# Thrown into the world. Transformative aesthetics of avatars' in-game awakenings.

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## Abstract

A significant portion of narrative single-player digital games makes use of the amnesiac hero's trope to facilitate users' engagement with game worlds and thus shape environments, tales or mechanics wholly characterized by their relationships with the main character's lack of memory. Here, of course, it is worth noting that the term 'engagement' is perhaps improperly used, as it encompasses a number of partly divergent concepts such as immersion, embodiment (among others, see Taylor 2002) and incorporation (Calleja 2011).

This paper analyses several ways in which memory, or the absence thereof, is expressed through digital game aesthetics. This will lead to a more complete understanding of one amongst several ways in which digital games state their self-transformative force on users' identities (Gualeni et al. 2017; Vella & Gualeni 2018) and memory. It is useful to reflect, following M. M. Kania's analysis, upon different ways in which digital games, if we agree with Graeme Kirkpatrick's claim that they "are aesthetic objects before they are anything else" (Kirkpatrick 2011), transform users' self through aesthetic means. Here, of course, we are assuming that aesthetics is indeed transformative, therefore adopting the idea of transformative aesthetics proposed by Erika Fischer-Lichte (Fischer-Lichte 2017). How do digital games aesthetically give us access to memory and memory lacks (or losses), and therefore "transform" users' identities? How do self-avatar's (Kania 2017) memories expressly become part of the player's experience? How do memory lacks or quests for identity characterize both amnesiac heroes and amnesiac characters, and how do they affect players' virtual subjectivity? This text will focus specifically on in-game self-avatars' awakenings, since they act as introductory limbos, or filters, which segment users' transitions inside the game world. This will lead to a first understanding of how digital games diegetically engage with players' identity and memory, re-reading and transforming them through digital world aesthetics.

We will make use, as theoretical and methodological assumption, of M. M. Kania's notion of involved aesthetics, which "provides the player with the experiential perspective that enables her to reflect over herself within a game, as well as over her own situatedness within the game world" (Kania 2017) and thus re-read Sartrean existential aesthetics (Sartre 1978). This text shall propose a first list of aesthetic, diegetic patterns of in-game awakenings that let us reflect, as both players and scholars, on the concept of memory/identity manipulation, overwriting, or annihilation, by including them into three main categories: awakening in womb-alike spaces, awakening in sensory confusion, and awakening without power or without identity. They will include all those elements, and that, of course, strengthen or problematize (or both simultaneously) the link between users, avatars, memory, and identity. It is worth noting that the classification that follows is also not meant to be exhaustive, but rather provisional and open to further enhancements. The text will develop and exemplify this first list by focusing on several examples and case studies.

- Awakening in uterine spaces. Amnesiac heroes mostly embark on their journeys through moments that resemble, if not directly represent, childbirth. They usually wake up in small, dark, and safe areas which resemble uterine, womb-alike spaces of sort.
- Awakening in sensory confusion. Amnesiac heroes, or heroes without memory at all (e.g. new-born babies), often wake up in sensory confusion too: visual expression of memory deficiencies (or absences) can consist whether in defocused blurs, in a massive use of darkness or fading effects, or both these effects and other combined.
- Awakening without power / without identity. The confusing visual expression of memory deficiencies (or absences) is often accompanied by movement restrictions or non-responsive controls, and usually turns into a tutorial. As time passes by, users deal with their own mastery of the game (Vella 2015a) as avatars do with their skills and potential: this often coincides with the recovery of memory or identity too. In addition, few games explicitly consider the constant threat of the amnesia, which recurs throughout the game via symbols, enemies, or the loss of companions: here a diegetic and narrative threat implies a mechanic, ludic menace too – that is, the loss of acquired skills and power.

Considering avatars' awakenings as diegetic births or hybrid diegetic/extra-diegetic transitions is useful to see how, visually and narratively, digital games represent the 'entering' in a digital world as a 'birth', often coinciding with a memory wipe. In many above cited digital games, visual experience and gestural engagement come together with narrative bewilderment or confusion, e.g. Prey, Halo: Combat Evolved, The Witness, and so on. Thanks to their memory losses (or lacks), all of these avatars come into the world as innocent and unprepared as the player do – they both experience the same sense of 'thrownness' (German: 'Geworfenheit') (Heidegger 2001) into an unexplored (and potentially hostile) environment. Users experience a 'thrownness': they are thrown into a world, into a system of rules, and often in the middle of a narrative. The initial subtraction (or absence) of evocative-narrative elements, the aim of which is "to provide evocative means for the interactor to comprehend the virtual space and the events within it, and generate context and significance in order to make the space and the experience of it more meaningful" (Nitsche 2008), then becomes a game design device aimed at express self-avatar's loss or lack of memory. It should be stressed that this subtraction is pivotal, as it deals not only with the gameworld and narratives but also with the player's process of taking a specific virtual subjectivity, based on the expressed memory and identity of the game character.

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## Introduction

Many narrative single-player digital games feature amnesiac heroes to facilitate users' engagement with game worlds[1] and thus shape environments, tales or mechanics wholly characterized by their relationships with main character's lack of memory. These characters often awaken at the beginning of their journey, and their awakening after an amnesiac trauma expresses their diegetic 'birth' as well as their relationship with the player, and therefore their coming to the digital world as subjects (among others, see Gualeni & Vella 2020, Vella & Gualeni 2018, Vella et al. 2019).

This paper analyses several ways in which memory, or the absence thereof, is expressed through digital game aesthetics. This will lead to a more complete understanding of one amongst several ways in which digital games state their self-transformative force on users' identities (Gualeni, Vella, Harrington 2017; Vella & Gualeni 2018) and memory. How do digital games aesthetically give us access to avatars' memory and memory lacks (or losses), and therefore 'transform' our identities? How do self-avatar's (Kania 2017) memories expressly become part of the player's experience? How do memory lacks or quests for identity characterize both amnesiac heroes and amnesiac characters, and how do they affect players' virtual subjectivity? The text will focus specifically on in-game self-avatars' awakenings, since they firstly carry users inside the game world: this will lead to a first understanding of how digital games diegetically engage with players' identity and memory, re-reading and transforming them within the virtual world and through their aesthetics.

## Players, Avatars, and Self-Avatars

Digital games and virtual[2] worlds, as an outcome of the cooperation between various factors (player and its experiential/existential baggage, game designer, hardware features, eventual technical issues, and so on)[3] give players the chance to transform their identities within digital environments, and therefore to give life to something several game scholars called 'virtual subjectivity'.

A relevant part of work in game studies has dealt with phenomenology of being in game worlds, and therefore with subjectivity and existentialism in digital environments. As well as Matthew Thomas Payne, who proposed 'existential ludology' as a field that "[similarly to existential phenomenology] asks about the possibilities and meaningfulness of human action in the [virtual] world" (Payne 2008: 622), ideas such as that of 'gameplay condition' (Leino 2010), that of 'ludic subjectivity' (Vella

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[1] With the term 'world' we indicate, as follows from phenomenological philosophical traditions, "a set composed of beings that are understood together with all their (detectable) properties and mutual relationships", i.e. "that set as experienced by one of the beings involved in it" (Gualeni, Vella, Harrington 2017: 4), experienced in persistently perceivable and behaviourally consistent ways, and therefore intelligible for a being – of course within a certain spatial-temporal context (ibid.).

[2] In this paper, 'virtual world' will be used to indicate "the interactive experiential horizon disclosed by digital media" (Gualeni, Vella, Harrington 2017: 2).

[3] I am implicitly making use of the notion of postphenomenology, borrowed from Don Idhe, as a way to conceive not "how human subjects change their world through technology, but how humans, their worlds, and technologies are all necessary and active parts of each other" (Keogh 2014: 13). A postphenomenological approach, in this sense, therefore recognises that "[t]echnologies transform our experience of the world and our perceptions and interpretations of our world, and we in turn become transformed in the process" (Ihde 2009: 44, cfr. Idhe 1993).

2015a), and that of 'gameplay situation' (Kania 2017) revolve around a further understanding of the existential dimension of in-game subjectivity.

Common ground of all these theories is the idea that the player develops a "subjective I-in-the-gameworld[4] […] while engaging with the game" (Vella 2015a: 22): a subjective standpoint within (in Jean-Paul Sartre's terms (Sartre 1966)) the 'extended facticity' of the game (Leino 2010: 220) that is structured through various mechanisms related to the player's embodiment (Taylor 2002) in the playable figure. These and other factors disclose the possibility, for the player, of self-determination and self-transformation within the game world, and consequently shape its comportment as well as something that we may call ludic subjectivity.

As a core feature of this standpoint it is worth noting that, despite its bond with diegetic and pre-scripted features of the playable figure, the ludic subject is not a pre-existing character that the player finds and simply steps into. Rather, it refers to the player's own sense of its transposed individual existence within the game world, and therefore is brought into being by the player's act of playing itself: it is, just as the Marta Matylda Kania's notion of the 'self-avatar', "an emergent being situated within the gameworld, consisting of the player's existence and intentional acts, and the features of the avatar" (Kania 2017: 7).

If digital games (as multi-layered experiential contexts) favour the emergence of such a virtual, ludic subjectivity, the emergent 'ludic subject' will be characterized, according to existential philosophy (Sartre 1966), by a specific and individual being-in-the(-virtual)-world. Its existential *situation* (idem, 127) will be bounded by a set of facts, 'a facticity', on which basis this subject will develop (similarly to actual subjects) its own existence.[5] In the case of narrative digital games, as already mentioned, this facticity will consist in a sum of interlinked several features, which will include also, diegetically speaking, the experiential background of the playable figure, i.e. its memory – that is to say: when a player at first engages with *God of War III* (SCE Santa Monica Studio, 2010), it has to deal with the fact that its avatar is a time-travelling divinity out for revenge against a whole Ancient Greek pantheon. The unborn self-avatar merging Kratos (the main character of *God of War III*) and the player has to deal with Kratos' background as well as with the player's one.

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[4] We adhere to Marta Matylda Kania's definition of the 'gameworld' "as the existential, spatiotemporal environment of the in-game life as experienced from the perspective of the gameplay situation; […] from the perspective of the aesthetic situation, the gameworld is the anticipated wholeness of the intentional object that the self-avatar expects to concretize by co-shaping the gameplay situation" (Kania 2017: 60). The gameworld "can neither be considered from the "neutral" or "objective" point of view, nor can the individual be comprehended as abstracted from the [game]world. As a result, [we can consider] game as a gameworld that provides the player with a fresh and unique existential situatedness" (idem: 2).

[5] Of course, the overall in-game facticity won't fully determine the virtual subject's existence, which (as well as actual subjects' existence (Sartre 1966)) will always transcend contingencies and aim at existential freedom – nevertheless, and for the reason above, the diegetic expression of avatars' memory (or memory losses, or memory lacks, as we will see in the next few sections) may be pivotal for the meaningfulness of the self-avatars' actions, and therefore for their being-in-the(-digital)-world.

This leads us to the fact that most narrative digital games have to somehow express the experiential background of their main characters too (as to say, their memories) in order to provide the player with a set of contingent facts that determine their avatar's present situation.

This paper shall focus on several ways in which narrative digital games at first engage with players' and avatars' fictional identities and memory, diegetically (and aesthetically, as we will see) favouring the birth of a forthcoming I-in-the-gameworld – M. M. Kania's self-avatar. It will focus in particular on in-game avatars' (and hence players') awakenings, since they de facto act as introductory sections/moments through which digital games engage with both players and avatars. The analysis of several in-game awakenings will lead us to a first understanding of how digital games aesthetically use memory and its representations in order to facilitate or directly encourage the birth of a self-avatar, and will therefore shed light on the relationship between memory, virtual subjectivity, and aesthetics in digital environments.

## Memory and Virtual Subjectivity

It is worth defining what we mean with memory before proceeding, bearing in mind that for the purposes of this paper we will use an operational, provisional idea of memory that of course needs further consideration.

The notion of memory plays a central role, albeit largely unexplored, in how we establish interactive (and creative) relationships with digital environments. In our everyday life "we think of memory as a faculty constituting our consciousness and our self-awareness, as the means by which the coherence of our identity and our history is constructed and sustained" (Terdiman 1993), but the way we think of memory in digital worlds is quite underestimated. In general, we understand memory as something that happens in the present, while it is related to the past: it could simultaneously be a tool, a phenomenon, work or labour, an action (all provisional, operative definitions borrowed by Terdiman). The notion of 'memory' clearly indicates a variety of things and processes. In game studies, it links to avatar studies and existential ludography (Payne 2008), and it deals with digital bodies, virtual minds, and incorporation. In this respect, and provisionally, it may be fruitful to re-interpret Terdiman's claim as follows: we think of virtual memory as a faculty constituting self-avatars' consciousness and self-avatars' self-awareness, as the means by which the coherence of their identity and their history is constructed and sustained.

Memory is therefore significant in conceiving avatars as users' 'prosthetic vicarious embodiment' (Cfr. Klevjer 2006). As we mentioned before, and as we will discuss later, the gaps in (and representations of) memory come to play a pivotal role in (fictional) in-game narrative development. It could be worthwhile to consider how prostheses' long-term or short-term memory losses contribute to game narratives and experiences, but also how, or if, their sensory memory does (we are provisionally using the cognitive psychology model by Atkinson and Shiffrin). Furthermore, all of these different kinds of memory may resonate with identification and narrative empathy (which of course "require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization", (Keen 2006)).

This text will use a fluid, malleable notion of memory in this paper, borrowed by the nascent field of memory studies but still in need for further consideration in order to be systematically included into the research area of game studies and avatar studies. On the occasion of the following discussion, we will implicitly deal with diegetically-expressed memory, and therefore with memory that filters through all of the aspects of one's engagement with game aesthetics, including narrative and mechanics.

## Videogame Aesthetics as Transformative Aesthetics

We will assume that digital games "are aesthetic objects before they are anything else" (Kirkpatrick 2011), as they offer, in resemblance to what Immanuel Kant defined as a fundamental characteristic of aesthetic objects (Kant 1961), "something that is pleasing to us by virtue of its form", and as they "have the kind of form that corresponds to long-standing ideas about aesthetic experience as an autonomous sphere of value" (Kirkpatrick 2007: 80-81). In other words, it is through aesthetic means, i.e. through the means of the form, that digital games implicitly or explicitly provide players with their avatars' memory (and therefore memory losses, as well as memory lacks).

It is worth noting three additional assumptions regarding the bond between digital games and aesthetics, anyway.

To begin with, digital games aesthetics needs to be distinguished from an 'aesthetics of disinterestedness'. This idea, which Sartre borrowed from Kant (Sartre 1966; Kant 1961: §2), defines "the aesthetics stance as free, unrelated to any specific goal, and not interested in the existence or reality of the contemplated object considered to be separate from the perceiver" (Kania 2017: 72). As M. M. Kania points out, instead, digital games (1) co-create with the player the way they can be perceived, and thus require the active role of the player (idem: 72-73). Kania makes use of Roman Ingarden's statements concerning the 'aesthetic situation' (Ingarden 1976), introducing the idea of 'involved aesthetics' as

> "an approach [that] results in the departure from a traditional understanding of the aesthetic as founded exclusively on the special value of the contemplated object, experiences caused by features of the object, or unusual perceptual stance; [an] aesthetics of experience that is oriented in the phenomenological constitution of the aesthetic object, which is contextual and situational" (Kania 2017: 73).

At the same time, Kania adheres to an understanding of aesthetics borrowed from existential aesthetics, according to which (2) "the primary metaphysical function of the aesthetic is to reveal the human being's place in the world and express the human strife for synthesis" (ibid.). As a consequence of these remarks, and in accordance with Kania, we will assume also that

> "in-game aesthetic situation is the moment of realisation of the self-avatar's position within the universe — as long as it is the gameworld they are situated in. It does not imply the

awareness of a world beyond one's situation; oppositely, it implies an awareness of the world as seen through one's own situatedness" (ibid.).

Moreover, according with Erika Fischer-Lichte's idea of a 'transformative aesthetics' (Fischer-Lichte 2017), we will assume that digital games aesthetic experience, similarly to others, (3) "presupposes a phase of separation in which the participating subjects leave behind their daily contexts" (idem: 2), i.e. a liminal state we may identify as the state of "disinterested and free pleasure" Kant wrote about, and that serves "as a precondition of the transformation into a "free subject"" (idem: 6-7). According to what we may identify as Friedrich Schiller's transformative aesthetics (Wihstutz 2017: 110), one of the main functions of art "is to propel its recipients […] into an aesthetic condition, a state of freedom, which keeps the sensual world with its constraints and difficulties of everyday life at bay, leaving scope for the imagination and giving autonomy to the mind" (ibid.).

To sum up, in considering digital games as aesthetic objects we have to deal with at least these three pivotal facts:

     - (1) digital games co-create with the player the way they are perceived, and therefore constitute a contextual, situational aesthetic experience;

     - (2) digital game experience shape an existential aesthetic situation that consists in the realisation of the self-avatar's position within the universe (as long as it is the gameworld they are in);

     - (3) digital games as aesthetic experiences presuppose a liminal phase of separation that propels players into an aesthetic condition, i.e. a state of freedom from everyday daily contexts.

Before proceeding, we shall use a combination of (3) and the self-avatar's emergence discussed in the previous section of this paper in order to explain further the focus on in-game awakenings. That is, we shall point out the fact that in-games awakenings may precisely express the liminality of digital game aesthetic experience, diegetically (and therefore narratively, and therefore visually) representing that liminal phase "in which [the participants, i.e., in our case, the players] are transferred into an extraordinary state that allows for new and potentially disturbing experiences" (Fischer-Lichte 2017: 2); i.e., the first times in which players transpose their own individual experiences within the game world, bringing self-avatars into being by their act of playing itself (Kania 2017).

**Users' First Engagement with Game Worlds: In-Game Awakenings**

A significant portion of narrative single player digital games makes use of the amnesiac hero's trope to facilitate users' engagement with game worlds. As we have seen in the first section, the term 'engagement' is a little improper here, inasmuch as it widely absorbs whole complex (and partly divergent) concepts such as immersion, embodiment (among others, see Taylor 2002) and incorporation (Calleja 2011) in digital worlds, the discussion of which would lead us away from the matter at hand.

However, the amnesiac hero's trope fruitfully and diegetically, narratively lets us reflect on "the transitional moment of 'entering' a virtual world, and therefore assuming a virtual identity therein" (cfr. Gualeni, Vella, Harrington 2017). The introduction of amnesiac avatars facilitates the first liminal phase of engagement with the virtual world and narratives: eliminating the memory of the playable figure, game narratives provides the player with an 'extended facticity' (in Sartrean terms) that is much more easy to familiarize with, at least lightened by the whole significant baggage of experiences of the main character.

These introductions often coincide with gameplay sections that need consideration: we will therefore focus on in-game awakenings that relates to memory lacks, memory losses, or temporary memory breakdowns as a starting point, with the remark that most of the observations we will make also apply to in-game awakenings in general (concerning avatars with memory issues). We shall propose a first list of aesthetic, diegetic patterns of in-game awakenings that let us reflect, as both players and scholars, on the concept of memory/identity manipulation, overwriting, or annihilation, by including them into three main categories: awakening in womb-alike spaces, awakening in sensory confusion, and awakening without power or without identity.

**Awakening in Uterine Spaces**

Often self-avatars find themselves in small, dark rooms, or cells, or corridors, which have only one exit they can rest their eyes on.

Some examples of this particular awakening pattern, which is also discussed by Gualeni and Vella (Gualeni & Vella 2020), include *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), which after a brief contextual introduction opens with the isometric view of a small, dark cave barely illuminated by a distant hole in the ceiling, providing the player with only one way out coloured in grey; *The Witness* (Thekla, Inc., 2016), in which without any advice the self-avatar finds himself standing in a long and dark corridor, with again a barely illuminated distant door at the end; *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006), which begins with a flying shot of Cyrodill and then throws the player in a small cell where its avatar is imprisoned for an unknown crime, a small space lighted only by a torch and a small window above; *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) or *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware, 2019), both starting with a playable hero stuck in an almost entirely dark space (a cell or a pit) only lighted from a distant hole overhead (from which, in both cases, comes an unknown saviour); *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013), that starts with Stanley closed in his comfortable, dark office lighted only by his desktop; and many other games.

Furthermore, amnesiac or no-memory heroes often embark on their journeys through moments that resemble, if not directly represent - such as *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2009) or, more significantly, *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) - childbirth. Link from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD, 2017), almost naked, wakes up immersed in an amniotic fluid in a small, cosy shrine (and surrounded by a motherly voice of sort that invites him to awaken); the main character in *Dark Souls 2* (FromSoftware, 2014) goes along a narrow and dark path until it reaches a bright rift that opens to the hostile kingdom of Drangleic; even heroes that haven't lost their memory 'come to life' resembling the conception, such as the ones from *Fallout 3* and *Fallout 4* (Bethesda

Game Studios, 2015), both rebirthing in a confusing, blinding bath of light as they firstly get out of their underground vaults; or such as the hero in *Final Fantasy X* (Square, 2001), who initially get swallowed up from a giant, formless, semi-organic hole in the sky, and therefore thrown in Spira, which will then become the game world and setting of the following adventures of the game.

Iconographically, these 'childbirths' remind us of the fact that a self-avatar is indeed coming into the (digital) world as soon as players start playing and step into a narrative, and through a space we could say 'gynaecological' (extending Ewan Kirkland's view concerning horror digital games and the uncanny (Kirkland 2009). It is worth noting that they have also a remarkable gameplay usefulness: together with their avatars, players can make experience of these antechambers of sort and thus familiarize with rules, controls, and mechanics in limited, protected spaces that serve as vessels, carrying them to the game world's own system of rules. It is no coincidence that these spaces often become settings of tutorials, or sections characterized by an oversimplified gameplay (for example the 'thing betwixt'-area in *Dark Souls 2,* the vault of *Fallout 3*).

Considering avatars' awakenings as diegetic parturitions or hybrid diegetic/extra-diegetic transitions (see for example the fall from the dark to a luminous crack in the sky in the introduction of *Myst* (Cyan, Inc., 1993), which represent the players' entering into the game) is useful to see how, visually and narratively, digital games represent the coming into in a digital world as a 'birth', which often coincides with an avatar's memory wipe. In all the examples mentioned above, amnesiac or no-expressed-memory avatars can only enter (or re-enter, such as the case of *Breath of the Wild*) the digital world after their previous experience is deleted, or if it never existed: they therefore deal with the game world for the first time, and at the same time of the player – i.e. they deal with the game world as new-borns. Self-avatars' frequent awakenings in womb-alike (small, dark, safe, and with a sole light source) spaces then effectively remind us, and through aesthetic means (visuals, scenic, narratives, soundtracks, ambient noises, and so on), that players play with the memory of a new, hybrid, virtual subject rather than with the memory of their own avatars. When they are born, these virtual subjects simply deviate both from avatars and from players and start dealing with the digital world as new-born identities.

**Awakening in Sensory Confusion**

Digital games often emphasize such a 'childbirth feeling' via the use of defocused blurs, darkness, or both combined (visuals), and through unresponsive controls, movement restrictions, or motor coordination problems (gameplay). This overall 'sensory disorientation' undoubtedly resembles, both aesthetically and mechanically, the post-natal confusion, and thus makes self-avatars, using Sartrean terms, "abandoned in the world [...] suddenly alone and without help" (Sartre 1966).

*Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010) opens with a dark, blurred, and slowed down first-person view of the main character, who (as he understand later) has just erased his own memory and find himself in an apparently abandoned and hostile castle: these first gameplay moments welcome the player with unresponsive visual and controls as well as with a creepy, dark, and haunting environment. The same goes for the awakening of the hero in *Arx Fatalis* (Arkane Studios, 2002), another amnesiac main character lost in a world he initially doesn't know at all. The confusing visual

expression of memory deficiencies (or absences) is often accompanied by movement restrictions or non-responsive controls. This specific example may capture well the link between memory wipe traumas and represented (re)births: it's only after the main character's amnesia, from a narrative standpoint, that the player can step into the playable figure, and therefore assume its control. As soon as these new virtual subjects are born, self-avatars come to life as confused and limited as newly born children.

At the start of *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie Studios, 2001) the hero awakens from a cryonic sleep and, just after a white fade-out, looks at a soldier that helps him recover his basic functions: he hears the officer's muffled voice, sees his blurred silhouette, and initially can't move at all. The first tutorial then is just like a teaching of children: under the pretext of the post-cryogenic confusion, *Halo*'s Master Chief is even taught how to direct eye, and how to move. The same goes for Venom Snake in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions, 2015), who finds himself amnesiac and constrained to bed in a hospital and initially can only turn right or left his head.

Here we should emphasize one of the main mechanisms related to player's embodiment in the playable figure of which Daniel Vella writes investigating the 'I-in-the-gameworld' (Vella 2015a: 266-289), and that we have already mentioned introducing this paper, namely: the establishment of visual and auditory standpoints, and therefore the establishment of a spatial 'here' for the player. Reshaping Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty 2002), Vella gives the spatial dimension of embodiment a crucial role in virtual subjects' perception. He observes "that one of the most fundamental ways in which the body gathers its world around itself is precisely in its giving the subject a position in the world" (Vella 2015a, 274): the playable figure establishes an embodiment of the player in a single location that is upheld systematically, i.e. "a 'here' or 'first position' relative to which […] a bodily space is laid out, with things-in-the-gameworld organized deictically – near or far, left or right, above or below, and so on – along lines extending outward from the playable figure as *origo* or point of origin" (ibid.).

The above quoted sensory confusions seem to work in this respect. As first visual/auditory standpoint establishments, they make clear that the body of the self-avatar (and therefore its eyes, its ears, its movements) is indeed a newly born body, and hence they shape a first significant aesthetics of subjectivity (Vella 2015a) that is marked by the 'inefficiency' of all the senses, and therefore of proprioception too.

**Awakening Without Power, Awakening Without Identity**

Other frequent digital game tropes we are interested in are the main character's awakening with no power and the main character's de-powerment.

When one plays *Fallout 3* he finds himself, for the first moments at least, embodying a new-born child: self-avatar here can't speak at all, can't jump, he can barely move, and therefore he is totally powerless (except for his first interactions with the environment: grabbing some objects, and so on). Similarly, in one of the first sequences in *Assassin's Creed II*, the main character steps into a newly

born Ezio Auditore just as he is getting born: after a white fading, the only thing you can actually do is "press [LEGS] to move your LEGS", then "press [EMPTY HAND] to move your EMPTY HAND", therefore "press [ARMED HAND] to move your ARMED HAND", and finally "press [HEAD] to move your HEAD". In both the cases quoted above, self-avatars awaken with a very limited range of possibilities, i.e. with no power. Furthermore, in both cases an almost-powerless self-avatar indeed coincides with a self-avatar without a structured identity (with no background), i.e. a new-born child.

Moreover, self-avatars often lose their powers as the main quest begins, in its early phase or just before its beginning, and sometimes this happens in conjunction with memory wipes: this is the case of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, for example, in which Link loses his memory as well as his strength, or *Star Wars: Knight of the Old Republic* (BioWare, 2003) and *Star Wars: Knight of the Old Republic II – The Sith Lords* (Obsidian Entertainment, 2004), both featuring an amnesiac hero that lost his powers together with its memory, and has to get both of them back slowly during the gameplay. More frequently, depowering characters is just a means of preserving the game flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1991) despite having a godlike, overpowered main character – e.g. Kratos in *God of War II* (SCE Studios Santa Monica, 2007), who gets killed and depowered by Zeus as soon as the game begins; or Alucard, in *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (Konami, 1997), weakened by the death before entering the castle.

Self-avatars' awakenings with limited powers, with no powers at all, and/or with no identity or memory, let us think to their existential positioning within their virtual worlds. Vella claims that "one of the strongest determining factors that shapes the ludic subject-position in relation to a given game's world is the set of capabilities the playable figure affords her in relation to it, which push her in the direction of certain modes of relation to the gameworld" (Vella 2015a: 287). Virtual subjects' consciousness too, then, as Merleau-Ponty writes, "is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 159): this brings us to some meaningful considerations concerning self-avatars' weakening or no power awakenings.

Firstly, the first moments of life of a virtual prosthetic subject (Klevjer 2012) that come to life with no power are always an initial step of a wider process of growth and development. The 'I can' of the main character of *Fallout 3*, for example, is expanding continuously throughout the gameplay and following well-known RPG patterns, as well as the 'I can' of Ezio Auditore, whose capabilities spread over and over again from his adulthood on (but maintain the same system of rules – i.e. the same pattern of controls). Main characters' strengthening is therefore, as Vella suggests, a matter of consciousness and positioning in relation to the game world: self-avatars who awaken with no power (and no memory) initially find themselves in a transitional moment of limitedness and learning during which they can only do a restricted range of actions – using Vella's words, "during which they are pushed in the direction of certain [restricted] modes of relation to the gameworld". Therefore, they are just like new-born children whose capabilities are limited just as their self-consciousness (at least intended as existential, bodily positioning), and they will be passing their whole life to improve both those capabilities and that self-awareness. Their power increases as well as their wealth of experience (i.e. their memory).

Secondly, therefore, amnesias and weakenings seem to have, narratively speaking, similar properties and directions: as time passes by, users deal with their own mastery of the game (Vella 2015b) as well as self-avatars do with their power improvements, as well as avatars recover their memory and identity too. Quests for identity often coincide with quests for a much higher, supreme power: as the voice of Zelda awakens Link from his amniotic sleep in *Breath of the Wild*, his journey begins in search of both his lost memories and strength (which is needed to recover his Master Sword).

Thirdly, we may read the diegetic and narrative threat of amnesia that characterizes some digital games (such as *Dark Souls* and *Kingdom Hearts* (Square, Square Enix, 2002-2019) series) in relation to an implicit, and not necessarily effective, ludic menace. If self-avatars' capabilities, limitations, power, and of course memory, are all bond to something we may interpret as a 'virtual conscience', then it is not surprising that the loss of memory is often associated with an implicit loss of conscience, and therefore power – and therefore of existential status: characters that risk to lose their consciences, such as Sora in *Kingdom Hearts* (Square, 2002), risk to become out of control of the player – Sora and his friends run the risk of becoming Heartless, and therefore of transforming themselves into their uncontrollable, hostile and unconscious enemies. The same goes for the hollowness in *Dark Souls*.

**Conclusion: An Aesthetics of 'Thrownness'**

Up to this point, we have seen how several aesthetic patterns contribute in shaping an existential aesthetic situation that consists in the realisation of the self-avatar's position within the game universe: digital game awakenings we discussed above are full-fledged narrative, aesthetic devices that strengthen the bound between avatar and player, and therefore encourage critical distance upon the existential implications of the birthing from nothing of a virtual subject.

In many above cited digital games, visual/auditory experience and gestural engagement come together with narrative bewilderment or confusion: self-avatars find themselves disorientated as well as displaced, and initially have no idea at all of what to do – e.g. *Rime* (Tequila Works, 2017), *The Witness*, *The Void* (Ice-Pick Lodge, 2009), and many others. That is to say, they find themselves 'thrown' into the world. Heidegger terms 'thrownness' (German: 'Geworfenheit') a condition in which every subject always finds itself: one is 'thrown to the world' inasmuch as he is characterized by a contingent set of facts that has, at least initially, no control over (Heidegger 2001, Heidegger 2008: 174). As we already mentioned, Sartre claims that this 'facticity' is at the basis of our 'existential situation' (Sartre 1966: 127), and that is on its basis (or against it) that one understands and develops its own existence.

The 'coming out into the digital world' feeling that several videogame awakenings so clearly stress, together with the 'post-natal' confusion or weakening that just woke up or amnesiac self-avatars experience, emphasize the 'thrownness' of self-avatars. Thanks to their memory losses (or lacks), all of these avatars expressly come into the world as innocent and unprepared as the player do – they both experience the same 'thrownness', feeling 'abandoned' in the world (using again Sartrean terms) as soon as they step into it (abandoning the womb, or some womb-alike space).

In addition to those referred so far it is worth noting that this sense of 'thrownness' is emphasized when the just woke up character has no clues at all that, in one way or another, channel its actions (or help self-avatars in developing an existential project (Sartre 1966)). That is the case, for example, of the above quoted *The Witness, Rime,* or of the non-linear experiment of *Cosmology of Kyoto* (Softedge, 1993). All these digital games feature self-avatars with no name, no expressed memory, and (initially at least) no expressed goals: in such cases, the at least initial subtraction or absence of evocative-narrative elements[6] becomes a game design device aimed at express self-avatars' loss or lack of memory, and therefore their estrangement in relation to the world they live in. Furthermore, the lack of goals and targets helps the player to exert his existential freedom, letting him develop his own existential project (Sartre 1966) within the game world.

This text tried to provide a first overview of some aesthetic patterns that revolve around the bound between users, avatars, self-avatars, and expressed diegetic memory. Several game studies areas could be enriched from this first attempt to deepen into the link between videogame aesthetics and memory: avatar studies, existential ludology, and of course virtual subjectivity studies could benefit from such an analysis of patterns that are at the same time aesthetic, narrative, game-design relative, and that of course refer to an (implicitly or explicitly) expressed birth of the 'I-in-the-gameworld'. At the same time, this text is a first step of a long process of understanding and grasp the influence of the concept of memory in digital games and in existential ludology, an influence that of course need further consideration in order to be carefully framed into the question of virtual subjectivity, and to be segmented and harnessed as a factor in game design as well.

**Games**

Amnesia: The Dark Descent, Frictional Games, PC, 2010.
Arx Fatalis, Arkane Studios, PC, 2002.
Assassin's Creed II, Ubisoft Montreal, PlayStation 3, 2009.
Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, Konami, PlayStation, 1997.
Cosmology of Kyoto, Softedge, MacOs, 1993.
Dark Souls, FromSoftware, PlayStation 3, 2011.
Dark Souls 2, FromSoftware, PlayStation 3, 2014.
Fallout 3, Bethesda Game Studios, PlayStation 3, 2008.
Fallout 4, Bethesda Game Studios, PlayStation 4, 2015.
Final Fantasy X, Square, PlayStation 2, 2001.
God of War II, SCE Studios Santa Monica, PlayStation 2, 2007.
God of War III, SCE Santa Monica Studio, PlayStation 3, 2010.
Halo: Combat Evolved, Bungie Studios, PC, 2001.
Kingdom Hearts, Square, PlayStation 2, 2002.
Kingdom Hearts, Square, Square Enix, 2002-2019.

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[6] The term is borrowed from Michael Nitsche's *Video Game Spaces.* He defines 'evocative narrative elements' as "elements implented implemented in the game world to assist in the comprehension […]" (Nitsche 2008: 3), "to provide evocative means for the interactor to comprehend the virtual space and the events within it, and generate context and significance in order to make the space and the experience of it more meaningful" (idem: 45). Of course, as Nitsche repeatedly stresses, they "do not contain a story themselves but trigger important parts of the narrative process in the player" (idem: 3).

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN, Kojima Productions, PlayStation 4, 2015.
MYST, Cyan, Inc., PC, 1993.
RIME, Tequila Works, PlayStation 4, 2017.
SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE, FromSoftware, PlayStation 4, 2019.
STAR WARS: KNIGHT OF THE OLD REPUBLIC, BioWare, PC, 2003.
STAR WARS: KNIGHT OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II – THE SITH LORDS, Obsidian Entertainment, PC, 2004.
THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION, Bethesda Game Studios, PC, 2006.
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD, Nintendo EPD, Nintendo Switch, 2017.
THE STANLEY PARABLE, Galactic Café, PC, 2013.
THE VOID, Ice-Pick Lodge, PC, 2009.
THE WITNESS, Thekla, Inc., PC, 2016.
UNDERTALE, Toby Fox, PC, 2015.

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