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Intermediality and Digital Games: On Player-figures and Media Borders in *Uncharted 4*

Abstract

This paper will present the argument that Nathan Drake, the *player-figure* in *Uncharted 4*, is an intermedial entity. By this, I mean that he is an entity with the ability to cross media borders. Based on this argument, the concept of gameworlds will be discussed and it will be suggested that the worlds players encounter in modern digital games should be perceived as intermedial landscapes. This landscape is traversed by the player via a player-figure that is imbued with the ability to cross media borders. In doing so, the analysis is meant to highlight the potential fruitfulness of utilizing perspectives from intermedial studies in the analysis of individual games, instead of mostly focusing on processes of transmedial adaptation.

The paper will begin by defining the concept of the player-figure and Nathan Drake as a player-figure will be analysed. It will be argued that by appropriating the same player-figure to different contexts, the player-figure switches back and forth between being perceived as an avatar and a character.

Subsequently, the concept of *intermediality* will be introduced and an analytical framework from that field will be utilized to analyse how the player-figure crosses media borders. It will be argued in this analysis that a fundamental change takes place on the spatiotemporal modality when the game transitions from gameplay to cutscene. This marks a crossing between two qualified media – from that of games to cinema.

In the discussion, the argument is presented that Nathan Drake is an intermedial entity because of the audio-visual consistency of the player-figure, which means it is the player-figure itself traversing the media borders. From a media studies perspective, this paper focusses on the intermediality of the player-figure to highlight how intermedial perspectives can be useful in the analysis of the player-figure and its relations to the player controlling them.

Finally, a jumping-off point for future research will be established, focusing on what intermediality could potentially bring to game studies. Most importantly, it will allow for a more granular analysis of what defines the digital game as a medium.

Key words: intermediality, player-figure, gameworlds, ludo-narrative, media borders, game studies, digital games

Introduction

While digital games are always mediated, seeing as they are dependent on the processing power of computers and (almost) always on some sort of screen output, it is only in recent years that researchers have highlighted the fact that contemporary digital games are something more than just games. Aarseth points out that games, fundamentally, are “complex software programs that can emulate any medium, including film, text/novel [and] graphic novel [...]”¹. He goes on to call these “games” *ludo-narratological constructs*, highlighting their composite nature, consisting of elements from games as well as narrative media². For clarity’s sake, the paper will primarily refer to games as ludo-narrative software. The acknowledgement of the multimodality of digital games seems to suggest that the intermedial perspective would be especially fruitful for the analysis of digital games. This is especially the case for contemporary games that, due to great advances in processing power, can mix earlier and newer media in innovative and interesting ways³. For now, we can broadly define intermediality as a concept describing “the totality of cross-media phenomena, [...] involving a crossing of borders between media”⁴. Within game studies, the intermedial perspective has been used to study transmedial phenomena such as the adaptation of games into movies or tv series into games^{5,6}. This paper makes a distinction between what we could call external intermediality, which focuses on transmedial processes of adaptation, and internal intermediality, which focuses on the crossing of media borders within a single media object. The present paper will not engage with external processes of adaptation across media, but instead focus on the internal intermediality of *Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End* (Naughty Dog, 2016). As such, the object of analysis is the crossing of media borders within the ludo-narrative software itself, between the qualified media that constitute it. Recently, Fuchs performed an intermedial analysis of *Alan Wake* in the same internal vein, focusing on how the constellation of several media managed to create a sense of gothic uncanniness⁷. This paper however, will focus on the *player-figure* of Nathan Drake, the swashbuckling hero the player controls during gameplay.

¹ Espen Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of games”, in *Proceedings of the international conference on the foundations of digital games*, (2012), p. 130.

² Ibid.

³ Jay David Bolter & Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA:MIT Press) (1999)

⁴ Martin Hennig, “Why Some Worlds Fail. Observations on the Relationship Between Intertextuality, Intermediality, and Transmediality in the *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* Universes”, *IMAGE* 21, (2015), p. 17.

⁵ Benjamin Beil & Hans Christian Schmidt, “The World of *The Walking Dead* - Transmediality and Transmedial Intermediality”, *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 10, (2015).

⁶ Martin Hennig.

⁷ Michael Fuchs, “A Different Kind of Monster: Uncanny Media and *Alan Wake*’s Textual Monstrosity”, in *Contemporary Research on Intertextuality in Video Games*, ed. C. Duret & CM. Pons, (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2016)

This article will consist of four parts. In the first part, Nathan Drake will be analysed through the lens of Vella's concept of the player-figure. Next, the concept of intermediality will be presented and an analytical framework from that field will be utilized to analyse how the game transitions between gameplay and cutscenes. Part 3 will discuss the results of the analyses and present the following arguments:

- 1) Nathan Drake in *Uncharted 4* is an intrinsically intermedial player-figure. This distinguishes him as a new kind of media entity, different from earlier, multimodal player-figures.
- 2) The worlds encountered in modern ludo-narrative software should be conceptualized as intermedial landscapes which players traverse via a player-figure that is imbued with the ability to cross media borders.

Finally, a jumping-off point for future research will be established, focusing on how intermediality can contribute to the field of game studies. Specifically, it will be highlighted how intermedia studies can present new perspectives on what constitute digital games as a medium.

I. The Player-Figure

Theory

Klevjer argues that avatar-based gameplay, i.e. games where players take control of a character in the gameworld, creates a sense of bodily immersion which is based on the embodied experience of play⁸. The immersion is not a trick of fiction, but the result of experiencing playing the game. This *prosthetic agency* is created through real-time control of in-game elements⁹. He also remarks that a distinction needs to be made between the avatar understood as a playable character and the avatar as an entity that grants the player agency and presence within the gameworld¹⁰.

This is where Vella's theoretical framework enters the picture. In his dissertation he lays the foundation for his concept of the *player-figure*. He makes an ontological distinction between *avatar* and *character*¹¹. The avatar refers to the player-figure as a *game component*, while the character refers to the player-figure as a *represented individual* in the game's heterocosm¹². He goes on to define an avatar's most important

⁸ Rune Klevjer, "Enter the avatar: The phenomenology of prosthetic telepresence in computer games", in *The philosophy of computer games*, ed. JR Sageng, H. Fossheim & T.M. Larsen (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), p. 14.

⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

¹¹ Daniel Vella, *The Ludic Subject and the Ludic Self: Analyzing the 'I-in-the-Gameworld'*. (IT-University of Copenhagen, 2015), p. 216.

¹² Ibid., p. 217.

characteristic: that all player interactions are structured through them¹³. The character, on the other hand, is both a mimetic representation of a possible person, and a textual construct constituted of signs¹⁴. A character is built up of *characterization statements* (from now on called CSs), a stream of signifiers that allow the player to construct a mental image of a character¹⁵.

This differentiation into avatar and character does not imply a duality. Instead, Vella describes the player-figure as a hybrid-identity, where the player may waver between perceiving it as an avatar or a character¹⁶. This hybrid-identity is possible because of what Vella calls the *double perspectival structure*; that the player has an *internal* and an *external* perspective on the game's events¹⁷. From the internal perspective, the player inhabits the *I can* of the avatar and has a first-personal experience of playing out subjective experience within a domain. From the external perspective, the player sees a translation of events of her being-in-the-gameworld into discourse “in the form [...] of a temporal sequence of audio-visual representation”¹⁸. This again relates to the player either perceiving the player-figure as avatar or character.

On- and off-line engagement

In the coming analysis of the Nathan Drake player-figure, I will be focusing on the differences in perception of the player-figure during gameplay and cutscenes. I will be using the concept of *on- and off-line engagement*¹⁹ to refer to these parts of the game. On-line is to be understood as “the state of ergodic participation that we would [...] think of as ‘playing the game’”²⁰. On the other hand, off-line “describes periods in which no registered input control is received from the player”²¹. When I refer to on-line segments in *Uncharted 4*, I mean parts where the player is granted control of the player-figure by the software. Conversely, off-line segments refer to parts in which the player is not in control of the player-figure.

¹³ Ibid., p. 219.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 371.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 374.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 364.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 364.

¹⁹ James Newman, “The myth of the ergodic videogame”, *Game studies*, 2(1) (2002), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/>, accessed November 13th, 2016.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Analysis

On-line engagement.

During on-line segments, the Nathan Drake player-figure functions mainly as an avatar, a game-systemic entity. This is especially the case during action-filled shootout sequences. Here, the player must fight to survive, not because they fear the character Drake will feel distressed if he dies, but because the player wants to overcome a challenge and progress to the next chapter. Drake becomes a vessel for the player's engagement within the gameworld and has systemic characteristics that structure the player's decision making. For example, if Drake gets shot too many times in a row, the game stops and returns Drake to an earlier part of the game. The player utilizes the actions afforded by the player-figure to overcome obstacles, i.e. find cover and shoot henchmen. It seems reasonable to believe that during shootouts the player identifies as Drake. This is further stressed by Drake's utterances during such segments. If a grenade is thrown near Drake, he will frantically shout "No, no, no, no!". In Vella's terms, this outburst could be perceived as a CS originating from the character Nathan Drake²². However, I would argue that the outburst functions more as a signifier of the grenade having landed within a certain radius of the player-figure, who is implicitly warning the player to get away from it. While this point is arguable, it makes sense if one views Nathan Drake the avatar, as a virtual game object that has certain behavioural properties, which places him on a different level than the fictional²³. The utterance does not characterize Drake as a character who dislikes grenades, but as a game-systemic entity that also functions as a dynamic information source to the player.

During on-line segments of exploration, the Drake player-figure manifests traits of a character through numerous instances of CSs. In Chapter 11, Drake must traverse a Madagascan street market. The player still controls Drake's movement and must guide him towards a destination, but small verbal exchanges and constraints on player actions function as CSs, creating a mental image of who he is as a character. The player-figure fluidly changes between being perceived as an avatar and a character. When walking through a crowd, Drake automatically squeezes through crowds and occasionally mumbles "Excuse me".

²² Daniel Vella, p.393.

²³ V.M. Karhulahti, "Suspending virtual disbelief: a perspective on narrative coherence", in *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*, ed. D. Oyarzun, F. Peinado, R.M. Young, A. Elizalde, G. Mendez (Berlin: Springer, 2012)



Figure 1 Drake traversing a Madagascan street market

Source: YouTube²⁴

Here, a combination of dynamic mimetic elements²⁵, i.e. the context-based animation of the player-figure and voice, create an image of Drake as a character, not a game-systemic entity. While it could be argued that the cover and shooting animations experienced during shootouts also characterize Drake, the point made here is that the dynamic mimetic elements utilized in the street market are more overtly expressive about Drake, since they are unique to him. Drake's companions, who occasionally join him in battle, are programmed to shoot and take cover using the same animations as Drake.

Further on, the player can choose to buy an apple from a vendor. If the player chooses to do so, she does not get a health bonus or any kind of boost to their avatar's systemic attributes. Instead, this serves as another dynamic mimetic element where the player, through her actions, decides what type of character Drake is.

²⁴All Figure sources: Youtube (2016). *Uncharted 4 Gameplay Walkthrough Part 1 FULL GAME 1080p No Commentary (Chapter 1-23)*. RabidRetrospectGames. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxaw6CqVMss>

²⁵ Daniel Vella, p. 393.



Figure 2 Drake buys an apple from a vendor

The most notable CSs stem from the lack of player actions possible in the market sequence, compared to the wealth of actions possible during shootouts. Besides walking and looking, the only other possible action is to “look closer”, which makes the game camera zoom in. This action is performed by pressing the button that normally makes Drake aim his weapon. Although the 3D model of the player-figure is visibly equipped with a gun and rope hook, they are no longer signifiers of possible player actions, but are part of the character’s costume²⁶, characterizing him as an experienced adventurer. This shows how the player-figure’s features, both semiotic and mechanical, can be appropriated to different contexts, thereby facilitating the seamless change back and forth between avatar and character.

Off-line engagement.

During off-line segments, the Drake player-figure functions only as a character. I would argue that the player, no longer having agency within the gameworld, takes on an external perspective on the events of the game. Although the word ‘cutscene’ may have problematic implicit meanings, I will summon it now to help properly explain what these off-line segments are. According to Klevjer, a cutscene is a “cinematic sequence that suspends regular gameplay in order to convey plot, characterization and spectacle”²⁷. Because the Uncharted series is deeply inspired by action-adventure cinema, the cutscenes are indeed cinematic elements that form the most explicitly narrative parts of Uncharted 4. Here, the player is fed a stream of static mimetic CSs²⁸, as if they are watching a movie. Static mimetic elements are

²⁶ Ibid., p. 379

²⁷ Rune Klevjer, “Cut-scenes”, in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron, (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2014), p. 301.

²⁸ Daniel Vella, p. 376

“statements regarding fixed (or relatively fixed) facts regarding a character” such as name and appearance²⁹. Some might argue that the instances in cutscenes, where the player is asked to choose a response on Drake’s behalf, turns the player-figure into an avatar. I would argue that this is not the case since these choices, like the situation with the apple vendor, only serve to characterize Nathan Drake. What is particularly interesting when examining Drake as a character in off-line segments is how much emphasis is put on showing his face to the player. Because of the sophistication of the performance capture technology used, Drake’s expressiveness during cutscenes is very impressive. It thereby foregrounds him as a represented individual. As engagement changes from off-line to on-line, the view of Drake’s back signals the change from character to avatar. He is stripped of his salient characteristics and reconfigured into a vessel.



Figure 3 Drake player-figure off-line



Figure 4 Drake player-figure on-line

²⁹ Ibid.

This concludes the analysis of the Nathan Drake player-figure. It has attempted to demonstrate how Drake can switch between being perceived as an avatar and a character by the player. The fluidity of this transformation process is important for this paper's argument that the player-figure is an intermedial entity. By reconfiguring the same player-figure, players are confronted with a visually coherent player-figure that is imbued with the ability to cross media borders, instead of being split into several different representations.

II. Intermediality

Theory

Intermediality is the study of all instances in which different media interact with each other, assuming a theoretical "in-between space" where these interactions take place³⁰. In Elleström's words, intermediality is something "that sometimes 'happens'; an effect of unconventional ways of performing medial works"³¹. As such, it is important to define what intermediality means in the context of this paper³².

The intermedial focus of this paper is the subcategory of *media combinations*³³. This is to be understood as media objects that combine "at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation"³⁴. Of interest for this paper is the crossing of borders between qualified media, considered a key intermedial phenomenon^{35;36}. Because of *Uncharted 4's* status as a piece of software, within which are encompassed several distinct media, I believe it is ripe for intermedial analysis because of the novel ways it seamlessly changes between those media. The word "media" has been thrown around quite a lot by now. Let me elucidate what the term means in the context of the coming analysis. Elleström divides the medium into *basic media*, *qualified media*, and *technical media*³⁷. Basic media are media that are "mainly identified by their modal appearances" such as "still images", "moving images" or "organized non-verbal sound"³⁸. Qualified media are what we would normally call "art forms

³⁰ Irina Rajewsky, "Intermediality, intertextuality and remediation", *Intermedialités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques Intermediality: / History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies* 6 (2005), p. 46.

³¹ Lars Elleström, "The modalities of media: A model for understanding intermedial relations", in *Media borders, multimodality and intermediality*, ed. Lars Elleström (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 28.

³² Irina Rajewsky, p. 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Irina Rajewsky, p. 46.

³⁶ Lars Elleström.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

and other cultural media types” which are constituted by both historic contexts and communicative conventions, and which consist of basic media³⁹. While the first two categories are abstractions that help us understand how media are formed, technical media are the physical objects or physical phenomena that “‘realize[...]’ and ‘display[...]’ basic and qualified media”⁴⁰.

These distinctions help me clarify my last statement: When I talk of the novel ways the *Uncharted 4* software transitions between media, I am referring to transitions between qualified media. As will become clear when I begin my analysis, I am interested in the ways the software transitions from the qualified medium of games to the qualified medium of cinema.

To properly analyse these transitions, I will be utilizing Elleström’s analytical framework, based on his *four modalities of media*. The term “modality” is related to the term “mode”, which is a “way to be or do things”⁴¹. In Elleström’s analytical framework, which will be introduced presently, he uses the term “modality” to refer to the different ways media can manifest themselves. He describes these modalities as “the essential cornerstones of all media without which mediality cannot be comprehended [...]”⁴²

The first of the four modalities is the *material modality*, referring to “the latent corporeal interface of the medium”⁴³.

Second is the *sensorial modality*, which relates to the “physical and mental acts of perceiving the present interface of the medium through the sense faculties” – through sense-data, receptors, and sensation⁴⁴.

Third is the *spatiotemporal modality*. This modality covers “the structuring of the sensorial perception of sense-data of the material interface into experiences and conceptions of space and time”⁴⁵. In other words, this modality refers to the way a person perceives and constructs the experience of space and time in the medium at hand.

Finally, the fourth modality, *semiotic modality*, relates to the “creation of meaning in the spatiotemporally conceived medium by the way of different sorts of thinking and sign interpretation”⁴⁶.

For my analysis of *Uncharted 4*, I will be focusing on the spatiotemporal modality since I believe an important shift happens in this modality when the game transitions between gameplay and cutscene. I will argue that this shift in modality marks a

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴² Ibid., p. 15.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

transition between games and cinema.

Analysis

Please note that in the following I will be writing numbers in parentheses, the decimals will refer to the images within Figure 5.

Setting the scene

In chapter 8, Drake and his brother are exploring a cave-system.

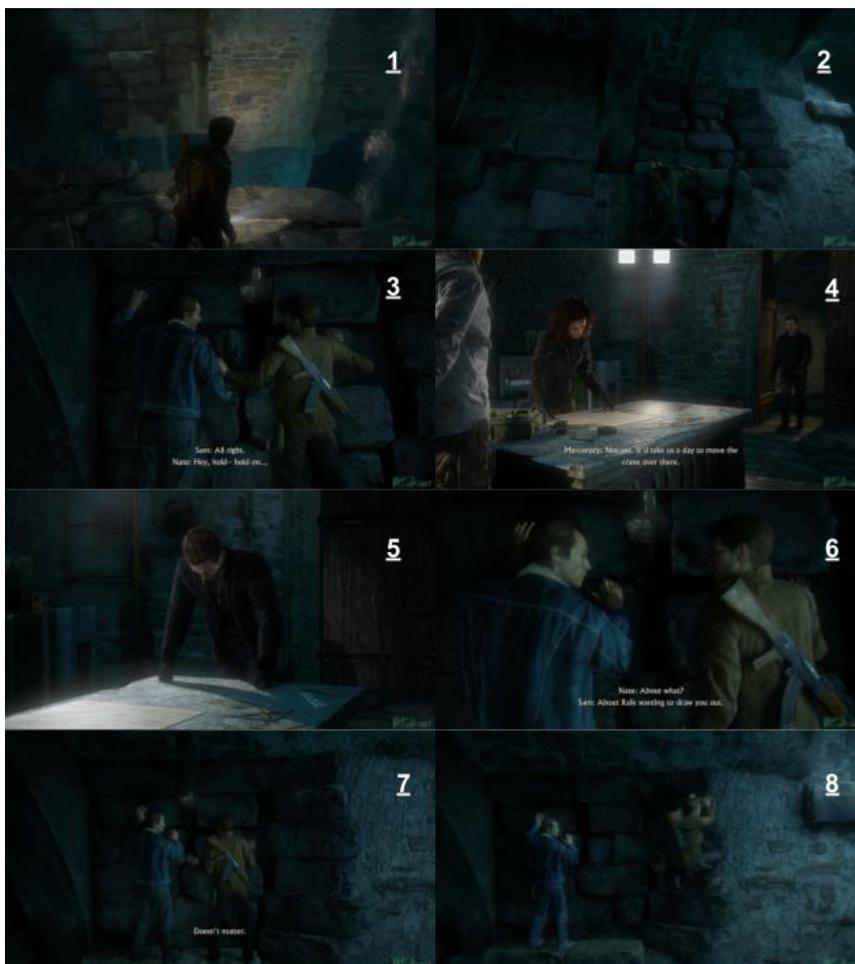


Figure 5 Transitions between on- and off-line segments

The player is in control of the player-figure, meaning its current status is an avatar (5.1). Occasional chat between the brothers deploys verbal CSs that characterize

their relationship. The player steers through the cave-system and begins climbing a wall (5.2). As they press the jump button, which makes the player-figure jump up onto a small ledge, they lose control of the player-figure and the camera closes in on the brothers (5.3).

A cut, and the viewer is now witnessing a conversation between the antagonists, which the brothers are listening in on (5.4).

As their scene ends (5.5), it cuts back to the two eavesdropping brothers (5.6).

As they converse, the camera automatically pulls out (5.7) and control of the player-figure is returned to the player (5.8).

Time and space

It is the argument of this paper that a change in modality has occurred within *Uncharted 4*, thus signalling a transition between the media encompassed within. For this analysis, I will focus on the changes happening on the spatiotemporal level, since this modality most effectively indicates the crossing from the medium of games into the medium of cinema.

If we begin by looking at the temporal level, the change is obvious. We move from the *partially fixed sequentiality* of games to the *fixed sequentiality* of cinema⁴⁷. I refrain myself from claiming that *Uncharted 4* has *non-fixed sequentiality*, since the game's linear nature does not leave much room for the player to improvise.

On the spatial level, it is not as easy to use Elleström's concepts of spatiality to make relevant distinctions between the types of space the player encounters during on- and off-line segments. Instead, I will use the concepts of *gameworld interface*⁴⁸ and *scenographic space*⁴⁹ to make these distinctions.

During on-line engagement, the player controls Nathan and must navigate the cave without falling to their death. The world is presented to the player in a wide view, allowing her to survey the world through the player-figure. Also, the player can control the view she has of the gameworld. Small reliefs of stone communicate to the player that she can grab them. The space functions as a *gameworld interface*, a space that's "designed to support and inspire certain gameplay activities" and which allows the player to "take gameplay-relevant actions within the gameworld"⁵⁰. The space changes as soon as the player loses control of the player-figure and thus also the view they have of the gameworld, signalling a change to a different modality.

The nature of the space changes to that of a scenographic space, where the player,

⁴⁷ Lars Elleström, p. 19.

⁴⁸ Kristine Jørgensen, *Gameworld Interfaces*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press) (2013)

⁴⁹ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge) (2013[1985])

⁵⁰ Kristine Jørgensen, pp. 2-3.

now a passive viewer, constructs the world through visual and auditory cues⁵¹. Unlike before, the player cannot control where they want to look, but are fed cues that help them construct the space in their minds. This is most explicitly the case with the room in which the antagonists converse since the player-figure will never set foot in that room. The room's function is not to feed the player information about relevant gameplay actions, but to set up expectations for the unfolding narrative. From this perspective, it could be argued that a change has also taken place on the *semiotic modality*, since the player/viewer employs different types of "sign thinking and interpretation" depending on whether the player perceives the represented space as a gameworld interface or as a filmic, scenographic space⁵². What is important to note is that this perception of space is dependent on whether the player can control the perspective (i.e. the camera) or not. Keep in mind that the scenographic space is still technically constructed in the same way as the gameworld interface: inside a game engine. The fundamental difference is that the player during on-line segments can control the perspective and thus engage with the world in a different way than if they did not control it. Interactivity, it seems, also plays a big part in cueing the player/viewer to employ a specific type of sign interpretation.

Based on this analysis, I am arguing that a transition has taken place between two qualified media: games, and cinema. What is particularly interesting is the seamless nature of these transitions, which can be quite jarring when the player is engaged in the real-time control of the player-figure. This seamlessness rests on the design decision to present the player with information in an ecological, integrated manner in a way that does not draw players' attention to the fact that they are playing a game⁵³.

Before I move on to discussing the implications of these blurred media borders, I will quickly summarize the results of my analysis.

By analysing the player-figure of Nathan Drake, I determined that he is mainly perceived as an avatar during on-line segments of gameplay, but that he was able to manifest traits of a character through different kinds of CSs. During off-line segments, he was perceived only as a character. This transformation from avatar to character is seamless because of the constant reappropriation of the same player-figure.

In my analysis of the player-figure's media border crossings, I concluded that the modality of the software changed fundamentally on the spatiotemporal level, turning the heterocosm from a gameworld interface during on-line segments, to a scenographic, filmic space during off-line segments.

⁵¹ David Bordwell, p. 113.

⁵² Lars Elleström, p. 22.

⁵³ Kristine Jørgensen, p. 147.

III. Discussions and Contributions

The Player-Figure as an Intermedial Entity

As has been pointed out in the analysis, *Uncharted 4* jumps to-and-fro between different qualified media. It does so in an almost seamless way, both by reconfiguring the player-figure and the perspective on the space the figure inhabits. But does this seamlessness exclude it from being categorized as an intermedial phenomenon? Rajewsky highlights digital media's ability to simulate earlier media forms and to erase perceptible media differences⁵⁴. This is certainly problematic since the study of intermediality is based on the existence of perceptible borders, which can be crossed. With that said, this paper would like to present an idea of where this perceptible border might be found.

In ludo-narrative software, the perceptible border between media is grounded in the player-figure and its ability to be mapped onto several qualified media in a way that is perceived as being coherent. Nathan Drake as a player-figure can be either a game-systemic entity, i.e. an avatar, or a character. We as players perceive him as a unified whole and this is key to him being an intermedial entity. Another very perceptible way that the player-figure signals a crossing between media borders is by having the player relinquish control of it.

Multimodal and Intermedial Player-Figures

This does not mean that all player-figures are intermedial. Cloud, the protagonist from *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) could certainly be called a multimodal player-figure with the hybrid-identity of both an avatar and a character⁵⁵. However, the player-figure of Cloud is built up of several different audio-visual representations. Avatar-Cloud is a small polygonal man during on-line segments of exploration and a slightly more realistically proportioned man during combat. The Character-Cloud found in off-line segments is a wholly different, third representation. This compartmentalization of several different player-figures makes the types of border crossings seen performed by the player-figure in *Uncharted 4* impossible. This does not make the intrinsic intermediality of Nathan Drake in *Uncharted 4* some technological goal that developers should strive for. Instead, the realization that a player-figure can consist of several representations opens new avenues of inquiry. What implications do these multiple representations have aesthetically, ontologically,

⁵⁴ Irina Rajewsky, p. 62.

⁵⁵ Andrew Burn & Gareth Schott, "Heavy hero or digital dummy? Multimodal player-avatar relations in *Final Fantasy 7*", *Visual Communication*, 3(2) (2004).

functionally? The recent *World of Final Fantasy* (Square Enix, 2016) acknowledges the multiple representations of its protagonists and incorporates their shape-shifting abilities as a part of gameplay. What does this self-reflexive design practice tell us about the ontology of the player-figure? This brings up another point. While Vella's study of the player-figure is very detailed, many of his analyses are based on games developed in western countries. Except for a footnote mention of *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square, 1999), all the role-playing games mentioned in his dissertation are western. It would be interesting to analyse how Japanese role-playing games utilize multiple representations to create a coherent player-figure. As Fuchs points out in his analysis of *Alan Wake*, the co-presence of several representations of the same character can have an aesthetic function, e.g. to create discomfort⁵⁶.

In summary, Nathan Drake in *Uncharted 4* is intermedial because he is audiovisually consistent across media, in a way that has been hard to achieve until now for technological reasons. This consistency is instrumental for the player perceiving the player-figure as both an avatar and a character. Even in the previous game, *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* (Naughty Dog, 2011), changes from off- to on-line engagement are marked with a second of black screen. This second of black is a way of compartmentalizing the player-figure into different modal strata. The player-figure is multimodal in this instance but not intermedial, since the figure itself is not crossing any media borders.

The observation that the Nathan Drake player-figure in *Uncharted 4* is an intermedial entity brings me to my next point.

Discussing Spatiality in Digital Games

If we accept the argument that Nathan Drake in *Uncharted 4* is an intermedial player-figure, we must also accept how this problematizes the ways digital game worlds are conceptualized. As was argued in the analysis – in tandem with the player-figure's transformation from avatar to character and the player's loss of control of it – the spatiotemporal modality of *Uncharted 4* changes. Instead of being a gameworld interface, it transforms into a filmic, scenographic space. The implication of this is that we can see the world of the ludo-narrative software as an *intermedial landscape* that can be both a gameworld and a traditional filmic space. It is never *just* a gameworld or a scene, it is something in-between and can switch between these. To echo Aarseth⁵⁷, it would be metonymic to simply call them *gameworlds* since the world in *Uncharted 4* is used as much more than an obstacle course for players to conquer. While the concept of intermedial landscapes is used by Fuchs in his analysis of *Alan Wake*'s uncanny, gothic world, it is used in this paper to call attention to a fundamental characteristic of the worlds players are confronted with when they play

⁵⁶ Michael Fuchs, p. 47

⁵⁷ Espen Aarseth, pp. 129-133.

modern digital games.

This paper suggests that *the worlds players encounter in ludo-narrative software should be conceptualized as intermedial landscapes which the player traverses via a player-figure that is imbued with the ability to cross media borders*. It seems salient at this juncture to point out that this view builds on the fundamental observation that videogames are not simulations, but virtual worlds that are ontologically distinct from the physical world⁵⁸. *Uncharted 4* is not a simulation of the physical world but is its own virtual realm in which these border crossings are a very real phenomenon.

Finally, future research endeavours utilizing the intermedial perspective will be outlined.

IV. Future Research

Towards a Conceptualization of the Digital Game Medium

The intermedial approach could potentially be useful in the investigation of understanding what digital games are as a medium, beyond simply calling them a “virtual hypermedium”⁵⁹. What is the medium of games? What borders surround it and how do we identify these? Wolf states that media borders are created by conventions⁶⁰. Elleström’s concepts of the two *qualifying aspects of media* could be useful for investigating these conventions⁶¹. The *contextual qualifying aspect* relates to the use of a medium in specific historical, cultural, and social circumstances⁶². By performing analyses of the discourses, practices and conventions surrounding the videogame medium, we gain insights into its evolution, but more importantly we may be able to discourage the use of normative views and colloquialisms⁶³. The second aspect, *the operational qualifying aspect*, relates to the aesthetic and communicative conventions of a medium⁶⁴. Much work has been done in this field, with researchers from different disciplines attempting to describe and explain how videogames as a medium communicate and foster aesthetic experiences.

In this academic context, the intermedial analysis of individual games that could be

⁵⁸ Veli-Matti Karhulahti, “Do Videogames Simulate? Virtuality and imitation in the philosophy of simulation”, *Simulation & Gaming* 46:6 (2015), p. 845

⁵⁹ Chiel Kattenbelt, “Intermediality in theatre and performance: Definitions, perceptions and medial relationships”, *Cultura, lenguaje y representación: revista de estudios culturales de la universitat Jaume, 6* (2008), p. 23

⁶⁰ Werner Wolf, *The musicalization of fiction: A study in the theory and history of intermediality*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi) (1999), p. 37, in Lars Elleström, p. 28.

⁶¹ Lars Elleström, p. 24

⁶² Ibid., pp. 24-25

⁶³ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

categorized as unconventional medial works would be particularly interesting. To use this paper as an example, by being aware of communicative conventions from several qualified media, an argument has been formulated that relates to the ontology of ludo-narrative software and the modern player-figure. Wolf writes that media function “as cognitive frames for authors as well as recipients and are therefore [...] part of the message itself”⁶⁵. This suggests that the individual media present in the media constellations we normally call “videogames” have a great impact on the experience that emerges when interacting with the media object. As a future research endeavour, it could be interesting to analyse contemporary experimental games that combine media in novel and surprising ways. Examples of this could be *Cibele* (Star Maid Games, 2015), *Her Story* (Barlow, 2015) or *Uriel’s Chasm* (Barry, 2014). All of these games utilize real video footage captured in the physical world, but they utilize this footage in a different way than they were used in the 90’s, when the future of games was envisioned as being a combination of action cinema and shooting games (see *Sewer Shark* (Digital Pictures, 1992)). Kattenbelt writes about intermedial studies being a way to investigate “those co-relations between different media that result in a redefinition of the media that are influencing each other [...]”⁶⁶. This seems like an interesting avenue of research and one which this paper hopes to contribute to. How is the inclusion of the basic medium of ‘moving images’ reshaped by being put in different types of ludo-narrative software? In *Sewer Shark* it serves as part of the gameworld, with video footage being overlaid on a game interface and sprites of enemies. In *Her Story*, the video clips of a woman being interrogated are framed more like collectible objects, with the player tasked to unearth as many clips as possible to solve a murder mystery. What could an analysis of this change in convention potentially tell us about the medium of videogames? What does it tell us about how the borders surrounding the ludic medium have been reshaped in the last 20 years? What Kattenbelt’s quote also suggests is that the search for a clearly definable digital game medium is futile. The field of game studies has struggled with defining games since its conception. I certainly do not think that an adequate, stable definition can be found, but a history of game media conventions would have academic and historic value. For investigations like these, Elleström’s analytical framework of the four modalities would be a powerful tool for thinking about these (un)conventional media constellations with greater granularity. As Schut points out, every time a medium is presented in a digital game, it is no longer the exact same medium as before, since it is put in a new context.⁶⁷

Wolf writes that the study of intermediality, “if carried out wisely”, will strengthen the core of the field of study⁶⁸. While it is not entirely clear what Wolf means by

⁶⁵ Werner Wolf, “The relevance of ‘mediality’ and ‘intermediality’ to academic studies of English Literature”, in *Mediality/Intermediality (Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 21)*, ed. A. Fischer, M. Heusser and A.H. Juncker (Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 2008), p. 23

⁶⁶ Chiel Kattenbelt, p. 25

⁶⁷ Kevin Schut, “Media Ecology”, in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron, (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2014), p. 329.

⁶⁸ Werner Wolf, p. 21.

“wisely”, perhaps Elleström’s advice to study all kinds of media “with a high level of awareness of the modalities of media and the crucial modal differences and similarities of media” is an answer⁶⁹.

The more we know about videogames as a medium, the closer we get to answering the question of what games are as a phenomenon, and this would be an important milestone⁷⁰.

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⁶⁹ Lars Elleström, p. 38.

⁷⁰ Espen Aarseth, “Ontology”, in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron, (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2014).

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