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Creative Computer Games Design
Dissertation Proposal

Proposed question for Independent Inquiry: How does immersion within a video game's Avatar,
World and Causality effect the psychology of the Player?

Keyword One: Avatar

Keyword Two: Causality

Keyword Three: Affect

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INTRODUCTION:

The Video Game industry has been advancing quickly for the past fifty years. Technology increases faster and more immersive games are released every year. The Video Game market has grown to be one of the biggest markets and Video Gaming has become a primary form of entertainment. And as the industry advances so does the design theories that go into the games that are created, gradually increasing the level of immersion available to the Player. Several aspects and concepts make up player immersion, a few are listed here:

The quality and complexity of Video Game Avatar's has grown and the lines between player and avatar could be blurring.

Many games now allow the Player to choose to play games how they wish, with branching storylines and multiple endings that reflect the Player's in-game decisions.

Video Games have become more real to the Players who inhabit them. These Players could be considered to have found secondary homes within these fictional worlds. These games are effecting the Players Affect.

The above concepts of Avatar, Causality and Affect will be looked at, compared in some instances, and analysed throughout this study using information from several sources on video gaming psychology as well as key industry members, (Will Wright, Swen Vincke and Chris Avellone). At which point the entirety of this study will be considered and a dissertation question will be created.

AVATAR:

The Oxford English Dictionary (no date) has these definitions of the word Avatar:

“(in Hinduism and Buddhism) a god appearing in physical form.

A picture of a person or an animal that represents a particular computer user, on a computer screen, especially in a computer game or on social media.”

A players Avatar could be considered the god of their game, through it a player can exercise complete control of another world, albeit fictitious in nature.

An Avatar is a representation of the Player within the world of the Video Game. Every time a Player loads a game and plays it, they are controlling a fictional object within a fictional world. The Avatar is the appearance of that controlled object and the effect it has on the world and the effect the world has on it.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to distinguish between an Avatar and a Character. The differences between these two concepts were researched by Klevjer (2006), who referred to characters as having “a part of an avatarial relationship”. As a player you still control a character and as such it is still an Avatar. The distinction that shall be used for the rest of this study then is as follows, Avatar is a controllable object the Player creates before playing and a character is a controllable object that is not created by the Player.

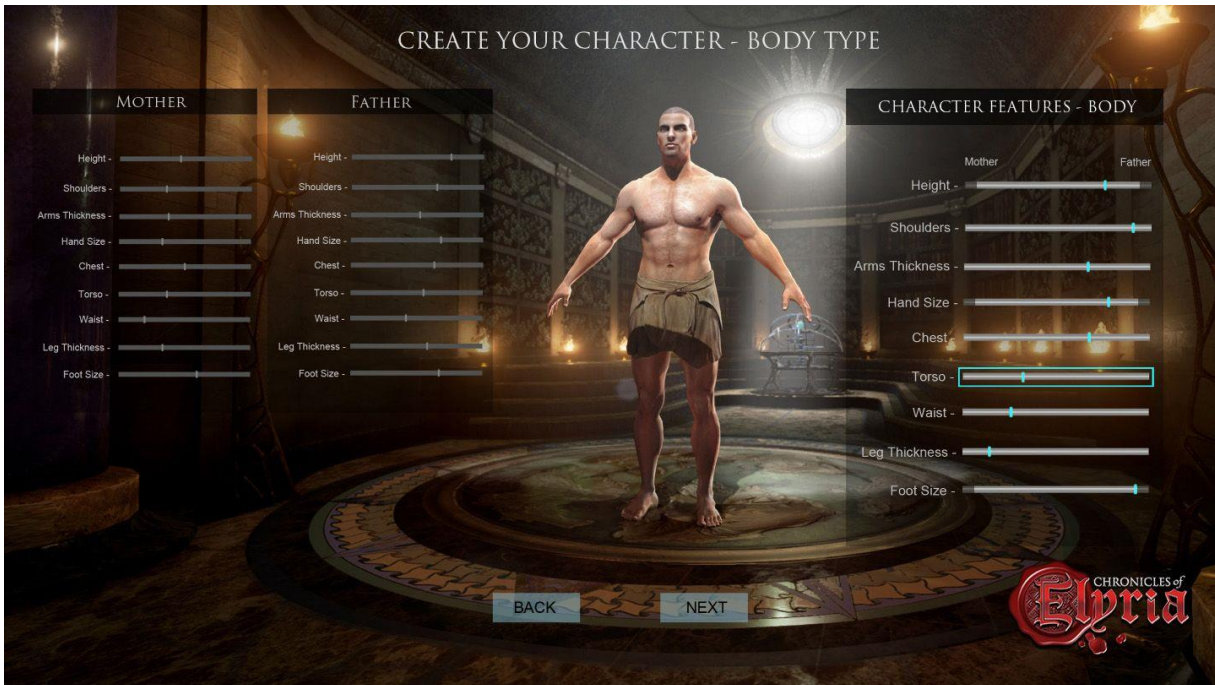


fig. 1.

The above image is from the game *Chronicles of Elyria* (no date) which allows the Player to customise their character based on sliders that alter the body type of your Avatar's parents and then use a second set of sliders to alter which parent your Avatar takes after. This is an example of the amount of control games afford players. Games like this allow you to create the complete personality and appearance of the object controlled within the game world. Other games have you inhabit a pre-made character which in terms of story you have zero control over. These are the ends of a spectrum, many games and game worlds fit into the centre of this spectrum allowing some control by the Player but not complete control.

When the Player can choose the appearance or personality of their controlled object, they are creating an alternate identity. Often the Player can choose to, if they wish, cross racial barriers by changing their Avatar's skin tone, gender barriers by changing their Avatar's gender, and so forth with religion, weight, sexual identification and preference, etc. The completed identity can often vary extremely from the Player's own appearance and personality.

Alternatively, a player could create an Avatar that closely resembles themselves. Or even one that looks similar and acts differently or looks different and acts similarly. If a player chooses to create themselves within the game, does this mean the Player themselves inhabits the game world?

Alternatively, if a player creates an Avatar that is wildly different to themselves does the effect the game has on them differ?

Or could the Player be both themselves and the character they are controlling. Kania (2017) explores the differences in perception between the Player and the character they play. She also speaks of the difficulty in studying Avatar's because you are unable to explore them whilst remaining objective. "the researcher approaching the game with avatar gets acquainted with the artefact while adopting the position of an agent; i.e., a self-avatar primarily situated within the gameworld; and then distancing from it." Due to this, research is made difficult by the connection the researcher unwillingly creates with the Avatar they play. This proves the profound effect the creation of an Avatar has on the Player. However, Gökçay and Yildirim (2011), write that studies have also indicated that when players focus on a game there is a noticeable drop in facial activation. It could be considered, in that event, that the Player's Avatar is more alive than the Player is. In this instance, the Player seems to be swapped out for the Avatar.

Rehak, B. (2003), writes of both the connections and differences between a player and their Avatar. The connection being the very literal control over the Avatar the Player has, and yet, the Avatar can die, resurrect and do the impossible. Yet, despite that, we still feel connected to them.

Swen Vincke, the creative director of Larian Studios believes in the importance of a players control over the Avatar. He measures his games quality on a scale he calls F.U.M.E. The first letter of which is for Freedom of Character Development which he describes as:

"Can you make the avatar you want to play? Or are you forced into a particular stereotype conjured by the designers of the game, who for sure will not have thought of your particular fantasy. It's an important question, because it directly affects how immersed I will be in the game."
(Swen Vincke, 2013)

CAUSALITY:

Mumford and Anjum (2013) describes Causation as the “most fundamental connection in the universe” and details its necessity within our morality. Without consequences there would be no need for decisions or restraint. The Oxford Dictionary (no date) simply defines this as: “the relationship between something that happens and the reason for it happening; the principle that nothing can happen without cause.”

It would seem as though Causality encompasses several elements and concepts. Causality itself is Cause and Effect. Something happens and because of that there is a reaction. This reaction could be desirable or undesirable, leading to reward and repercussion. But it is the cause of causality which is most interesting. The decisions people make each day.

Within the world of the game there is rarely anything that happens without direct cause from the Player, whose decisions, like in the real world, have consequences. These consequences can show themselves in the long term or the short term and there can be one singular consequence or a string of consequences which can be obvious or a lot more subtle. A small action can have a large outcome and a large action can have a small outcome. The analysis of these outcomes and the predictions we make inform our decisions to control Causality. The more we experience causality the more accurate these predictions become and the more desirable our outcomes. But we can never be an expert in all subjects, and we can never account for everything that may occur.

Causality is fundamental to life and is fundamental to games. The Player is always making decisions when they play a game. When to shoot, what to buy, where to go and what route to take. Every button press is a new decision made by the Player. Each of which naturally starts a line of causation. The enjoyment a player receives from a game is because of the outcomes of this causality and keep playing to replicate those outcomes. A good game can manage this enjoyment so the Player will keep playing. But the outcomes of the Players decisions can never be only positive. Sometimes the Player dies or regrets a decision. This is the result of Causality. The outcomes, good or bad, extend from causality. And as the game progresses it can get harder and harder. The risk of a bad outcome would then potentially increase along with a player's experience of the game, making the game more rewarding with every level. If this is the case then, every desirable outcome becomes more profound and along with it the experience of the Player.

In *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), Ahmed, S. speaks of Nietzsche's theories around causality. She refers to 'anticipatory causality' as we come to expect a line of Causality before we act. This is how we learn to control this Causality. Ahmed also writes of Nietzsche's observation of the retrospective attribution of Causality. You only know the outcome once you have explored the decision.

Since there are numerous Lines of Causality it can only be expected that these lines can intersect and create chaos and conflict. It is the centre of that conflict where Choices Matter games thrive. Choices Matter is a genre of Video Game simply dedicated to the Player making choices that change the storyline of the game in dramatic ways.

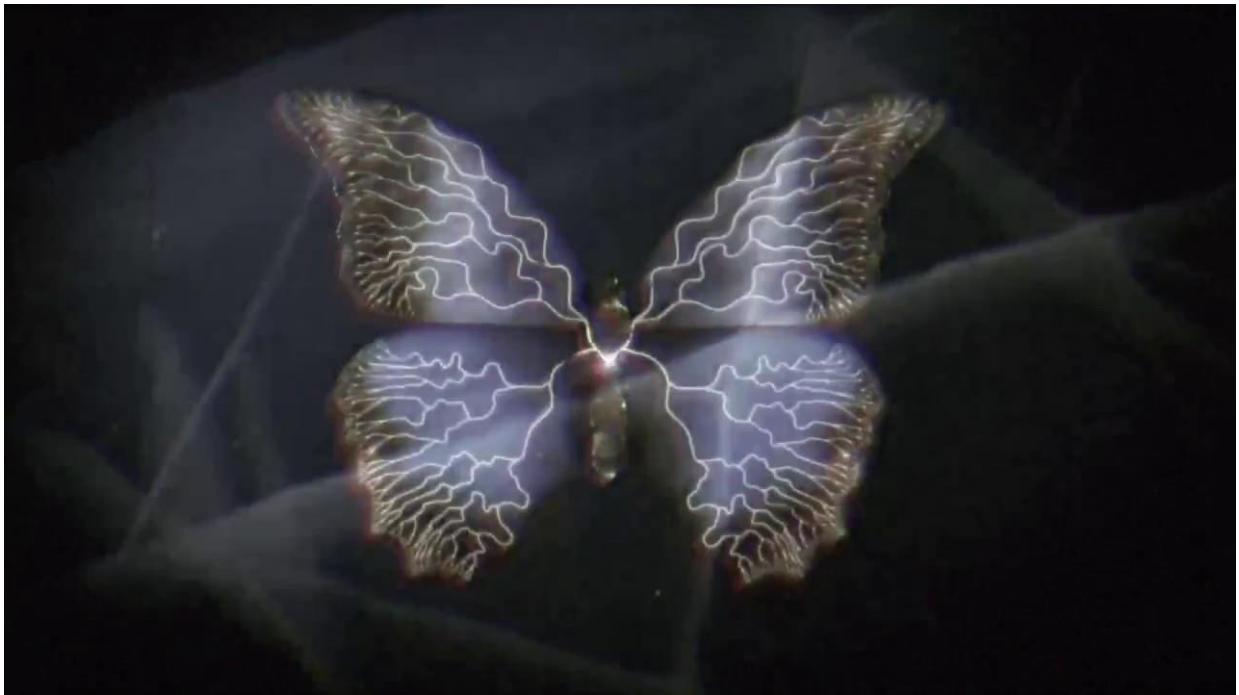


fig. 2.

This is a frame from the opening cutscene of the game *Until Dawn* (2015), a definite example of the Choices Matter genre. The depiction of the butterfly is a reference to the butterfly effect, each of the white lines or paths coming from the centre point indicates the splitting routes of the game as you make decisions throughout that can effect whether or not the characters within the story die.

Chris Avellone (2011), known for his work on the game *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) (Another example of Choices Matter), speaks of the many benefits of cause and effect to a Video Game's

player. He says the ideal situation to place the Player in is one that includes an interesting narrative and well written side-characters and then to allow the Player to create whatever mess they wish and watch the results.

This makes the ideal design of a game a state of controlled chaos, where the Player can experiment within the bounds of the game's scenario, its conflict, and watch the outcomes of their decisions spiral wildly out of control yet head to a satisfying conclusion.

AFFECT:

The Oxford Dictionary (no date) has five definitions of Affect the first of which is simply as follows: “To produce a change in somebody/something.” This would mean that the world around us influences us, physically, intellectually and emotionally and we influence the world in return. Turner (2017) speaks about Affect as having two dimensions, “the level of physiological arousal (from calm to excited) and the emotion’s valence (the dimension of pleasure-displeasure)”. Turner goes on to say that Affect is the constant reassessment of a person’s reaction to internal and external factors. By this definition, Affect is largely the emotional influence an object or event has upon us and that everything affects us, from the mundane to the traumatic. It is this Affect which would allow us to desire and to want, because some things make us feel good and because of that we want it.

Once the world of games is brought into consideration, this definition narrows to more specific function, where it is largely synonymous with immersion, however, this study shall consider Affect as only the emotional effect the game has on the Player.

When compared to other forms of media, first impressions would indicate that Games do not offer the same emotional Affect that other mediums like film and music. However, Gökçay and Yildirim claim that games have the same to offer and give an explanation to as to why games are not immediately associated with emotional Affect, according to them the viewpoint is largely biased by history.

Considering games as though they affect people on the same emotional scale as all other forms of media and in addition as though it could rival real life, then it would be very possible for some players to lose themselves within the world of fiction and neglect the real world.

This already happens on a smaller scale as games begin to affect the Player it begins to matter to them, the characters and the world seem to speak directly to them and then they can begin to feel as though they are inhabiting that world. If this second fictitious world had the same influence on the affect of the Player, then that world would then be arguably as meaningful to the Player as real life.

When talking about the Affect games has on players it is nearly impossible to ignore the argument for video games causing aggression in its players. Turner writes about the conclusion of a large study into aggressive affect in video gamers, “there is no good evidence that playing digital games

leads to aggressive cognition or aggressive affect or aggressive behaviour in the real world.” This would seem to indicate that a lot of the emotions felt by the Player when playing a game are self-contained within that event, and upon stopping play the Player is left with no unusual amount of affect when compared to any other activity or hobby.

Heavy Rain (2010) is another example of the ‘Choices Matter’ genre. The game mechanics of Heavy Rain are designed solely to enhance the Players feeling of control over the game’s characters and as a result, affect the Player more. Gökçay and Yildirim elaborate, “Modern titles, such as Heavy Rain, have adjusted the gameplay/narrative balance and now play like interactive stories, and less like games. In Heavy Rain, for example, game mechanics are used to support the narrative, enhancing the perception of presence and increasing the viewer’s sense of control over the character’s fate.” Heavy Rain is a game that is designed to pull the Players into the game, making them feel every story beat. As such, Heavy Rain could have a very profound affect on its players mood. The game then has a responsibility to the Player, to reward their time and emotional energy. While this could negatively affect the Player it also indicates a higher emotional range available to those who play games over other forms of media.



fig. 3.

The above image is a collage of the various emotions the Avatars within The Sims 4 (2014) can attain. This is an example of the sheer number of emotional affects the Player can give to, or seek out, for their Avatar and in return receive similar stimulus from the game. Will Wright, the creative

director of The Sims (2000), speaks about the emotional range available when playing a game as opposed to watching a film. “The kind of emotions that we can actually get out of games are very different. Things like guilt, or pride, teamwork. A lot of that is based upon agency.”

CONCLUSION:

Within the three sections three keywords have been explored, the differences between Avatar, Character and Player. The way in which Cause and Effect are utilised in gaming genres. And the potential positive and negative ways in which these games can affect the Player. It is clear there is some overlap between each keyword's concept, but these overlapping concepts have not been explored to their full extent. Each keyword appears to connect to player immersion, the way the Player represents themselves, the way they go about making decisions and the way the outcomes effect the game world and the Player themselves. As such the main question the dissertation will answer is this:

How does immersion within a video game's Avatar, World and Causality effect the psychology of the Player?

And the four sub-questions within this are:

If a Player creates an Avatar that resembles them, will they experience a more profound Affect?

Why do Choices Matter style games affect players so profoundly?

Where does the line of Causality begin when considering Avatar, Affect and Causality itself?

Is the Player's Affect influenced positively or negatively by the games they choose to play?

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