. 9: Customizable player-controlled game piece in *Skyrim*

More importantly, though, *Skyrim* allows for highly adjustable forms of progression regarding the player-controlled character as a game piece. Over the course of the game, the player improves the character's 'skills', which are numerical representations of abilities like 'archery', 'lockpicking', or 'smithing' (see figure 9). While these ludic properties of the character certainly also imply (fictional) skills that can be attributed to the character as a fictional being, their improvement primarily affects the calculated outcome of gameplay-related actions like 'shooting a bow', 'picking a lock', or 'crafting a weapon'. In addition, by improving skills the player-controlled character gains 'experience points' and 'levels up' to acquire new skill-specific abilities. Unlike the concept of 'skills', the game mechanic of 'leveling up' cannot happily be said to represent 'fictional' character progression in any meaningful sense, but it is still one of the most relevant aspects of 'ludic' character progression.

Consequently, the player's striving for skill improvement of and leveling up the player-controlled character may well lead to playing styles almost exclusively focused on the ludic aspects of simulated gameplay (e.g. repeatedly letting the player-controlled character creep up behind his or her own horse in order to improve his or her 'stealth skill' without the risk of being attacked). For most if not all players, ludic character progression will also be the main reason for completing the various side quests which can be found throughout the vast open world of *Skyrim*. While quests like "collect 60 alchemist ingredients" or "bring one mammoth tusk to Ysolda" contribute little or nothing to

the representation of the player-controlled character as a fictional being, they still 'spice up' the repetitive gameplay necessary to improve the character as a game piece with short narrative set-pieces (if the player is not choosing to cheat, that is; see e.g. Consalvo 2007).

Fig. 10: Player-controlled character facing a dragon in *Skyrim*

To put it in a nutshell: An open-world role-playing game like *Skyrim* combines a nonlinear narrative structure with a 'linear' ludic structure of character progression. While it relies strongly on the mode of narration (including character speech, scripted sequences, and written text) to represent the game's storyworld and the various characters not controlled by the player, the player-controlled character is not only highly configurable, but also primarily represented through simulated gameplay. This has dire consequences for the way the character is constituted as an intersubjective communicative construct: In fact, only the most basic diegetic features of the character as a fictional being can be said to be intersubjectively represented, most of all their rise from a refugee and captive to a 'dragonborn' and, finally, dragon-slayer (see figure 10).

The details that define the player-controlled character may differ substantially between different playthroughs, though, which leads to a wide (but not unlimited) 'possibility space' that includes bodily, mental and social aspects of the player-controlled character as well as his or her actions and decisions during the course of the game. This 'possibility space' is expanded further by the fact that even the hundreds of quests in *Skyrim* are not completely determined, but (in some cases) procedurally generated: The side quest "The Forgemaster's Fingers", for example, might involve any Orc living in an Orc Stronghold in Skyrim as a quest-giver who sends the player to a randomly selected dungeon out of 30+ possible locations to obtain the desired object. In this case, the overall structure of the quest is determined while the involved characters and game spaces are not.

Similarly, the player-controlled character as a game piece is subject to the decisions and preferred playing style of the player, who is free to select any

combination of skills and abilities and equip the character with weapons and armor of her choice. However, the player-controlled character's overall ludic structure and gameplay-related 'possibility space' can still be said to be at least partially intersubjectively given: Not only are the basic game mechanics (like 'moving', 'jumping', 'looking') fairly unaffected by the player's decisions, but the set of skills and attributes that constitute the character as a game piece is shared by every character – albeit with different values. In this sense, a game like *Skyrim* certainly challenges the established notion of characters as 'intersubjective communicative constructs', but does not justify entirely abandoning it. As our third case study will illustrate, though, things get even more complicated in multiplayer games, among which the genre of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game is perhaps the most relevant for our purposes.

6. Fictionalized Player Representations in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*

BioWare's massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *Star Wars: The Old Republic* was first released as a subscription-based service in 2011, but went free-to-play (with an optional-subscription model) in late 2012. As a fairly generic MMORPG, it borrows heavily from predecessors such as Blizzard's still immensely popular *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-2014) with regard to overall game mechanics, while at the same time building on BioWare's long-time experience as a developer of story-driven role-playing games such as those in the *Baldur's Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights*, or *Mass Effect* series in general and the 2003 genre classic *Star Wars*: *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) in particular. As this latter point of reference already suggests, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* also ties into the transmedial storyworld of the *Star Wars* entertainment franchise with the events represented in the former taking place 300 years after *Knights of the Old Republic*, but well over 3,000 years before the events in the *Star Wars* films.[23]

The game's main conflict involves the Galactic Republic and the re-emerging Sith Empire with the former struggling to maintain power while the latter is plotting the former's downfall and the establishment of a new Empire. Quite similar to the way *Skyrim* integrates a large number of interrelated quests into an overarching narrative structure, *The Old Republic* also features countless quests and storylines scattered over different planets (each of which offers various different areas implemented as game spaces) that tie into the larger context of the galactic cold-war between the different factions. As in *Skyrim* (or other role-playing games and MMORPGs, for that matter), the player's main goal is to create and gradually advance the player-controlled character by gaining experience points, improving skills and optimizing gear. What is particularly noteworthy about the game, however, is the way it seeks to combine a branching and richly-detailed narrative structure (that also employs an unusual-

ly high amount of cut-scenes) with genre-typical gameplay routines and the limits and affordances of a persistent online world populated by thousands of equally 'unique' player-controlled characters.

The 'persistence' of the game world is one of the most distinguishing features of contemporary online role-playing games. Technically, it points to the fact that the state of the game world, its properties and those of its characters are not simulated by a software program installed on the individual player's computer but on remote servers that allow for hundreds of player's to interact with the same 'world' or game space. Consequently, the overall world simulation is constantly running (except for short scheduled maintenance breaks), while the individual players 'log in' or 'log out' of the game. This does not only have consequences for the way game-related character progress is monitored by and compared among players but also for the way story progress works in these games.

Fig. 11: Opening quest of the Jedi Knight class in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*

For example, one of the first quests a player-controlled Jedi Knight character has to complete is titled "Attack of the Flesh Raiders" and sends him or her against said raiders who have mounted an assault on the Jedi training grounds (see figure 11). But as every new player who has chosen the Jedi Knight class must be granted the same opportunity to complete this quest at different moments in time on the same server, the raiders will constantly reappear after being 'killed' (see figure 12). In this case, the 'persistence' of the game world means that no matter how many times different players will 'stop' the attack (in light of their individual story progress), the training ground will never cease to be attacked by the raiders (in terms of the overall game state). Thus, while part of the information conveyed through narrative techniques tends to be quite reliable with regard to the 'intersubjective' fictional storyworld of the game, the fact that it is played simultaneously by a large number of players turns it into what Juul calls an "incoherent world game" (Juul 2005, 132, see also Thon 2009[24]).

Fig. 12: Other players and 're-spawning' Flesh Raiders in *The Old Republic*

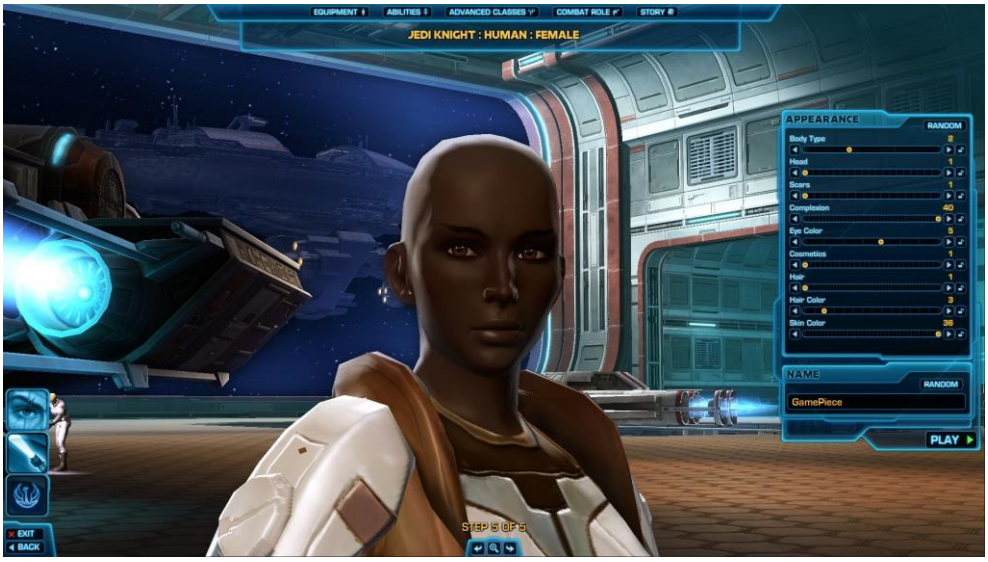

Fig. 13: Customizable player-controlled fictional being in *The Old Republic*

Having established a general notion of how a massively multiplayer online game works, we can turn to look at *The Old Republic*'s characters and will, again, limit our analysis to the player-controlled character(s) as the most complex and relevant character type in the game. As in *Skyrim,* the player-controlled characters are highly configurable: During character creation, the player chooses between two factions (Galactic Republic or Sith Empire) with four different character classes each (Jedi Consular, Jedi Knight, Smuggler, Trooper, Sith Inquisitor, Sith Warrior, Imperial Agent, and Bounty Hunter) as well as between ten different species (Chiss, Cathar, Cyborg, Humans, Miraluka, Mirialan, Rattataki, Sith Pureblood, Twi'leks, and Zabrak) with two different genders, before she can further customize the player-controlled character's appearance in a variety of ways (see figure 13). While the player-controlled character's gender, appearance, and species do not affect its ludic properties,[25] the different character classes certainly do: They come with distinctive playing

styles, sets of skills, and attribute distributions that focus on abilities like melee or ranged combat, healing, or 'crowd control'.

At least initially, the different character classes are also each involved in their own unique storylines that tie into the overall narrative structure of the game. Thus, it can be said that *The Old Republic* adheres very closely to the conventions of the role-playing genre especially regarding the way the player-controlled character as a fictional being is represented: Indeed, no matter which character class the player chooses, the player-controlled character is taking an increasingly important role in the storyworld by 'acting out' a variety of quests in the mode of simulation, often framed by in-engine cut-scenes and scripted sequences of events which drive the overall story of the game. *The Old Republic*'s frequent use of cut-scenes and different dialogue options is, on the one hand, reminiscent of previous BioWare role-playing games like *Mass Effect* and, on the other hand, distinguishes it from its genre predecessors like *World of Warcraft,* which almost exclusively rely on linear dialogues and scripted sequences. In this sense, the game can be said to be one of the most story-driven MMORPGs developed to the present day – but in its core, it is still not *about* story.

Even though reaching the level cap[26] (the player's goal for the character as a game piece) and completing the main story's quests (the presumed goal for the character as a fictional being) may be important aspects of the game, for most players it is the social experience of online play that fundamentally affects the way characters are perceived, customized, and used as a means for communication with other players. As has been extensively discussed within game studies research, MMORPGs are built around social play (see Chan / Vorderer 2006, Taylor 2006, Corneliussen / Walker Rettberg [Eds.] 2008). Their ludic structure encourages (and, more often than not, requires) coordinated team play in order to complete the more difficult quests and achieve further progress in the 'end game' after reaching the maximum character level. In *Star Wars: The Old Republic,* for example, there are a number of 'flashpoint' quests, which require two or more players whose characters have reached a certain level to team up and fight superior enemies in a dedicated game space (a so-called 'instance'), the state of which is not in sync with the rest of the game world but only accessible to group members.

The most difficult end game missions, so-called 'operations', depend even more on coordinated team play: Becoming available once the player-controlled character has reached level 50, these 'instances' require groups of eight or sixteen players to work together in large-scale battles for the best gear available in the game and rely heavily on divided responsibility, real-time communication and coordination between players. Thus, *The Old Republic* not only represents a fictional (story)world and simulates a ludic game space, but also constitutes a complex social space in which the player-controlled characters act as *representations of other players* and signify differences in social status (see also Thon 2007, Kuhn 2009). In this sense, an analysis of the character as an actor within the larger social space of the game will focus on (1) the social attributes of the

players as signaled through the properties of their respective character and (2) avatar-mediated forms of social interaction and communication afforded by the game.

In *Star Wars: The Old Republic* player status is established and communicated via very different kinds of social practices and markers. For one thing, players can join 'guilds', which house dozens of players and provide them with a guild chat system, a shared pool of items and other pleasantries. More importantly, though, they enable players to establish social rank systems of up to ten different positions ranging from 'aspirant' to 'guild master', each with their own rights and responsibilities (see also Williams et al. 2006). While these are more or less explicit markers of social status, outside of guilds almost any aspect of a player-controlled character's appearance or ludic attributes might signal differences in player status. As the latter is often measured in experience, proficiency and game-related achievements, ludic properties like character level, player-versus-player (PvP) rating, or 'legacy points' serve as indicators for the respective player's social impact in the group, guild, or server community (see also Taylor 2006).

Similarly, a character equipped with high-level gear 'tells the story' of its player's investment in the game: The best gear for PvP combat, for instance, can only be traded for large amounts of 'Warzone Commendations', the in-game currency for PvP items. These are earned by frequently participating in so-called 'warzones' – i.e. battlegrounds for large player-versus-player fights between the different factions. Thus, high-level PvP items worn by a character not only signal superior statistics as a game piece, but also point to the fact that the respective player has either performed very successfully in PvP warzones or has at least invested a huge amount of time in PvP combat. Likewise, a player-controlled character who dons the best gear for player-versus-environment (PvE) game modes signals that its player has put in the time and effort necessary to succeed in *The Old Republic*'s PvE 'endgame', which is dominated by the large-scale 'operations' already mentioned above.

Besides these primarily ludic character-related markers of social status, representations of characters in multiplayer video games can also occur in the mode of communication, which the players of *The Old Republic* primarily realize via in-game text chat, external VoIP software (like Skype or TeamSpeak), or the character's species-specific social abilities (like performing a unique cultural dance). Another genre-typical way of communicating in the game is the use of 'emotes': By typing commands like "/greet" or "/facepalm", a player's character may perform a wide range of predefined animated gestures (see figure 14), thereby letting the player use nonverbal means of communication that are integrated into the game mechanics to contribute to the representation of their character in the mode of communication (see also Mortensen 2006).

Fig. 14: 'Waving' at the Flesh Raider in *The Old Republic*

However, communicating in a multiplayer game does not solely fulfill social functions, but may as well serve ludic or narrative purposes (see also, once more, Thon 2007). Especially during difficult team fights, the in-game chat is, on the one hand, predominantly used for assigning game-related tasks, discussing tactics, and coordinating attacks. On the other hand, members of dedicated role-playing guilds might discipline themselves to limit their communication and interactions in ways that befit the representation of their characters as fictional beings and adhere to the logic of the fictional (story)world, which is particularly rich in the case of *The Old Republic*, both due to the game's unusual emphasis on the mode of narration and due to the complex transmedial entertainment franchise of which it is an integral part.

Thus, as has been mentioned earlier, the three modes of representation (narration, simulation, and communication), the three ways of experiencing characters (narrative experience, ludic experience, and social experience), and the three dimensions of the video game character (fictional entity, game piece, and representation of the player) we have proposed to distinguish are closely interrelated in massively multiplayer online role-playing games such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, whose players frequently do not communicatively represent themselves but rather communicate *as* the characters they control, using the game's mechanics and communicative means to contribute to the representation of the latter as a fictional being.

7. Conclusion

In this essay we have proposed a method for the analysis of video game characters based on a theoretical understanding of their medium-specific modes of representation and the experiential affordances and mental processes involved in their intersubjective construction by video game players. We have distin-

guished, first, between narration, simulation, and communication as three modes of representation particularly salient for contemporary video games and the characters they represent; second, between narrative, ludic, and social experience as three ways in which players perceive video game characters and their representations; and, third, between three dimensions of video game characters as 'intersubjective constructs', which usually are to be analyzed not only as fictional beings with certain diegetic properties but also as game pieces with certain ludic properties and, in those cases in which they function as avatars in the social space of a multiplayer game, as representations of other players.

Having established these basic distinctions, our analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* has aimed to illustrate how contemporary video games employ cut-scenes, scripted events, and simulated gameplay to represent their characters as fictional beings – in this case the deteriorating body, troubled mind, and ever more pathological sociality of the player-controlled character Captain Martin Walker. In contrast to *Spec Ops: The Line*'s emphasis on the mode of narration in the context of a fairly linear narrative structure and the narrative experience of Walker as a fictional being, then, our second case study has allowed us to shed some more light on how contemporary video games may also represent highly configurable characters by way of employing a nonlinear narrative structure as well as by emphasizing their status as game pieces. As we have shown, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*'s highly adjustable player-controlled character leads to the more complicated case that only the most basic diegetic features of the character as a fictional being can be said to be intersubjectively represented, while the details that define him or her may vary substantially during different playthroughs, leading to a (wide but not unlimited) 'possibility space' of character-related features and actions. Finally, as we have discussed in our third case study, in massively multiplayer online role-playing games such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, the three modes of representation, the three ways of experiencing characters, and the three dimensions of the video game character we have proposed to distinguish are closely interrelated, as their players do not only communicatively represent themselves but also engage in actual 'role-playing' when communicating *as* the characters they control.

Evidently, more could be said on each of the dimensions of video game characters that the previous case studies have focused on as well as on their interrelation, or on the question to what extent the three dimensions of video game characters that we have proposed to distinguish can actually be said to be intersubjectively constructed despite the fact that the ways in which the modes of narration, simulation, and – most saliently – communication are used to represent characters will vary from player to player and from playing session to playing session. Despite these lacunae, however, we believe that the method of analysis for video game characters proposed in this essay is capable of successfully capturing these characters' specific mediality without refraining from treating them *as characters* that are similar to as well as different from characters represented in more traditional narrative media forms such as novels, comics, films, or television series.

Works Cited

Gameography

Remedy (2010): *Alan Wake*. USA Microsoft Game Studios.
BioWare (1998): *Baldur's Gate*. USA Interplay Entertainment.
Nintendo (1981): *Donkey Kong*. JAP Nintendo.
Epic Games (2006): *Gears of War*. USA Microsoft Studios.
Taito (1975): *Gun Fight*. USA Midway Games.
Valve (1998): *Half-Life*. USA Sierra Entertainment.
Quantic Dream (2010): *Heavy Rain*. JAP Sony.
Team Bondi (2011): *L.A. Noire*. USA Rockstar.
BioWare (2007): *Mass Effect*. USA Microsoft Game Studios.
Remedy (2001): *Max Payne*. USA Gathering.
BioWare (2002): *Neverwinter Nights*. USA Atari.
Namco (1980): *Pac-Man*. USA Midway Games.
Yager Development (2012): *Spec Ops: The Line*. USA 2K Games.
BioWare (2003): *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. USA LucasArts.
BioWare (2011-2014): *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. USA Electronic Arts.
Bethesda Game Studios (2001): *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*. USA Bethesda Softworks.
Naughty Dog (2013): *The Last of Us*. JAP Sony.
Core Design (1996): *Tomb Raider*. UK Eidos Interactive.
Naughty Dog (2007): *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*. JAP Sony.
Blizzard Entertainment (2004-2014): *World of Warcraft*. USA Blizzard Entertainment.

Bibliography

Aarseth, Espen (2001): "Computer Game Studies, Year One". In: *Game Studies* 1 (No. 1). URL: http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html (31.12.2013).
Aarseth, Espen (2004a): "Genre Trouble. Narrativism and the Art of Simulation". In: Noah Wardrip-Fruin / Pat Harrigan (Eds.), *FirstPerson. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, pp. 45-55.
Aarseth, Espen (2004b): "Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse". In: Marie-Laure Ryan (Ed.), *Narrative across Media. The Languages of Storytelling*. Nebraska, pp. 361-376.
Aarseth, Espen (2012): "A Narrative Theory of Games". In: *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games,* pp. 129-132. URL: http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2282365 (31.12.2013).
Aristotle (1982): *Poetik*. Stuttgart [translated and edited by Manfred Fuhrmann].
Backe, Hans-Joachim (2008): *Strukturen und Funktionen des Erzählens im Computerspiel. Eine typologische Einführung*. Würzburg.
Bal, Mieke (1997): *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 2nd Edition. Toronto.
Barthes, Roland (1970): *S / Z*. Paris.
Beil, Benjamin (2010): *First Person Perspectives. Point of View und figurenzentrierte Erzählformen im Film und im Computerspiel*. Münster.
Bogost, Ian (2007): *Persuasive Games. The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge.
Branigan, Edward (1984): *Point of View in the Cinema. A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film*. New York.
Calleja, Gordon (2011): *In-Game. From Immersion to Incorporation*. Cambridge.
Chan, Elaine / Vorderer, Peter (2006): "Massively Multiplayer Online Games". In: Peter Vorderer / Jennings Bryant (Eds.), *Playing Video Games. Motives, Responses, and Consequences*. Mahwah, pp. 77-90.
Chatman, Seymour (1978): *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. New York.
Consalvo, Mia (2007): *Cheating. Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. Cambridge.
Corneliussen, Hilde G. / Walker Rettberg, Jill (2008) (Eds.): *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity. A* World of Warcraft *Reader*. Cambridge.
Creed, Barbara (1993): *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London.
Currie, Gregory (2010): *Narratives and Narrators. A Philosophy of Stories*. Oxford.

Dennerlein, Kathrin (2009): *Narratologie des Raums*. Berlin.
Deterding, Sebastian (2009): "The Game Frame. Systemizing a Goffmanian Approach to Video Game Theory". In: *Breaking New Ground. Innovation in Games, Play, Practice, and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*. URL: http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.43112.pdf (31.12.2013).
Deuber-Mankowsky, Astrid (2001): *Lara Croft. Modell, Medium, Cyberheldin*. Frankfurt a.M.
Dille, Flint / Zuur Platten, John (2007): *The Ultimate Guide to Video Game Writing and Design*. Oxford.
Domsch, Sebastian (2013): *Storyplaying. Agency and Narrative in Video Games*. Berlin.
Dyer, Mitch (2012): "The Story Secrets of *Spec Ops: The Line*. Use Your Delusion". In: *IGN. Imagine Games Network*. URL: http://www.ign.com/articles/2012/07/20/the-story-secrets-of-spec-ops-the-line (31.12.2013).
Dyer, Richard (1986): *Heavenly Bodies. Film Stars and Society*. New York 2004.
Eder, Jens (2008): *Die Figur im Spiel*. Marburg.
Eder, Jens (2010): "Understanding Characters". In: *Projections* 4 (No. 1), pp. 16-40.
Eder, Jens / Thon, Jan-Noël (2012): "Digitale Figuren in Kinofilm und Computerspiel". In: Harro Segeberg (Ed.), *Film im Zeitalter neuer Medien II. Digitalität und Kino*. München, pp. 139-181.
Eder, Jens et al. (2010a) (Eds.): *Characters in Fictional Worlds. Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*. Berlin.
Eder, Jens et al. (2010b) "Introduction". In: Jens Eder et al. (Eds.), *Characters in Fictional Worlds. Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*. Berlin, pp. 3-64.
Egri, Lajos (1946): *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. New York.
Ermi, Laura / Mäyrä, Frans (2005): "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience. Analysing Immersion". In: *Proceedings of Digra 2005. Changing Views, Worlds in Play*. URL: http://people.uta.fi/~tlilma/gameplay_experience.pdf (31.12.2013).
Eskelinen, Markku (2004): "Towards Computer Game Studies". In: Noah Wardrip-Fruin / Pat Harrigan (Eds.), *FirstPerson. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, pp. 36-44.
Eskelinen, Markku (2012): *Cybertext Poetics. The Critical Landscape of New Media Literary Theory*. London.
Fahlenbrach, Kathrin / Thon, Jan-Noël (2015): "Interactive Representations of Subjectivity". In: Maike Sarah Reinerth / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *Representations of Subjectivity across Media*. Forthcoming.
Fine, Gary Alan (1983): *Shared Fantasy. Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago 2002.
Frasca, Gonzalo (1999): "Ludology Meets Narratology. Similitude and Differences Between (Video)games and Narrative". URL: http://www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm (31.12.2013).
Frasca, Gonzalo (2003): "Simulation versus Narrative. Introduction to Ludology". In: Mark J. P. Wolf / Bernard Perron (Eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York, pp. 221-236.
Frome, Jonathan (2006): *Why Films Make Us Cry But Video Games Don't. Emotions in Traditional and Interactive Media*. Madison.
Frye, Northrop (1957): *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton.
Gamescoop (2012) (Ed.): *Theorien des Computerspiels zur Einführung*. Hamburg.
Goffman, Erving (1974): *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Boston 1986.
Gottsched, Johann C. (1972): *Schriften zur Literatur*. Stuttgart [edited by Horst Steinmetz].
Greimas, Algirdas Julien (1966): *Sémantique Structurale. Recherche de Méthode*. Paris.
Hancock, Hugh (2002): "Better Game Design through Cutscenes". In: *Gamasutra*. URL: http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131410/better_game_design_through_.php (31.12.2013).
Hartmann, Tilo et al. (2001): "Avatare. Parasoziale Beziehungen zu virtuellen Akteuren". In: *Medien und Kommunikationswissenschaft* 49 (No. 3), pp. 350-368.
Harvey, William John (1965): *Character and the Novel*. London.
Heidbrink, Henriette (2010): "Fictional Characters in Literary and Media Studies. A Survey of the Research". In: Jens Eder et al. (Eds.), *Characters in Fictional Worlds. Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*. Berlin, pp. 67-110.
Herman, David (2002): *Story Logic. Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Lincoln.
Herman, David (2004): "Toward a Transmedial Narratology". In: Marie-Laure Ryan (Ed.), *Narrative across Media. The Languages of Storytelling*. Lincoln, pp. 47-75.
Herman, David (2009): *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Chichester.
Horace (1972): *Ars Poetica*. Stuttgart [translated and edited by Eckart Schäfer].

Hühn, Peter (2009): "Event and Eventfulness". In: Peter Hühn et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of Narratology*. Berlin, pp. 80-97.
Isbister, Katherine (2006): *Better Game Characters by Design. A Psychological Approach*. San Francisco.
Jannidis, Fotis (2004): *Figur und Person. Beitrag zu einer historischen Narratologie*. Berlin.
Jannidis, Fotis (2009): "Character". In: Peter Hühn et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of Narratology*. Berlin, pp. 14-29.
Järvinen, Aki (2003): "The Elements of Simulation in Digital Games. System, Representation and Interface in Grand Theft Auto: Vice City". In: *Dichtung Digital* 5 (No. 4). URL: http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2003/issue/4/jaervinen/index.htm (31.12.2013).
Jenkins, Henry (2004): "Game Design as Narrative Architecture". In: Noah Wardrip-Fruin / Pat Harrigan (Eds.), *FirstPerson. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, pp. 118-130.
Jenkins, Henry (2006): *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York.
Jin, Seung-A Annie / Park, Namkee (2009): "Parasocial Interaction with My Avatar. Effects of Interdependent Self-Construal and the Mediating Role of Self-Presence in an Avatar-Based Console Game, Wii". In: *CyberPsychology & Behaviour* 12 (No. 6), pp. 723-727.
Juul, Jesper (2005): *Half-Real. Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge.
Keogh, Brendan (2012): *Killing Is Harmless. A Critical Reading of Spec Ops: The Line*. Marden.
Klastrup, Lisbeth (2001): "Paradigms of Interaction. Conceptions and Misconceptions in the Field Today". In: *Dichtung Digital* 5 (No. 4). URL: http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2003/4-klastrup.htm (31.12.2013).
Klastrup, Lisbeth / Tosca, Susana (2004): "Transmedial Worlds – Rethinking Cyberworld Design". In: *Proceedings of the 2004 International Conference on Cyberworlds*. Washington, pp. 409-416. URL: http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1033145 (31.12.2013).
Klastrup, Lisbeth / Tosca, Susana (2014): "*Game of Thrones*. Transmedial Worlds, Fandom, and Social Gaming". In: Jan-Noël Thon / Marie-Laure Ryan (Eds.), *Storyworlds across Media. Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Nebraska, pp. 295-314.
Klevjer, Rune (2002): "In Defense of Cutscenes". In: Frans Mäyrä (Ed.), *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*. Tampere, pp. 191-202. URL: http://folk.uib.no/smkrk/docs/klevjerpaper.htm (31.12.2013).
Klevjer, Rune (2006): *What is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer Games*. Bergen. URL: http://folk.uib.no/smkrk/docs/RuneKlevjer_What%20is%20the%20Avatar_finalprint.pdf (31.12.2013).
Klevjer, Rune (2014): "Cut Scenes". In: Lori Emerson et al. (Eds.), *Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*. Baltimore [Forthcoming].
Konijn, Elly A. et al. (2008) (Eds.): *Mediated Interpersonal Communication*. New York.
Kuhn, Axel (2009): *Vernetzte Medien. Nutzung und Rezeption am Beispiel von 'World of Warcraft'*. Konstanz.
Ladas, Manuel (2002): *Brutale Spiele(r)? Wirkung und Nutzung von Gewalt in Computerspielen*. Frankfurt a.M.
Lankoski, Petri (2010): *Character-Driven Game Design. A Design Approach and its Foundations in Character Engagement*. Aalto. URL: https://www.taik.fi/kirjakauppa/images/4463b7dc09f925da01eaf73cbc72eed9.pdf (31.12.2013).
Leschke, Rainer / Heidbrink, Henriette (2010) (Eds.): *Formen der Figur. Figurenkonzepte in Künsten und Medien*. Konstanz.
Linderoth, Jonas (2005): "Animated Game Pieces. Avatars as Roles, Tools and Props". In: *Aesthetics of Play Online Proceedings*. Bergen. URL: http://www.aestheticsofplay.org/linderoth.php (31.12.2013).
Lindley, Craig A. / Sennersten, Charlotte C. (2008): "Game Play Schemas. From Player Analysis to Adaptive Game Mechanics". In: *International Journal of Computer Games Technology*, pp. 1-7. URL: http://downloads.hindawi.com/journals/ijcgt/2008/216784.pdf (31.12.2013).
Margolin, Uri (1983): "Characterisation in Narrative. Some Theoretical Prolegomena". In: *Neophilologus* 67, pp. 1-14.
Meister, Jan Christoph (2003): *Computing Action. A Narratological Approach*. Foreword by Marie-Laure Ryan. Berlin.
Mortensen, Elvira T. (2006): "WoW is the New MUD. Social Gaming From Text to Video". In: *Games and Culture* 1 (No. 4), pp. 397-413.
Mulvey, Laura (1989): "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". In: Laura Mulvey (Ed.), *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington, pp. 14-28.

Neitzel, Britta (2000): *Gespielte Geschichten. Struktur- und prozessanalytische Untersuchungen der Narrativität von Videospielen.* Weimar.
URL: http://e-pub.uni-weimar.de/opus4/files/69/Neitzel.pdf (31.12.2013).

Neitzel, Britta (2005): "Narrativity in Computer Games". In: Jost Raessens / Jeffrey Goldstein (Eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge, pp. 227-245.

Neitzel, Britta (2007): "Point of View und Point of Action. Eine Perspektive auf die Perspektive in Computerspielen". In: Klaus Bartels / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *Computer / Spiel / Räume. Materialien zur Einführung in die Computer Game Studies*. Hamburg, pp. 8-28.

Neitzel, Britta (2012): "Involvierungsstrategien des Computerspiels". In: Gamescoop (Ed.), *Theorien des Computerspiels zur Einführung.* Hamburg, pp. 75-103.

Perron, Bernard (2012): *Silent Hill. The Terror Engine.* Ann Arbor.

Pfister, Manfred (1977): *Das Drama.* München.

Pitts, Russ (2012): "Don't Be a Hero. The Full Story behind *Spec Ops: The Line*". In: *Polygon*. URL: http://www.polygon.com/2012/11/14/3590430/dont-be-a-hero-the-full-story-behind-spec-ops-the-line (31.12.2013).

Price, Martin (1983): *Forms of Life. Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel.* New Haven.

Reinecke, Leonard / Klein, Sina (2014): "Game Studies und Medienpsychologie". In: Klaus Sachs-Hombach / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *Game Studies. Aktuelle Ansätze der Computerspielforschung.* Cologne [Forthcoming].

Richard, Birgit (2004): *Sheroes. Genderspiele im virtuellen Raum.* Bielefeld.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith (2002): *Narrative Fiction. Contemporary Poetics*. 2nd Edition. London.

Rogers, Scott (2010): *Level Up! The Guide to Great Video Game Design.* Chichester.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2005): "On the Theoretical Foundations of Transmedial Narratology". In: Jan Christoph Meister (Ed.), *Narratology beyond Literary Criticism. Mediality – Disciplinarity*. Berlin, pp. 1-23.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2006): *Avatars of Story*. Minneapolis.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2008): "Transfictionality across Media". In: John Pier / José Á. García Landa (Eds.), *Theorizing Narrativity*. Berlin, pp. 385-417.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2009): "Space". In: Peter Hühn et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of Narratology*. Berlin, pp. 420-433.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2014): "Story / Worlds / Media. Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology". In: Marie-Laure Ryan / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *Storyworlds across Media. Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology.* Lincoln, pp. 25-49.

Ryan, Marie-Laure / Thon, Jan-Noël (2014): "Introduction. Storyworlds across Media". In: Marie-Laure Ryan / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *Storyworlds across Media. Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Lincoln, pp. 1-21.

Salen, Katie / Zimmerman, Eric (2004): *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge.

Schmid, Wolf (2003): "Narrativity and Eventfulness". In: Tom Kindt / Hans-Harald Müller (Eds.), *What Is Narratology? Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*. Berlin, pp. 17-33.

Schneider, Ralph (2000): *Grundriß zur kognitiven Theorie der Figurenrezeption am Beispiel des viktorianischen Romans.* Tübingen.

Schröter, Felix (2010): *Die Figur im Spiel. Entwicklung eines nutzerorientierten Analysemodells für Computerspielfiguren.* Hamburg.

Schröter, Felix (2013a): "'Don't show it, play it!' Filmische und nicht-filmische Figurenkonzeption im Computerspiel". In: *Rabbit Eye – Zeitschrift für Filmforschung* (No. 5), pp. 22-39. URL: http://www.rabbiteye.de/2013/5/schroeter_figurenkonzeption.pdf (31.12.2013).

Schröter, Felix (2013b): "Systemkonflikt. Menschenbilder im Computerspiel am Beispiel des transhumanistischen Diskurses in Deus Ex: Human Revolution". In: *kritische berichte. Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften* 41 (No. 1), pp. 75-82.

Schröter, Felix / Thon, Jan-Noël (2013): "Simulierte Spielfiguren und / oder / als mediale Menschenbilder". In: Jens Eder et al. (Eds.), *Medialität und Menschenbild.* Berlin, pp. 119-143.

Seger, Linda (1990): *Creating Unforgettable Characters.* New York.

Sheldon, Lee (2004): *Character Development and Storytelling for Games.* Boston.

Silverman, Kaja (1992): *Male Subjectivity at the Margins.* New York.

Smith, Murray (1995): *Engaging Characters. Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema.* Oxford.

Sorg, Jürgen (2010): "Figurenkonzepte im Computerspiel". In: Rainer Leschke / Henriette Heidbrink (Eds.), *Formen der Figur. Figurenkonzepte in Künsten und Medien.* Konstanz, pp. 341-371.

Sorg, Jürgen / Eichhorn, Stefan (2005): "Mapping Cutscenes". In: *Navigationen* 5 (No. 1-2), pp. 225-240.
Taylor, T. L. (2006): *Play Between Worlds. Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge.
Thon, Jan-Noël (2006): "Communication and Interaction in Multiplayer First-Person-Shooter Games". In: Giuseppe Riva et al. (Eds.), *From Communication to Presence. Cognition, Emotions and Culture towards the Ultimate Communicative Experience. Festschrift in Honor of Luigi Anolli*. Amsterdam, pp. 239-261.
Thon, Jan-Noël (2007): "Unendliche Weiten? Schauplätze, fiktionale Welten und soziale Räume heutiger Computerspiele". In: Klaus Bartels / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *Computer / Spiel / Räume. Materialien zur Einführung in die Computer Game Studies*. Hamburg, pp. 29-60.
Thon, Jan-Noël (2008): "Immersion Revisited. On the Value of a Contested Concept". In: Amyris Fernandez et al. (Eds.), *Extending Experiences. Structure, Analysis and Design of Computer Game Player Experience*. Rovaniemi, pp. 29-43.
Thon, Jan-Noël (2009): "Computer Games, Fictional Worlds and Transmedial Storytelling. A Narratological Perspective". In: John R. Sageng (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference 2009*. Oslo. URL: http://www.hf.uio.no/ifikk/english/research/projects/thirdplace/Conferences/proceedings/ (31.12.2013).
Thon, Jan-Noël (2014a): "Game Studies und Narratologie". In: Klaus Sachs-Hombach / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *Game Studies: Aktuelle Ansätze der Computerspielforschung*. Cologne [Forthcoming].
Thon, Jan-Noël (2014b): "Narrativity". In: Lori Emerson et al. (Eds.), *Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*. Baltimore [Forthcoming].
Thon, Jan-Noël (2014c): "Subjectivity across Media. On Transmedial Strategies of Subjective Representation in Contemporary Feature Films, Graphic Novels, and Computer Games". In: Marie-Laure Ryan / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *Storyworlds across Media. Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Lincoln, pp. 67-102.
Thon, Jan-Noël (2014d): "Toward a Transmedial Narratology. On Narrators in Contemporary Graphic Novels, Feature Films, and Computer Games". In: Jan Alber / Per Krogh Hansen (Eds.), *Beyond Classical Narration. Unnatural and Transmedial Challenges*. Berlin [Forthcoming], pp. 25-56.
Thon, Jan-Noël (2015): *Transmedial Narratology*. [Forthcoming].
Tomasi, Dario (1988): *Cinema e Racconto. Il Personaggio*. Turin.
Tosca, Susana (2003): "The Quest Problem in Computer Games". In: *Technologies for Interactive Digital Storytelling and Entertainment 2003 Proceedings*. URL: http://www.it-c.dk/people/tosca/quest.htm (31.12.2013).
Van Vugt, Henriette C. et al. (2010): "Modeling Human-Character Interactions in Virtual Space". In: Jens Eder et al. (Eds.), *Characters in Fictional Worlds. Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*. Berlin, pp. 329-354.
Vogler, Christopher (1992): *The Writer's Story. Mythic Structure for Writers*. Studio City.
Walker Rettberg, Jill (2008): "Quests in *World of Warcraft*. Deferral and Repetition". In: Hilde G. Corneliussen / Jill Walker Rettberg (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity. A* World of Warcraft *Reader*. Cambridge, pp. 167-184.
Weimar, Klaus (1989): *Geschichte der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft bis zum Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts*. München.
Williams, Dimitri et al. (2006): "From Tree House to Barracks. The Social Life of Guilds in World of Warcraft". In: *Games and Culture* 1 (No. 4), pp. 338-361.
Wimmer, Jeffrey / Schmidt, Jan-Hinrik (2014): "Game Studies und Mediensoziologie". In: Klaus Sachs-Hombach / Jan-Noël Thon (Eds.), *Game Studies. Aktuelle Ansätze der Computerspielforschung*. Cologne [Forthcoming].
Wolf, Mark J. P. (2013): *Building Imaginary Worlds. The Theory and History of Subcreation*. London.
Wolf, Werner (2011): "Narratology and Media(lity). The Transmedial Expansion of a Literary Discipline and Possible Consequences". In: Greta Olson (Ed.), *Current Trends in Narratology*. Berlin, pp. 145-180.

Felix Schröter, M.A.
University of Hamburg, Institute for Media and Communication
Von-Melle-Park 6
D-20146 Hamburg

E-mail: felix.schroeter@uni-hamburg.de
URL: http://www.felixschroeter.de

Jan-Noël Thon, M.A.
University of Tübingen, Institute of Media Studies
Wilhelmstr. 50
D-72074 Tübingen
E-mail: jan.thon@uni-tuebingen.de
Web: http://www.janthon.de

Sie können den Text in folgender Weise zitieren / How to cite this article:
Schröter, Felix / Thon, Jan-Noël: "Video Game Characters: Theory and Analysis". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung / Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 3.1 (2014). 40-77.
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20140523-111542-8
URL: https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/view/151/200

[1] See e.g. Herman 2009, Ryan 2014 on the concept of storyworld. See also e.g. Bal 1997, 175-227, Chatman 1978, 43-145, Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 6-42 for classical accounts of existents, events, and characters; as well as Dennerlein 2009, Herman 2002, 263-299, Ryan 2009 on space, and Hühn 2009, Meister 2003, Schmid 2003 on events.

[2] Our translation from the German: "Es verhält sich aber so, dass viele nur wenig und nur wenige viel zum Bereich der Figur geschrieben haben […]."

[3] For a comprehensive overview of historical theories of character see Eder 2008, 39-60, Heidbrink 2010. See also the recent anthologies on characters in different media by Eder et al. (Eds.) 2010a and Leschke / Heidbrink (Eds.) 2010.

[4] As is argued in more detail in Thon 2015, Eder's insistence on characters being fictional is rather problematic, since allowing for *nonfictional* characters leads to a more precise distinction between the 'intersubjective communicative constructs' of 'persons' represented nonfictionally and the actual persons these 'intersubjective communicative constructs' are meant to refer to. While it might be more appropriate to speak of *represented* rather than of fictional beings in the case of characters, then, this question is not too relevant for the purposes of the present essay.

[5] For further discussion of video game characters' subjectivities and their relation to 'what it means to be human', see also e.g. Fahlenbrach / Thon 2015, Schröter 2013b, Thon 2015.

[6] While research on video game characters often focuses on the player-controlled character (or 'player character') as the most complex character type, other character types include the characters that are not controlled by the player but, rather, by the artificial intelligence of the game (or 'non-player character') as well as the 'non-individuated' group characters and character types (or 'units') that are particularly salient in the strategy game genre. See Schröter 2010; for different functions of non-player character see e.g. Isbister 2006, Sheldon 2004.

[7] Our translation from the German: "Figuren beruhen auf normativen Abstraktionen über ideale Figurenvorstellungen ."

[8] For further discussion of the relation between transmedial and medium-specific terms and concepts in the context of a transmedial narratology, see Thon 2014c, 2014d, 2015. See also the program of a 'media conscious' narratology sketched in Ryan / Thon 2014 as well as the earlier approaches to transmedial narratology by Herman 2004, 2009, Ryan 2005, 2006, W. Wolf 2011.

[9] The lack of references to previous research in Domsch 2013 is generally striking, with the bibliography of merely 4½ pages including quite a few entries that refer to online game journalism rather than actual research. Apart from the general lack of references, the similarities between the title of Neitzel's PhD thesis (*Gespielte Geschichten*, which translates as "played stories") and Domsch's book (*Storyplaying*) in particular will raise some eyebrows, as Domsch does not even include Neitzel's study in his bibliography – despite the fact that he is a native speaker of German and there really is no way he could not have been aware of Neitzel's works, which have been highly influential in the field of narratologically-oriented game studies.

[10] While 'interactivity' is sometimes thought of as a "silly and abused term" (Aarseth 2004a, 52) or "an entrenched notion in studies of digital media" (Bogost 2007, 40), it still appropriately captures the fact that video games are 'interactive' in a medium-specific way, and that the characteristic 'ludic interaction' between a player and a video game such as Yager Development's *Spec Ops: The Line* or Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is, of course, very different from the kind of 'interpretive interaction' between a reader and a comic – or the kind of 'social interaction' between a group of players discussing *Spec Ops: The Line*, for that matter. See also Klastrup 2001 for an early reconstruction of the conceptual history of the term 'interactivity' in game studies.

[11] Players of violent video games, for example, often claim that they do not experience their actions in the game world as 'virtual violence' but as mere functional, competitive interactions with the game system or other players (see Ladas 2002), while some players of immersive role-playing games report deliberately focusing their attention on aspects of the fictional (story)world and its inhabitants (see Taylor 2006, 72).

[12] According to sociologist Goffman, who is considered one of the founding members of symbolic interactionism, the individual responds to a particular event in daily life by employing one or more frameworks or schemata of interpretation whose primary functions are attention allocation, providing rules of interpretation and action, as well as expectations about the appropriateness of specific emotional reactions (see Goffman 1974, 22ff.). In recent years, Goffman's frame analysis has gained much prominence among game studies scholars (see the review in Deterding 2009).

[13] *Spec Ops: The Line* has received quite a bit of critical attention, but even though it seems often closer to a 'subjective walkthrough' than the "critical reading" (Keogh 2012) it explicitly aims to be, Keogh (2012) still provides one of the most thorough examinations of the game so far.

[14] *Spec Ops: The Line*'s singleplayer mode was developed by Yager Development, but publisher 2K insisted on a multiplayer mode, the construction of which was outsourced to multiple developers, until it eventually arrived at Darkside Studios. Cory Davis, the lead designer of *Spec Ops: The Line* at Yager, characterized the multiplayer mode as follows: "The multiplayer game's tone is entirely different, the game mechanics were raped to make it happen, and it was a waste of money. No one is playing it, and I don't even feel like it's part of the overall package – it's another game rammed onto the disk like a cancerous growth, threatening to destroy the best things about the experience that the team at Yager put their heart and souls into creating" (quoted in Pitts 2012). Without going into any detail here, it at least seems clear that our analysis would not profit much from the inclusion of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s multiplayer mode.

[15] Later, it turns out that not only Konrad but also the two civilians are hallucinations of Walker, but for most first-time players, the sequence will still carry significant 'moral weight'.

[16] As opposed to the choice whether Walker should shoot the US soldier in chapter four, these choices are further marked as significant via the achievements – "A Man of Patience" / "A Man of Action", "Damned If You Do" / "Damned If You Don't", "Friendly Fire" / "Unfriendly Fire", and "A Line, Held" / "A Line, Crossed" – that are attached to them, acting as a meta-commentary on their respective 'moral weight'.

[17] There are quite a few sequences such as the 'hanged civilians' in chapter nine or the defunct walky-talky that Walker uses to 'talk to' Konrad that are explicitly marked as hallucinations during *Spec Ops: The Line*'s ending and some other elements of the representation such as Adams' face appearing on a US soldier or Lugo's face appearing on a 'Heavy' that are easily recognizable as hallucinations via contextual knowledge. However, *Spec Ops: The Line*'s use of 'markers of subjectivity' – including the way it employs 'fades to white' instead of 'fades to

black' to mark the representation of hallucinations – does not seem entirely consistent. Hence, while the game's lead writer, Walt Williams, holds that "everything after the crash [of the helicopter that the player plays through during the prologue and, once again, in chapter twelve, the authors] is Walker kind of reliving the hell of what he had just done" (quoted in Dyer 2012), a comprehension that does not overemphasize the subjectivity of the cut-scenes and gameplay sequences following chapter nine and focuses on clearly marked hallucinations would, perhaps, be more appropriate.

[18] In fact, this somewhat sloppy disconnect between Walker the game piece and Walker the fictional being also occasionally manifests itself via inconsistencies between the game's cut-scenes and its interactive gameplay. Most strikingly, this is the case with regard to the representation of Walker's weapons. While the player can make Walker pick up and use various different weapons during the gameplay sequences (which, incidentally, one would expect to contribute to the representation of both Walker the game piece and Walker the fictional being), nearly all of the cut-scenes represent Walker carrying a M4A1 carbine and a holstered Beretta M9 pistol – independently of the weapons that he has carried during the gameplay sequences preceding them.

[19] While Walker the fictional being's diminishing restraint is, once more, not afflicting Walker the game piece's ludic abilities, it might also be noted that the animations that are triggered when the player lets Walker 'execute' a stunned enemy get significantly more brutal, as well. While the player may experience the 'executions' differently, then, their ludic function remains the same.

[20] For further discussion of this kind of '(quasi-)perceptual overlay' and other strategies of subjective representation as well as more or less medium-specific 'markers of subjectivity' (such as the 'fades to white' mentioned above), see Thon 2014c, 2015.

[21] Of course, even the fairly linear narrative structure of a game like *Spec Ops: The Line* does not prevent the player from ignoring story progress by, for example, letting the player-controlled character stand around in one of the game spaces for several hours or even days. However, *Spec Ops: The Line*'s predetermined narrative events are closely linked to the continual forward movement of the player-controlled character through sequentially connected game spaces and can therefore fairly unequivocally be said to contribute to the game's story.

[22] In *Skyrim*, each race possesses unique abilites and starts off with a score of +10 in one skill and +5 in five other skills (like 'archery', 'lockpicking', or 'smithing'). Numerical values like these influence the outcome of game actions (like 'shooting a bow', 'picking a lock', or 'crafting a weapon') or unlock new skills. They add to the 'ludic' properties of the character as a game piece.

[23] For further discussion of the transmedial storyworlds that entertainment franchises such as *Star Wars* commonly represent, see e.g. Jenkins 2004, 2006, Klastrup / Tosca 2004, 2014, Ryan 2008, 2014, Thon 2009, 2015, M. J. P. Wolf 2013.

[24] While Thon 2009 uses the games in the *Warcraft* franchise as its main examples, the representational mechanisms and strategies of comprehension described in that context are more generally relevant for the ways in which video games represent storyworlds. See also Thon 2015 for a more in-depth discussion of the ways in which video games challenge traditional theories of representation. Incidentally, quite a few of the studies on MMORPG-specific features that we will refer to in the following use *World of Warcraft* as their main example, but the mechanisms described can often also be observed in other MMORPGs such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic*.

[25] The choice of species does provide the player-controlled character with a species-specific ability, but the ludic function of these abilities is generally negligible.

[26] When first released, the maximum level of the player-controlled characters in *Star Wars: The Old Republic* was 50, but this 'level cap' was increased to level 55 with the expansion *Rise of the Hutt Cartel*, which was released in April 2013. Apart from that, the expansion has mainly added a new explorable planet, Makeb, and a new level 55 'operation', "Scum and Villainy". The second expansion, *Galactic Starfighter*, which has been released between December 2013 and February 2014, primarily introduces player-versus-player (PvP) space combat.