Master Thesis Bouke Joshua Leenders

Conventions and Clichés in Interactive Digital Media

MASTER PROGRAM	Creative Industries
DATE OF SUBMISSION	29th of July 2016
SUPERVISOR	Dr. M.J.C.G. Stevens
SECOND ASSESSOR	Dr. L. Munteán

Conventions and Clichés in Interactive Digital Media

Bouke Joshua Leenders

I hereby thank everyone who has assisted in establishing this thesis. My research would, without a doubt, be of far worse without any of you. Special thanks go out to my supervisor Dr. Stevens for his critical stance and on-point feedback throughout the writing process, Anne Braken for her endless support and willingness to listen, Michel Ottens for his insights and my parents for their suitable concerns.
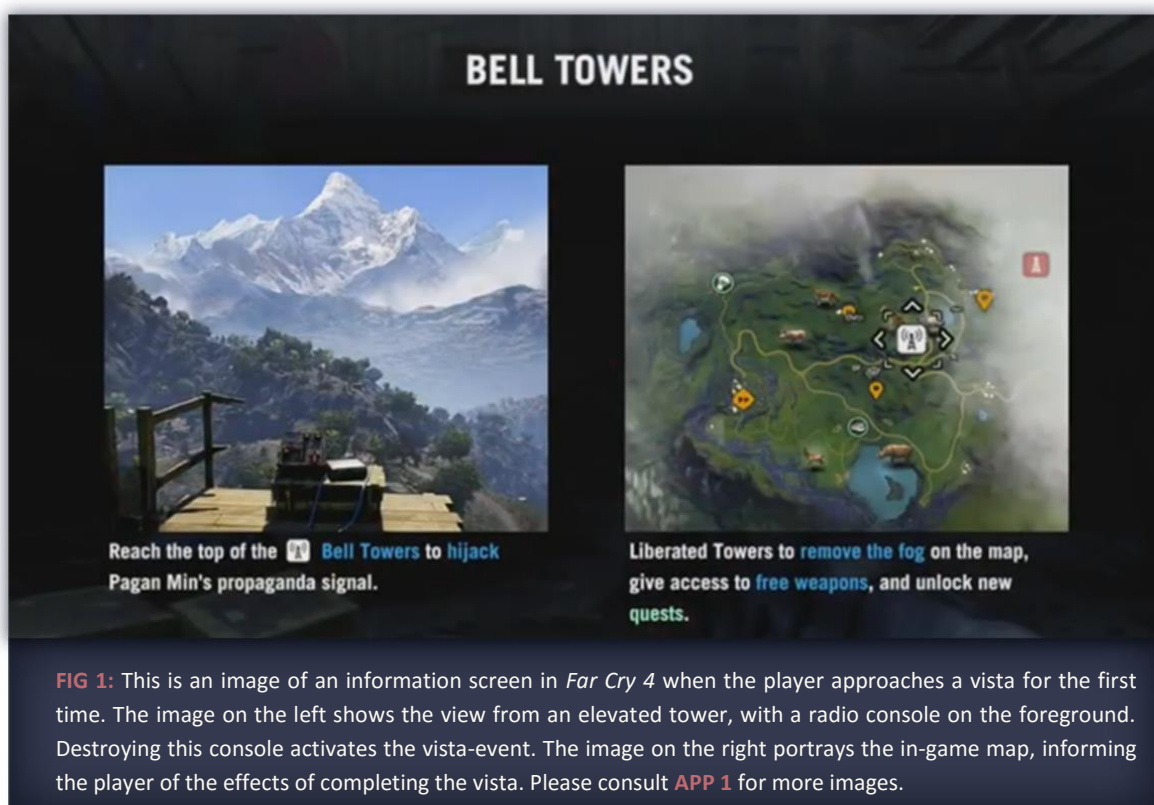
Table of contents

Introduction

Conventions and Clichés in Interactive Digital Media

With the game industry ever expanding, with more titles every year, video games show more and more variations, and develop more deviating characteristics. The popularization of virtual and augmented reality, and the announcement of new consoles like the 'steam machine', will likely result in new kinds of games in the upcoming years. Even though the spare time activity of gaming takes up an increasing amount of our time and money, we know surprisingly little of its particularities on an academic level. Take the vista as an example: numerous games feature this event in which the player is invited to scale an elevated location after which a short clip is presented to the player, showing the area in which the player-character is situated. Particular as this may sound, it has yet to be defined and appropriated in an academic game-discourse. We seem to be able to write about games in relation to other academic traditions, or in relation to real-world case studies, but we have yet to define many of the tropes, conventions and clichés that make up the characteristics of this medium. An abundance of books and articles on the sociological and educational value of videogames in our contemporary society take up this academic field (Steinkuehler, 2005; Ferdig, 2008; Felicia, 2011), whilst scholars still struggle to find the right discourse to discuss particular phenomena like the vista. Handbooks for videogame analysis, like *Computer Games and New Media Cultures* (Fromme & Unger, 2012), are packed with articles indicating that games are merely seen as a form of play and offer hardly any new tools to analyse them. Whereas the formal characteristics, conventions and aesthetics of games are neglected in the bigger picture, there is a trend in contemporary academic literature that is starting to analyse Interactive Digital Media by their inherent qualities. By assessing video games in this way, a game-specific, cultural discourse is slowly arising, although it is still in its early stages.

All of these handbooks and articles fail to mention something as ordinary and widespread as the vista. Are we able to make extensive claims about the game medium, whilst we still struggle to pinpoint its particularities? In this thesis I will set out to find a clear-cut definition, application and role of a trope as mundane as the vista. Through this scope I hope to find in what way the conventional use of these tropes influence the medium as a whole. In other words, my main question

will be: **what is the role of vistas in Digital Interactive Media and how do these types of tropes illustrate the conventional perception within this medium?**

Although many examples of the vista can be found within the medium, almost all titles, even those by the same developer, signify this trope differently. Ranging from vistas, viewpoints, synchronization points and forge towers; an almost comically effort is put into finding new names for this phenomenon between different games. Nevertheless, there is a recognizable pattern between these different applications, sharing visual cues, locations and effects; however, it is yet to be defined. For all these signifiers, the umbrella term 'vista' will be used up from this point to refer to all similar uses. As I define it, the vista is: **an event centred on reaching an elevated location, which is scripted and separable from the overall gaming experience. During this event, the player experiences a cutscene which breaks up the gameplay, changes camera movement, and does not allow interactivity.**

FIG 1: This is an image of an information screen in *Far Cry 4* when the player approaches a vista for the first time. The image on the left shows the view from an elevated tower, with a radio console on the foreground. Destroying this console activates the vista-event. The image on the right portrays the in-game map, informing the player of the effects of completing the vista. Please consult **APP 1** for more images.

This is also what makes it different from regular viewpoints or lookout points, as these are mere locations explorable at the players' convenience. In the case of the vista, the player has to reach a specific location, perform a certain task and press a button to put this event into action. This trope is not core to the gameplay and is certainly not a central action on which the rest of the game depends.

An appealing case study is the bell, or radio tower in *Far Cry 3* (2012) and *Far Cry 4* (2014) which the player encounters during the game-experience. The player can scale these towers by climbing ledges, jumping over caved-in scaffolding, risking falling to death on their way to the top. But, when the way to the top is found, the player is rewarded with some in-game items, experience points and an update of their map; revealing new locations of quests and items (**FIG 1**). Without the vista, the player would have been left in the dark about much of the information about the gameworld. To some extent, especially during the beginning of the game, the player is aimed towards these vistas, clarifying its practical use as well as its relation to the game's story.

This young medium is full with these minor, re-occurring and task-like actions, often seen in a number of games over multiple generations.[1] Although there are many large characteristics within these games, I have found these minor recurring tropes to lend themselves best for a research on this scale. Therefore, I will focus on these recurring tropes in order to come to a conclusion about conventions and clichés within the medium as a whole. The vistas shown in the *Far Cry* series, for example, are no isolated incidents. Their developer, Ubisoft, has also used this technique in their other, widely popular *Assassin's Creed* series. Other developers have also shown interest in this technique, but it is surely not sprung from Ubisoft alone. As far as it is possible to trace its origin, the vista seems to go back to the player rather than a developer. Early open-world games are a go-to genre where this often the case. The *GTA* series (and especially *GTA: San Andreas)* is an often used example which offers the player fixed quests and guidelines on how to progress the game, but would also leave enough freedom to explore the game outside of these narratives (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 108; Bogost, 2006: 153). Players would try to search for locations which were hard to reach, sometimes even breaking the intended rules of the game in order to get up on buildings, or reach the highest mountains in the game world. This roaming around the world becomes evident on a large scale in the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game) titled *World of Warcraft* (2004). Although the game was full of quests and social interaction with other, real-life players, some set out in order to reach seemingly unreachable locations (Cuddy & Nordlinger, 2013). This included trying routes up mountains that the developers overlooked in designing the game world. This act was also dubbed 'mountaineering' and is visible on the game's forums and other player communities (**FIG 2**). The act of making screenshots played a major part in this activity. In this way players could record this achievement and share their experience with an online community. There wasn't any in-game credit towards the player, but this was seemingly not the only type of appreciation players were

---

[1] Gaming generations are a categorisation of consoles within a certain period of time. The hardware and support possibilities tied to the introduction of new consoles lead to a different type of games due to graphics and gameplay developments. With the release of the Xbox One, PlayStation 4 and Wii U up from 2012, we are currently located within the eighth generation..

looking for. The developers of *World of Warcraft* eventually applauded this effort and placed an Easter Egg on top of one of the mountains. Fast forward ten years and this player-experience is taken by developers into the games' design. I hope to find out the why's and how's of this development in this thesis, but it is clear that games start to include side content focussed on these exploration-type activities. The vista was introduced as a way to reward player's effort, dispense content or show-off the game's design, all of which will be addressed in the remainder of this thesis. It is important to note that the vista is not only limited to a niche or genre of gaming, but is seen in multiple genres, consoles and generations of games.

FIG 2: Two player-characters are shown who reached the highest mountain in *World of Warcraft*. Although the mountain was never intended to be climbable, players found ways up the steep ledges in order to jump up. The flag and skeletons on the right are an Eater Egg place there by the developers to respond to the effort of player to climb up this mountain outside of its intended use.

In order to perform this thesis, I will use a number of different theories and methods, depending on the different facets of my research question. On the surface I would have to find some common grounds and affiliation with the past academic writings. I will use the analysis guidelines from Clara Fernández-Vara's *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2015) in order to perform an analysis of the formal characteristics of a selected set of case studies. After introducing my theoretical framework and defining my corpus, I will perform an in-depth analysis of three main AAA games or series[2], namely *Assassins Creed – Revelations* (2011), *Guild Wars 2* (2012) and *Shadow of Mordor* (2014). These, as

---

[2] AAA (or Triple-A) games are a category in the production of IDM not defined by genre but based on the highest budgets, levels of promotion and development capabilities. These games are generally attributed the highest esteem and expectations by the mainstream consumers and professional gaming press (Steven, 2001).

far as I can judge at this point, seem to distinctly, yet similarly, use the vista trope. Although varying in application, operation, and consequence, these titles tap into the continuous appropriation that is evident throughout the industry. Since this thesis is as much a critique on the academic game discourse as well as a way to define the vista, I will go out of my way to discuss the lacunas and inconsistencies in the theoretical literature I use. The upcoming chapter will sketch the structure of the analytic phase of this research based on the model provided by Fernández-Vara. With the help of the introductory examples found in the *Far Cry* series, I will illustrate which parameters of her model I will use, after which I will approach it critically in the chapter thereafter. Additional literature, models and theories for the analytic phase will also be introduced in this chapter.

Chapter 1
Framework and State of Affairs

1.1 Structure

If I would design this research in a customary manner, the current academic practices would oblige me to choose one of two traditions within this field. Game scholars have been debating the 'correct' perspective to approach videogames for years, constructing a divide between the two camps. The underlying binary in this debate is the differentiation between these two traditions, branded the ludology-narratology debate. In short, ludologists believe that the game medium is centred around its interactive component, which is the core perspective through which it is analysed. Narratologists rather place games in the tradition of other narrative media such as film and literature, using theory from these disciplines to approach this young medium. Gonzalo Frasca, who is often seen as one of the forefathers of ludology, tried to debunk this debate in 2003 in his article *Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place,* but to no avail. Like Frasca, I believe that this debate did more harm than good to our understanding of this medium, and that it is based on false assumptions (Frasca, 2003). I could, for the remainder of this thesis, try to disprove and negate the arguments of both sides and try to reunite the two, but I won't. Both interactivity (in the form of play) and narrativity (in the form of uncovering an intended progression) are valuable in understanding the videogame medium, but this crusted debate left another aspect academically bare, and wrongly so. Ludology and narratology either try to achieve some greater truth about the medium by categorization and labelling, or prove social hypotheses by using videogames as a case study. Videogames as a medium with its own history, intertextual references and collective memory are very rarely mentioned by either side of the debate; something that is far more present in literature about other Art forms (Kwestek, 2013). In order to break with the past academic focus, I would rather be using the term 'Digital Interactive Media' (or IDM) instead of videogames, thereby acknowledging the interactive component as well as the interdisciplinary media perspective.

In line with discarding this debate, I also hoped to find a handbook, or analytic model, which didn't have a dominant preference towards one of these binaries, but would rather aim for a complete picture. Clara Fernández-Vara proposes such a model in her *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2015). While giving a broad spectrum of analytical tools, she also uses specific theories by game scholars

from both sides of the ludology-narratology debate. In her introduction, she also goes into detail how her work relates to the broader cultural sciences and traditions, which also comes with some questionable perceptions. I will first elaborate on her model, after which I will discuss the dubious statements and trains of thought I found in her work.

Fernández-Vara has worked on a way to discuss games on an academic level for some time now as a game scholar, an emerging kind of theorist. Her first academic publication, the collaboration *Towards an Ontological Language for Game Analysis* (2007), sketches a daring and much needed 'Ontology of Gaming' as part of the currently discontinued 'Game Ontology Project' (GOP) (Zagal, Fernández-Vara et al., 2007). Ever since her academic debut, Fernández-Vara has experimented with collecting and introducing a fitting jargon to discuss gaming, resulting in the *Introduction to Game Analysis* handbook, issued last year. Although this seems like a watered down version of the ambitious paper from 2007, this handbook is her first methodological work since. Much of the analysis neglects the perspective of the game-designer and focuses dominantly on player-experience, thereby creating a subjective form of research. Fernández-Vara recognizes this pitfall and works on a way to distinguish subjective experiences from objective, formal aspects of IDM.

Neither this model, nor my thesis, will in any way be a form of parochialism in which I will argue for a canon, genre distinction or aesthetic-based categorization within IDM. In *Towards an Ontological Language for Game Analysis,* Fernández-Vara (et al.) describes how a great number of the analytical material up to that point try to categorize games within a genre or niche before performing the analysis. This results in particular models for particular kind of games. This does not honour the full content of the game and inherent qualities, overlooking possible genre-transcending or out-of-the-box titles. She prefers what is called a 'black-box analysis', focussing on the isolated qualities of the game itself and neglecting its connection with other or similar games (possibly from the same developer or series) (Zagal, Fernández-Vara et al., 2007: 22). I will henceforth refer to this model as **artefact analysis**. In the tradition of material culture studies, artefact analysis acknowledges videogames not as a passive medium, like painting, but as a communication of agency with its own history, canon and intended (inter-medial) connections. Whilst the project attracts its fair share of criticism from both cultural studies and developer standpoints, it illustrates the motives and foundations for Fernández-Vara's later work, and, moreover, its uniqueness is telling for the on-going gaps in the theoretical landscape. The GOP calls for four distinct categories within a particular game to categorize all different facets of game-design, or what they would rather call the 'Design-Space'. *Rules, Goals, Entities* and *Entity Manipulation* embody all different possible components of the game, both from the player's perspective (interactivity) as well as the gameworld surrounding them. In *Introduction to Game Analysis* she rearranges these four categories into a more orderly three,

namely **context**, **game overview**, and **formal aspects**. All three categories are broken down into smaller sections which Fernández-Vara named 'building blocks'. Each category, through these 'building blocks', provides a different layer in the analysis with its own parameters and focus points. While I will explain and apply these analytic layers to greater extent during the analysis, I will introduce them at this point to exemplify, but also to evaluate them critically in the upcoming chapter.

Context

Context embodies the relation between the artefact and the rest of the medium, the circumstances in which it is released, but also what might have influenced its production or consumption (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 58). Firstly, this asks for secondary sources to illustrate these circumstances. Reviews, news articles and interviews might prove valuable in order to situate the artefact accordingly. Moreover, paratext could serve as additional sources from which information can be gathered. Specifically for IDM, paratexts could be game manuals, casings, trailers, websites or forums. References that the game itself evokes, like historic setting, fictional universe or medial tradition, also imply a certain contextual relation with the outside world, other media or real-life events. To exemplify, I will briefly relate these parameters to *Far Cry 4*. On the one hand, this game is part of a long standing series, but it does not share much of an overarching narrative. This instalment takes place in a fictional country which shows many similarities with Nepal, Tibet, or Northern India; featuring coloured powder, Hindu-like religious practises and characters with ethnic similarities to this region. This relation was strengthened when Nepal was hit by an earthquake in 2015. The development team decided to raise money for the area since they felt much affiliation with the country and its people after developing the game (Makuch, 2015). The analytic context layer finds a way to describe all these related events in order to better understand the characteristics of the game-specific elements the artefact embodies and is associated with.

Game overview

When the context is sketched and artefact is approached directly, Fernández-Vara proposes the **game overview** stage. The main question in this layer is explaining how this specific artefact relates to the medium as a whole. What kind of game are we talking about, which tools do the developers use, and how is the player experiencing it? To be able to answer these questions, Fernández-Vara formulates a number of new 'building blocks', ranging from the story and space of the game, to its rules and goals (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 15, 86-87). Although the paratexts could still provide additional information, the majority of the data is gathered from the game itself. Categories like genre might also play a role when the specific artefact is related back to other videogames, or traditions in other media. It is important to note that not all parameters apply to all case studies, or

all types of research, something that Fernández-Vara refers to in her introduction of this layer (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 87). To illustrate these parameters, *Far Cry 4* takes part in a world which is openly navigable for the majority of the game, which gives a lot of freedom to the player in terms of movement and exploration. Specific locations initiate more rigid and delimited missions and events, often with their own rules and goals. The plot of the game centres around Ajay who returns to his mother's homeland in order to fulfil her dying wish for her ashes to be scattered at a sacred temple. Although these elements of space, goals/rules, and story, seem separate through these 'building blocks', their overlap exhibit telling information about its design from a developer's perspective. How is the game intended to be experienced, and how is the story related with the seemingly non-narrative elements of the game? The lead-up to these answers are made during this layer, mostly focussing on situating these moments of overlap. To find out how this is put into practise, we most delve deeper into the final layer.

Formal aspects

The difference between game overview and **formal aspects** is best explained in the words of Fernández-Vara herself. Tapping into the discourse of text analysis, game overview is to be understood as the insight of a text as whole; what message does it convey, what is its meaning? The formal aspects layer is more aimed towards the underlying structures, patterns and grammar of that text. To be able to deconstruct these structures, one has to have a deeper understanding of the available language and techniques. This goes for the 'reader' as in the player, but also for the one analysing it. The latter has to be aware of the rules and goals, but also in which way they are presented to the player. For example, in *Far Cry 4*, the player is somewhat free to walk around the entire world. The designers, however, might want to withhold the player from aimlessly walking in a random direction and reserving some parts of the world for later stages in the game. While still giving the illusion of this complete freedom, the designers make it increasingly difficult for the player to go too far ahead by imposing certain waypoints and side missions. Your opponents also become harder to defeat along the way, urging the player to first collect better weapons and items. The selection in parameters in the previous layer also spills over in the formal aspects. Depending on the lens used, the structures might be more specific towards the limited number of characteristics.

While both subjective and objective data play a part in all categories, the former is most dominantly present in the context layer, decreasing over the two following ones. In line with subjective perception, the role of the player changes accordingly, ranging from consumer, to agent and meaning-creator. Objective data is most notably present in the formal aspects layer, but also plays a significant part in the game overview layer, as well as a source for secondary literature in the context

layer. But does this three-part analytic model suffice, does the sum of all these 'building blocks' embody the entirety of the games they deconstructed?

1.2 Critical Approach

For the most part, I was very relieved when finding this model by Fernández-Vara. Her connections towards the broader academic traditions, as well as her insight in the academic game discourse provide a strong foundation for this research. However, confining myself to filling in the blanks in this model wouldn't suffice in the research I hope to perform. Because of the minor characteristics of the vistas, this all-embracing model would obscure the necessary, selected amount of data. While she provides the tools for the broad strokes, many of the terms and definitions she uses originate from other game scholars. Understandably, the application of these terms is somewhat superficial in the broad scope of her entire model. One way of increasing the focus on specific characteristics is going back to the primary texts in which they are proposed. For example, Ian Bogost and Henry Jenkins are authors who are both mentioned and applied by Fernández-Vara, but will be used as primary sources as well to broaden the theoretical viabilities of these models. According to their place in the original model, these theories will be introduced during the analysis to create a fluid and understandable transition between the model, adjustments and findings. In this way, the longer tradition of the terms as well as multiple perspectives will help to achieve a greater understanding of the case studies.

While scaling up the original analytic model, there is also need to specify its scope. It would extent the size of this research to absurd proportions if all case studies are analysed in this way, and even performing all parameters for a single case study would leave little room for interpretation. Since I am dominantly interested in finding data surrounding the vista in these case studies, all layers will serves as lenses, zooming increasingly to find the according data. For this reason I won't include audio in this research, for this would add endless new parameter to the equation. Fernández-Vara does propose a similar method in her introduction, but focuses more on the intended audience which will read your article, rather than changing scope for different intended research goals (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 18). Next to shifts in applying her model, the traditions which she taps into is also questionable at points, leaving the reader with vague definitions or inconsistencies. The following sub-chapter will elaborate on these to further situate her work, as well as the problems I encountered.

Conflict of Traditions: Fernández-Vara and Derrida?

In the opening chapter Fernández-Vara refers to the lack of understanding of IDM as a lack of cultural capital of the subject, thereby tapping into the Bourdieusian tradition of cultural analysis. A better understanding on the topic would benefit both producer and gamer, because it makes them less prone to hypes and mediocre titles, making games less entertainment and more the art form it deserves to be (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 10). She describes the difference between a *moviegoer* and a *cinephile* to illustrate the different levels of medial knowledge and appreciation in film. One way of increasing this cultural capital is educating ourselves in the different elements of the experience of playing video games, not unlike what she proposed in 2007, now qualifying these elements as 'formal abstract design tools' (idem: 12). This is not in order to create a value-judgement or to formulate a canon of sorts, for this would only limit the field of study, thereby taking elitism as a criterion and risking bestsellers to take up most of the space. Although Bourdieu would embrace this type of elitism, Fernández-Vara sees harm in the superficial consumption of the bulk of the IDM products. This is where the artefact-like approach is most important to create a workable model for all kinds of games, not just the ones with particular characteristics, popularity or social player base.

Fernández-Vara describes the need to differentiate varying aspects of the inherent qualities, the market they were published in and the social environments they uphold as so-called 'building-blocks'. However, the idea of taking apart a certain notion and creating a better understanding by rearranging and re-contextualisation, touches heavily on the work of Jacques Derrida (idem: 11). In this way, these 'building blocks' of understanding games are somewhat similar to a post-structuralist, even deconstructive analysis. Although Fernández-Vara refers directly to this type of analysis, she does not go any further into it, though she seems to use it as a theoretical framework for her 'building blocks' approach. As addressed by Katja Kwastek in *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art* (2013), Derrida has previously been connected to the idea of interactivity in post-structuralism (Kwastek, 2013: 56). To tap into this academic train of thought I will briefly elaborate on Derrida´s notion of deconstruction and make the connection with Interactive Digital Media.

Whilst Derrida focuses his theories on 'text', it is not limited to literature, or writing in general. Moreover, according to Derrida there is nothing outside 'text', meaning that we can only comprehend and process the world through language. Meaning, context and communication are all bound to language in order to process it, and imagining it without this would be unintelligible. Critical theorist Peter V. Zima elaborates on these ideas of Derrida further in his *Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (2008). First of all, there is no absolute truth or model to understanding the universe, something that a number of philosophers claim to have found throughout history. The same goes for structuralism, especially that of Saussure. In the structuralist mindscape everything can be

understood through language, which is the only fixed and true vehicle of meaning (Zima: 2008: 37-42). Derrida counteracts this idea by claiming that language is fluid and dependent on context. To quote Zima:

> *Derrida believes that the presence of meaning cannot be achieved, an opinion that is quite troubling for most rationalists, since each sign continually points towards other preceding or subsequent signs, thus precipitating the dissolution of its own identity and of the presence of meaning. In other words: meaning can never be present, since it develops in a continually open context of reference and thus becomes subject to a change which Derrida labels, in accordance with the French verb différer, différance (idem.: 43).*

Fernández-Vara claims in *Towards an Ontological Language for Game Analysis* as well as *Introduction to Game Analysis* that she does not seek to create a model (or language if you will) to understand all games. She merely tries to create a method to deconstruct all the 'building blocks' of a separate artefact in order to create a better understanding. Like Derrida, she understands the importance of *context*, which is the first layer of research she proposes (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 14). The following two layers (*game overview* and *formal aspects)* complete the entire spectrum of different aspects within the artefact. There is, however, a distortion in this train of thought. In the rest of her book, Fernández-Vara refers to the analysis of the separate 'building blocks' as being structuralist instead of post-structuralist, as during the earlier chapters. This indifference towards the linguistic traditions seems somewhat illogical, but instead of ignoring it, I would like to work around it. At most, one could argue that the act of a deconstructive analysis within a certain context could be seen as a structuralist approach (focussing on the 'structuralist' in post-structuralist). Although the 'post' adjective signifies a fracture, it is also a reflection on the prior tradition, but using structuralist and post-structuralist interchangeable seems rather inconsistent. These changing perceptions during her own analysis might be confusing, but she is not the only one struggling with this matter.

(In)fusion to Solve This Confusion

Ranjan Ghosh, an Indian academic on cross- and transcultural literature, recognized this same indifference in Postcolonial, feminist and Marxist readings in literature. Although deconstructive approaches claim to reveal 'hidden' meanings in text, they also obscure others. "… a postcolonial reading or Marxist reading, no matter how cross-disciplinary their approach may be, would invariably choose to embed the discussion within tenets and issues honouring that 'particular' paradigm" (Ghosh, 2006: 1). He refers numerously to fellow linguist Edward Said as an example of the tenacious tradition of deconstruction. Specific readings of literature, like Said's notion of Postcolonialism, dominate interpretive and analytical models, but ignore varying possible interpretations. Ghosh

proposes a broader perspective, not an alternative on the former linguistic tradition per se, but a mix of methods and cross-disciplinary approaches to give a complete view on the matter: **(In)fusion** (idem: 3-4). Dividing and analysing separate components seem to be key to Ghosh, something that should sound quite familiar. Fernández-Vara refers to the importance of this complete type of analysis as well, but still seems to struggle with which tradition of research fits best with this type of model (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 12-13). By both combining and deconstructing, Ghosh imagines something that is already evident in Derrida's notion of 'différance'. Derrida's composition consists of both difference (fluidity or alternative meaning) and postponement of a fixed and true meaning. Meaning is hence found in the margins, something that, according to Derrida, the structuralists would overlook in their analyses. Ghosh would agree on this last statement, but points out that neglecting everything but the margins is also meddling with a complete image of the whole. His (in)fusion approach, a composition as well, is looking for structure and recognizable patterns whilst on the other hand also deconstructing and rearranging particularities to achieve a better meaning of the details.

This is exactly what I take from Fernández-Vara's ideal image for her method. Although Ghosh sees his model as an improvement for literature, Fernández-Vara acknowledges that most of her method is based on the perception of IDM as text (idem: 5). Furthermore, this also adds to the multi- and cross-disciplinary perspectives which Ghosh proposes. Fernández-Vara's proposed approach doesn't include certain models to analyse particular types of games, but rather wants to include any possible agencies in the experience. In this way the research is, although somewhat subjective, honest about the varying elements which might play a part in the outcome. Although Fernández-Vara hands some useful tools along the way, they may not suffice to find answers I hope to find. As mentioned before, the vista would have easily been overlooked when performing Fernández-Vara's model in its original form. To return to Kwastek, the relation between Derrida's post-structuralism and interactivity, is the fluid creation of meaning in which the player has a lot of agency (Kwastek, 2013: 56). Although this notion received its fair amount of criticism, the construction of meaning has no place in Fernández-Vara's model.

Complementation
In short, her model falls short when looking at the specific theoretical backgrounds she taps into. Because she interprets videogames as texts, she falls in the same pits, structuralists and post-structuralists do, as described by Ghosh. The mode of analysis Ghosh proposes, (in)fusion, will structure a theoretical framework to complement these short comings. Additional literature and models model will add to the interdisciplinary and theoretical analysis, adding perspectives from sociological, spatial and architectural studies. After a broad analysis, which mainly consists of

Fernández-Vara's model with some additional, expository literature, I will interpret the data following these interdisciplinary sources. To refrain from starting a whole new thesis after the first analytic phase, I will introduce the main thread of this interpretation at this point. This interdisciplinary analysis is largely based on the theoretical framework provided by Regina Friess in her text on *Symbolic Interaction in Digital Games* (2012). Her separation between aesthetic and narrative interaction will come up again after the initial broad analysis, but because it already serves as a lens for my writing process, I feel the need to introduce her concepts in a nutshell.

Although Friess goes on to further specify her model into a qualitative empirical method, the initial framework is very clear and useful for this research. In her view, the perceptions in game-experience, or meaning-creation can be divided between the aesthetic and narrative perceptions. These perceptions are based on different forms of meaning-creation which she recognizes. Since the quantity of material in the initial, broad research-phase tends to become overwhelming and unstructured, I choose to specify on elements which would later be relevant in either or both the narrative or aesthetic parameters. In short, **narrative perception** "is understood (…) as a form of situational meaning construction that focuses on the course and the interconnectedness of actions, considerations, and experiences of humanlike agents in world-like environments" (Friess, 2012: 250). On the other side of the spectrum, **aesthetic perception** is "understood as meaningfulness that is based on the valuing of perceived structures" (idem.). By introducing this binary, Friess shows that two different perspectives exist to gameplay experience and meaning-creation. On the one hand, there is an intended framework of narrative progression by the developers, which the player is encouraged to recreate. On the other hand there is a sense of freedom, a free space to create your own experience and construction of meaning. Whilst Fernández-Vara shows a number of the same notions when separating the building blocks, she has a very different assumption of narrativity within IDM. She sees narrativity primarily as a storytelling element. This exists both on the producers' end as well as the players'. Together with a synopsis of the story they form building blocks within the **game overview** phase of her method, whilst I would join Friess' argument that it is a sense of interconnectedness that is seen over the entirety of the artefact. Because of this I will, against the current of Fernández-Vara's model, also mention narrative elements in **context** and **formal aspects** chapters in order to structure the data accordingly.

The extent of this narrative/aesthetic divide will form the basis for the conclusion of the initial analytic phase found in chapter two to four. When arriving at the deep analysis, up from chapter five, Friess will be the starting point from which I will structure the outcomes from the different case studies. Because Friess remains very limited to defining and categorizing specific perceptions within IDM, I will thicken her framework with secondary literature on narrativity and aesthetic perceptions.

Without these additions I feel that Friess' foundation is too much focussed on sorting empirical data from interviews, and lacks the connection with media and cultural theory I aim to find.

1.3 Definitions and Concepts

While in the process of labelling the vista and gathering case studies, I recognized some over-arching concepts which I will define at this point. Other, less determinative terms will be defined during the following chapters, but the concept of *open-world, perspective* and *cutscenes* play a role to such an extent that I will dedicate this paragraph to them. First of all, open-world is a reference to a type of gameplay that is not limited by spatial restrictions, and indicates a space in which the player can roam around freely. Whilst it is often used interchangeably with the term sandbox, open-world could still have certain constraints to the amount of scripted gameplay accessible at any moment in time, whilst sandbox indicates complete narrative freedom (Jenkins, 2007). All three case studies can be considered to be open-world spaces, although varying on the open-world/sandbox spectrum.

FIG 3: This image of *Assassin´s Creed – Revelations* shows the third-person perspective as seen in many cases in IDM. The 'camera' has enough distance to the character to that the environment around it can easily be seen. The distance between the camera and the character, as well as their location can be manipulated by the player to some extent.

In film, the camera's perspective is an elaborate, but clear characteristic field within the medium. Point-of-view, zoom, distance to the focus point, height, type of lens and movement are all direct aspects of cinematography (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010: 167). Framing, editing and transitioning are all interrelated techniques which can be seen as indirect aspects, ranging all the way to visual

storytelling, just to name a few. How much of this is thrown overboard when this camera is no longer a static agent in the experience of a medium, but an interactive and manipulatable entity? Though all three case studies are portrayed in a so-called third-person perspective, the player can use their controller to change the position of the camera around. The focalisation point in a third-person perspective is centred on the player as seen in **FIG 1**. The distance between the 'camera' and the player ranges from an 'over-the-shoulder' perspective, to a longer shot. This camera position and zoom change slightly and organically when the player performs a certain type of gameplay, such as combat or climbing. The mediative nature of camerawork and cinematography in IDM is further explored by Michel Ottens in his *Film in Computer Games* (2015).

But not all parts of the game are as interactive. For varying reasons the player is broken out of the gameplay experience – for dialogue, flashbacks or to portray action-sequences – captured under the umbrella term 'cutscene'. In the words of Norwegian game scholar Rune Klevjer: "A [cutscene] is a cinematic sequence that suspends regular gameplay in order to covey plot, characterization, and spectacle" (Klevjer, 2014: 302). These clips can contain in-game scenes in otherwise interactive game environments, characterized by mediated animations, soundtracks, text and voice-overs. The conventional perspective is broken with, and different camera movement is introduced, breaking with the third-person perspective for example. The player-character as well as other entities in the gameworld might move on their own, and rules which apply to the game in general might be broken or bent in order to depict this scene. I interpret the clip which is present during the vista to be a cutscene (but of course not all cutscenes are vistas).

But before the analytical phase will proceed, I will first elaborate on my argumentation for the subject and case studies. This following chapter will also serve as an introduction to the case studies, some of which the reader might not be familiar with, as well as to show how I came to the specific case studies.

1.4 Purposeful Sampling

The argumentation for the subject and case studies of this thesis emerge from my personal assessment of their usability in this research. This might seem arbitrary, but science critique Michael Q. Patton also recognizes this need for selection in qualitative research. The thoughtful choices for one's research are a major part of the process and outcome. Patton calls this type of selection *sampling,* of which different types can be differentiated for different kinds of research. Whilst his work is mostly based on finding methods for sociological and economic research, it is also very applicable to cultural studies, an academic branch that is prone to choosing the darlings of one's own preference. Besides this pitfall, I also hope to find outcomes and insides which span further than this particular subject. Patton's method offers a way to select and asses a selected 'sample', in order to sketch this bigger picture (Patton, 2002: 230-231).

Patton selected sixteen different types of sampling - ranging from random selection to thoughtful and maximized variations. For this thesis I 'sampled' on two levels. First of all I choose vistas as being a prime example of minor and reoccurring tropes in Interactive Digital Media. Secondly I deemed three particular case studies to be most useful to illustrate the different uses of this trope across the medium. I will shortly state the anticipated uses for both these levels, as well as introduce the case studies briefly.

Conventions: Vistas as the Prime Example

Can I plea that from all the repeated tropes, conventions or clichés in the area of Digital Interactive Media, vistas are, without a doubt, the best case study? This is quite a statement to make and it might not even be truly correct to begin with. I will not even try to claim it is, but even more importantly, there is a whole different reason why I choose the vista as my prime example. Certain samples are both generic but varying enough to provide enough information to be able to make a generalized statement about the subject as a whole. Patton formulates **critical case sampling** as a category that embodies this choice. In his words: "*critical case sampling* "permits logical generalization and maximum application of information to other cases because if it's true of this one case, it's likely to be true of all other cases" (Patton, 2002: 243).

By using the vista I will be able to make claims about its use, but also about related techniques and aspects in the entire gaming medium. I base this assumption on the increasing use of the vista, as well as the incorporation by major developers like Ubisoft. The vista tends to become an industry standard, even though no one really understands its meaning. To return to Patton's purposeful

sampling, the broad application of this trope and the long history in both player experience and development offer a large source of information, with a large pool of case studies to be analysed.

In order to achieve clear data for this research I drafted a few limitations for the instances I analyse. Firstly, I pass up on possible introductory or tutorial[3] phases of the game because this may distort the density and motivations to use vistas in the game as a whole. Secondly, apart from experiencing and describing the vista trope, I will record one instance per case study using screenshots. These can be found in the appendices.

Case Studies

Similar to the vista trope, I will not claim that these case studies are the perfect case studies to be analysed in general. I am, however, convinced that they prove to be very helpful sources in order to give a complete image on the use of the vista within IDM. In making this selection, I looked for examples in which the vista is 1) clearly and distinctively present, 2) a part of the gameplay experience, but not exclusively centred around this action, and finally, 3) available and repeatable during the game for a broad analysis. This outset rhymes strongest with Patton's notion of **intensive sampling**: *"information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely"* (Patton, 2002: 243). The extreme cases that Patton mentions would be, in my interpretation, examples which focus the entirety of the gameplay around vistas. The aforementioned third condition is also referring to the frequency in which the trope is present in the game, tying in with Patton's description of the *intensive sampling*. The extreme example would embody a frequency that is too high, whilst other examples would portray a too sporadic occurrence. *Intensive sampling* also implies a selection which looks like the *critical case sampling*, namely choosing examples which express a generalizing outcome. However, the selection during the *critical case sampling* is made out of conviction, whilst the process during *intensive sampling* is made out of necessity. It would be impossible to research all different uses of a trope, but these case studies serve to sketch a complete image of the different types of its use.

I made the choice to include three main case studies with the notion of 'one's an accident, two's a coincidence, three's a pattern' in mind (Fleming, 1958). On the first layer of my analysis I want to be able to make a general argument about vistas for which this 'pattern' is of great importance. The following layer would show that variations within this pattern are visible, which asks for a certain leap of faith on my part. Patton says that "*Intensity sampling* involves some prior information and

---

[3] Tutorials are stages in the game which take the player by the hand to introduce them to the rules of the game. Special missions, text in the interface, or NPC's inform the player of the possibilities after which she/he is encouraged to mimic these directly. This knowledge and acquired skill are later called upon during the gameplay.

considerable judgment" (Patton, 2002: 234). This prior information is obtained on my past experiences with the games as well as the accessibility of literature on the case studies. The first case study is the *Assassin's Creed* game series (2007-2016), an on-going series which launches new instalments almost yearly. Not only does this series comply with all the proposed conditions, it is also one of the first AAA games to use vistas on a systematic basis.

The second case study is *Guild Wars 2* (2012), an MMORPG competing with the legacy of *World of Warcraft*. This game adds a more social element to the equation, making the vista trope an activity shared in real-time with other players, whilst also using it on different occasions. The last case study is the 2015 game *Shadow of Mordor*. As the name suggests, this game takes place in the Tolkien universe from his original novels, extending to its interpretation by the film adaptations. Although the events in the game are not part of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit*, locations and characters are based on the source material. In this new story the player travels through the lands of Mordor whilst visiting, you guessed it, multiple vistas on its way. A more extensive introduction on all games will be presented in the following chapter, which focuses on the **context** phase of Fernández-Vara's model. With all these frameworks in place, the initial, broad analysis can begin. Each of the following chapters will contain one of the analytic concepts by Fernández-Vara, complemented by additional literature and background for the case studies where needed.

Chapter 2
Broad Analysis – Brick by Brick

2.1 Context

As introduced, **context** is the first of the analytic layers in Fernández-Vara's model. *Context* in relation to games are all circumstances in which the game is produced, published and played (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 58). Paratexts, reviews and references (both before and during release) are all part of this layer, everything that could influence (or could have influenced) the experience of the game externally. The possibility of subjectivity by the researcher is made evident in this chapter, as well as relations to other media and real-life events. Fernández-Vara explicitly excludes narrativity in this research phase. However, I see the connections with the broad story of a narrative universe to be a key part of the game's context as argued during the previous chapter. Hence, a brief introduction of the game's plot, as well as the references to intermedial storytelling will be elaborated upon where needed.

Assassin's Creed – Revelations
The *Assassin's Creed* series is the spiritual successor to the longstanding *Prince of Persia* series (1989-2010), created by Canadian based developer Ubisoft up from 2007 (Désilets, 2008). Similar to *Prince of Persia,* the game is a mix of an Action-Adventure and Stealth game, altering between hiding and sneaking through your surroundings and engaging in combat with your in-game enemies. Throughout the *Assassin's Creed* series, the player controls different followers of the mysterious assassin's creed (hence the title) in varying locations and periods in history, ranging from the Third Crusades and Renaissance Italy to Revolutionary America and Industrial England. The particular game I will analyse is the third instalment in the Renaissance saga, which is the fourth game in the entire series: *Assassin's Creed – Revelations* (2012). The majority of the game takes place in Constantinople, contemporary Istanbul. The choice for this game is twofold; on the one hand this game is the last release in what is considered to be the core city-based gameplay, or 'design space' in Fernández-Vara's words. Up from the next game (*Assassin's Creed III* (2013), Ubisoft deviates from this urban tradition in order to portray more rural surroundings, only to return to its roots during the latest two instalments. Although I will come back to the importance of this urban landscape, for now it is

important to consider that the locations and surroundings in the game environment are familiar to the player, at least to some extent. Ubisoft namely portrays settings which appeal to the visual memory of players, by depicting numerous famous landmarks and locations. Interestingly enough, this memory is also constructed since the game provides detailed logs and encyclopaedias on the locations and characters one encounters. Lastly, the motive for choosing this game is based on how vistas are portrayed in relation to the other games in the series.

Interrelational References

The cross-cultural space of Renaissance era Constantinople is directly referred to during the game, giving the developers an excuse to use influences from both European and Arabian culture. The paratexts of the game also inform the player that this is not a single sided portrayal of the Orient or otherness. The following text appears when the game is started: "Inspired by historical events and characters. This work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs". One could argue that the development team tries to cover themselves for any possible critique on religious or racist negligence. However, this could also be a way to tell the players that the developer tried to include varying different sources of input to make the gameplay experience as complete as possible.

Parkour, or more specifically Free-Running, is a dominant source for the gameplay in the entire AC series. Already in its predecessor, *Prince of Persia,* Ubisoft applied a number of elements from this form of city exploration, although this also included a sense of superhuman and gravity-defying characteristics. The AC series relies somewhat more on the worldly capabilities from the human body and taps into the trend of Free-Running. While playing, the player can experience the thrilling exploration of the city from their own homes. This relation is referred to directly during the game due to the option to 'Free-Run' with a certain button combination. Ubisoft also amplifies this relation during their promotional events, using parkour workshops and showcases with the iconic assassin costumes (McWhertor, 2015).

This doesn't seem to be the only trend that Ubisoft tried to tap into. The enormous popularity of the Dan Brown novels and film adaptations sparked an interest in hidden mysteries and conspiracies surrounding the Catholic Church and Knight's orders (Schiesel, 2009; Dow, 2013: 216). This hype emerged in the early two-thousands creating a boom in tourism to the Italian cities of Florence and Rome, glorifying the Renaissance's mysterious artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Bernini. Both the Knight's Templar's and Sacred Christian artefacts play a major role in Dan Brown's novels, as well as the AC series, and so does artist Leonardo da Vinci. Whilst the previous two games in the Renaissance saga seem to rely heavily on this trend within the Italian borders, *Assassin's Creed –*

Revelations is the first to explore different environments whilst holding on to its roots in terms of design space and gameplay.

Intended Experience

To quote the wise words of the Nvidia PR-department, the console seems to be 'the way it is meant to be played' when it comes to Assassin's Creed. There are two main arguments for this assumption, the first being the release of the game. For years, Ubisoft has been faced with critique surrounding the support for the PC version of their game. Due to the yearly release strategy, Ubisoft has released their main series during the fourth quarter since 2007 (ranging from October to December), but until *Assassin's Creed III,* all PC versions of the games were delayed, postponed or rescheduled up to half a year later.[4] Ubisoft's lead designer Jean-Sebastien Decant explained their motives in a press statement towards Polygon. According to him, Ubisoft decided to focus on the console versions (for Xbox 360 & PlayStation 3) of the game first, finishing (and releasing) them earlier than the PC version, which still needed a decent amount of work before launch. Focussing on the console versions is already a strong sign that they prioritize this above the PC, but the game itself also shows some preferences towards console, and especially the use of the controller. Keza MacDonald, amongst others, has referred to use of keyboard and mouse on PC as 'suboptimal', compared to the analogue controllers from the Xbox and PlayStation (Macdonald, 2012). Although Macdonald acknowledges that AC III increased their efforts to make the game more playable for the PC version, she still would recommend playing the game with a controller.

Guild Wars 2

Guild wars 2 (2012) reinstates the collaboration between developer ArenaNet and publisher NCSoft, who also worked together on the first instalment of the series. *Guild Wars 2* would be a perfect title to illustrate the malfunctions of 'genre-based analytic models' for which Fernández-Vara warns in her GOP article (Zagal, Fernández-Vara et al., 2007: 22). I point this malfunction out because *Guild Wars 2* seems to be the odd one out from the perspective of multiple genres, the most dominant ones being the 'Action Roleplaying Games' (Action RPGs) and 'Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games' (MMORPGs). The latter received much academic and mainstream attention over the past decennia because of major titles like *Ultima Online* (1997), *Everquest* (1999) and *World of Warcraft* (2004) for their enormous player bases. A number of economic, sociologic and psychological books and articles have been published about the in-game worlds (and corresponding discourses) created by both the developers and players of these MMORPGs (Balicer, 2007; Barak, 2008; Cudy &

---

[4] The on-going critique and fear for boycotts from the PC community, Ubisoft changed this policy up from 2014.

Nordlinger, 2013). *Guild Wars* has never truly been able to step out of the shadow of these titles, both when looking at sold units as well as current player base. Especially *World of Warcraft* is known for maintaining an astonishing amount of 8.5 million players in 2007 (Loguidice & Barton, 2009: 365). Not only did these players buy the initial game, there were also willing to pay a monthly subscription to be able to keep playing the game. This subscription fee was used by developers to maintain servers and continuously produce new content for the player base. Although the first instalment of *Guild Wars* was already in development when *World of Warcraft* was released in 2004, it differentiated itself by disposing of a subscription fee for their players, something that is common for MMORPG titles throughout the industry. *Guild Wars* would rather rely on newly sold items and expansions to maintain a stream of income (O'Brein, 2015).

Genre-Transcending or Re-defining?

By switching between multiplayer and single-player content, *Guild Wars* could be seen as a MMORPG and Action RPG respectively in different stages of the game. This is more merged together in the sequel, *Guild Wars 2,* which still puts the solo experience first, but emerges the player in a massive world in which other players also roam around. Mike O'Brien, president of ArenaNet, published a manifesto during development, expressing the importance of a mix of genre for their sequel. According to him, MMO's have demanded too much from their players, pressuring them to commit more and more time and effort in order to keep up with the game. This multiplayer aspect seems to be a form of social pressure, something that many gamers try to escape from while playing games. O'Brien also addresses the need for immersion, both on a single player and multiplayer level (O'Brien, 2010).

One of the strategies to bring the two genres together is the option to buy in-game currency with real money. Although it sprung some controversy at first, the developers explained that in this way players who are more affiliated with the single player, RPG style of playing would not be pressured into spending hours on end earning enough 'gold'. Instead, players could choose to spend some money so they can focus on the other aspects of the game which they prefer. Other MMO titles struggle with illegal exchange of in-game currency and goods, but ArenaNet hoped to nip it in the bud by facilitating this exchange themselves. This strategy, also titled 'microtransactions', is often used in casual and mobile games for similar reasons. The 'hard-core' gaming community is often decidedly negative about this option, but the application within *Guild Wars* seems to be accepted over time.

The critical acclaim by the game-press for both RPG and MMORPG genres did not translate as well as one would have hoped. Up to this point the second instalment hasn't sold as many copies as its

predecessor. This could also be the result of the declining popularity of the MMORPG genre; even *World of Warcraft* announced its final expansion later this year. Even the innovation that O'Brien refers to is apparently not enough to reignite the enthusiasm and devotion from the player base that once defined the genre.

Intended Experience

In line with the MMORPG genre*, Guild Wars 2* is released on PC only. The importance of the mouse-keyboard combination is expressed by Bill Loguidice and Matt Barton in their *Vintage Games* (2009). The long history of text-based and online games focussed on in-game interaction via chat message, sparking social interactive games in the early 80s. The MMORPG never made the translation onto console because it lacked the option for text-based interaction in chats, which defined the genre from early on. The decline of the genre could also be tied in with this tradition, since other types of games are all seen on multiple platforms. RPGs are for example also commonly seen on console. Whilst not all titles appear on both PC and Console, a player interested in the RPG genre is not tied to one platform. Furthermore, online gameplay on console was first attempted by Microsoft's Xbox Live only in 2002, some twenty years after its introduction on the PC. Online multiplayer games were simply not available on consoles until a few years ago when it finally took off (Microsoft Corp., 2003). This lack of tradition of online games on the consoles is also a contributing factor to the absence of games like *Guild Wars 2* and the diminishing of the MMO genre as a whole.

Shadow of Mordor

Shadow of Mordor (2014) embodies everything that you would associate with eclecticism. From the visuals and narrative to the gameplay, almost all aspects of this game have been related back to other games, books and films. First of all, and the most obvious, *Shadow of Mordor* is part of Tolkien's narrative universe. This does not mean that Tolkien created a special side story to be adapted into a videogame, but that Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment (which holds the rights to all of adaptations of Tolkien's work) permitted and published this game. Developer Monolith Production collaborated with Warner Bros. during their earlier title *Guardians of Middle Earth* (2012), which also portrayed the fictional world of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. In this game, players would control characters from these stories, such as Gandalf or Legolas, and defeat waves of enemies. Although players were familiar with these characters from the books and films, many pointed out the inconsistencies with the overall narrative of the universe. The *Guardians of Middle Earth* instalment received very mixed reviews and especially the PC version performed very poorly.

Interrelational References

Guardians of Middle Earth was supposed to piggyback onto the momentum form *The Hobbit* film adaptations (2012-2014), but failed to deliver. All hopes were pinned on *Shadow of Mordor,* an Action RPG to be set in the time between the events of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Monolith initially consulted with Peter Jackson, director of the film adaptations, to find out if a shared narrative would be an option for this following game. Jackson simply urged the developers to create a game that could stand on its own two feet (Karmali, 2014a). Design Director Michael de Plater explains in an interview that the narrative in the game manages to strike a balance between Tolkien's source material, the adaptations and a new autonomic story. The game features an original protagonist, the ranger Talion, who was soul-bound with a wraith (spirit) upon execution. This wraith is revealed to be Celebrimbor, an Elf smith master and crafter of the 'one ring', the MacGuffin of the entire fictional universe. Both characters, bound into one body, seek revenge on Sauron, the universe's main villain, and all his henchmen. The ties with the rest of the narrative universe are found in collectable items and cameos from the beloved character Gollum.

Before the release of the game in 2014, *Shadow of Mordor* stirred up the game-press quite a bit. Former Ubisoft developer Charles Randall accused Monolith of steeling code and assets from the *Assassin's Creed II* game, which he worked on. An article on game website IGN acknowledges that pre-released game footage certainly looks very similar to the AC franchise (Pereira, 2014), but Randall goes as far as claiming that 'his work' is directly copied and used in the new game. Ubisoft never directly responded to the accusations and Monolith only dismissed them after the game's release (Karmali, 2014b). During an interview with IGN, *Shadow of Mordor*'s lead designer Bob Roberts was never afraid to be branded an *Assassin's Creed II* clone since he trusted in his project's originality. He never responded directly towards Randall's accusations, but the all-around positive critical and public acclaim during the launch period quickly overshadow the alleged copied code.

Assassin's Creed is not the only series to which the game was compared too. Many made the comparison with the *Batman: Arkham* series (2009-2015). Even if Monolith would have gotten a few ideas off this series, or even would have stolen some lines of code, no one would have batted an eye. Both *Shadow of Mordor* and the majority of the *Batman: Arkham* games were published by Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. The rights to the series, the production of the titles as well as the intellectual property are all owned by Warner Bros. and Monolith happily made use of this fact. Monolith even developed a game from the DC's Batman universe for Warner Bros. in 2006. The combat systems have been called almost identical by multiple journalists as well as players (Gaston, 2014; Young, 2014). After release, these comparisons watered down, since this was also received very positively.

Controversy

Cracking down too hard on these or other aspects of *Shadow of Mordor* wouldn't even have been possible for many smaller game journalists or semi-professional game-bloggers. As revealed by Twitch and YouTube-reviewer John Bain, better known as 'Totalbiscuit', critics were tied to a very degrading contract. To review the game prior to release, reviewers or self-acclaimed critics like Bain are known to acquire access to the game. One would see the positive effects for the publishers as this comes with a decent amount of free publicity. It would even be understandable for the publishers to limit the content which the reviewers or critics may mention, in order to refrain from spoiling the plot or revealing to much of the gameplay. However, the branding department of Warner Bros. took it a few steps further and definitely one too far. Bain paraphrased parts of the early-access counteract on Twitter and later talked about it in greater length during one of his Youtube videos. Jim Sterling, journalist for game magazine *The Escapist* got hold of the contract as well and discussed it during a video-article titled *Shadiness of Mordor*. Among the standard restrictions in content, the reviewers were enforced to only give positive descriptions of the game, whilst also mentioning at least a set amount of times that the viewer should buy the game (Sterling, 2014). In retrospect these controversies surrounding *Shadow of Mordor'*s content and reviews could be linked to the pressing need to succeed for its developer Monolith. The Tolkien hype would soon die down with the closing chapter of *The Hobbit* series on its way and after the failure of *Guardians of Middle Earth*, this might have been their last chance.

2.2 Game overview

To return to Fernández-Vara's model, the next step in the initial analysis is the **game overview**. As established, the focus will be dominantly on the use of the vista from this point on. General assumptions and key characteristics of the case studies will still be elaborated upon, but only if they have a relation with the vistas that is worth mentioning. Besides this, the aesthetic and narrative parameters as described by Friess will relish extra attention. The *game overview* is the area which "focuses on the content, the basic features that distinguish the game from others and how it has been read, appropriated, and modified by different audiences" (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 14). Whilst the audience has already been mentioned during the context chapter, it was merely seen as a target audience, assessor or consumer. The focus in this chapter is shifting to the player as a possessor of agency within the gameplay experience. This includes the experience of, and relation between the 'camera' and the player, as well as the social spaces the game creates. Fernández-Vara would have introduced the narrative, or rather story, at this point as well. Since the narrative plays an important part in the remainder of this research, the decision was made to introduce the broader and interdisciplinary aspects of the story during the previous chapter. This chapter will treat the narrative mainly to indicate the relation between the use of the vistas within the bigger story. The building blocks that will provide the most relevance will be: story, rules and goals of the game, game mechanics, spaces of the game, and gameplay experience. I will use *Assassin's Creed* to exemplify these building blocks and their corresponding terms.

Assassin's Creed – Revelations

The majority of the gameplay in *Revelations* is focussed on the single player experience. Although there is a separate multiplayer mode included in the game, it is evidently less dominant when looking at promotion and reception of the game.[5] During this game you, the player, takes on the role Desmond Milles who is stuck in a simulation device (the Animus). The machine lets you relive events from your ancestors, who in the case of Desmond happen to be numerous assassins. Due to events in the finale of the last game, Desmond's psyche is in poor shape and is therefore stuck in the Animus to stable his condition. Desmond decides to finish the story of one of his forefathers in the hopes he

---

[5] To exemplify this claim; the official **cinematic trailer**, nor the **gameplay trailer** features any of the multiplayer content. In their reviews of the game, Gamespot (VanOrd, 2011), and IGN (George, 2011) mention the multiplayer mode a few times and mark it as simple and a secondary feature in the game.
http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassins-creed-revelations-review/1900-6346892/
http://www.ign.com/articles/2011/11/14/assassins-creed-revelations-review

will be able to wake up from a coma-like state. This framed story creates a game within the game, both with its own rules and goals. The player will, for the remainder of the game, spend time controlling Ezio Auditore, a seasoned assassin from the Italian city-state of Firenze. The player already got to know this protagonist in the past two instalments, of which this is the closing chapter. Ezio sets out to Constantinople, the newly conquered city by the Ottoman Empire, in order to find a hidden library of one of the legendary assassins of yesteryear. In line with all its predecessors, the player is given the task to assassinate bad guys (mostly Byzantine remnants in the city), solve mysteries and find hidden artefacts. The aforementioned legendary assassin is no one less than the protagonist of the first instalment of the AC series, namely Al'taïr. The experience takes you down memory lane, both showing places and events from Al'taïr's time and closing the story of Ezio.

Storytelling

Ubisoft seems to imply a 'reader' who is familiar with the story, since they rely heavily on the storylines and lore from their previous games. This is **embedded storytelling**, as Fernández-Vara describes it. These are the so-called events and narrative progressions which are scripted and intended by the game's developers (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 107). For the sake of delivering the story, the player is taken by the hand throughout certain portions of the game. She counters this with the **emergent storytelling**, a narrative constructed by the player itself, based on their own interaction and imagination, an unintended and unscripted form of meaning-creation. Most of this embedded story is conveyed through dialogue, cutscenes and scripted in-game events to inform the player. In other words, the story is both told during the gameplay, but also during non-interactive portions of the game, through what film theory would brand as exposition. Henry Jenkins, on whom she bases the distinction of embedded and emergent storytelling, goes into more detail in his *Game Design as Narrative Architecture.* He describes exposition as a form of 'telling', whereas visual or environmental storytelling are an example of 'showing' (Jenkins, 2004: 7).

Rules and Goals

The story is also a way to verify and legitimise the rules and goals of the game. During the Ezio-storyline the player's main goal is to 'synchronize' with his story. It needs some imagination to make sense of this logic, but the player is, through the character of Desmond, reliving the life of his ancestor. You reach the goals of the game by correctly recreating, or 'synchronizing', those events which are provided by texts on your interface[6] during gameplay, or the game's menu when pausing the game. Some rules are also connected to this 'synchronization'. When you die in combat, or fall from a tall building, you 'desynchronize' with Ezio. The game is reloaded to a previous point in time,

---

[6] The interface in a game can be interpreted as a form of paratext which is not part of the game world, but is projected on the screen to inform the player. This non-diegetic information can include a health bar, mini-map or instructions for the player via texts of indicators.

giving you an opportunity to try over again[7]. This is a creative take on the conventional 'game over' moment in IDM. The function of both is the same, but the incorporation into the game-world is more engaging than most other games. The use of this paradigm goes even further during the game's missions. To evoke a specific style of gameplay, or to challenge players to deviate from their personal preferences, extra rules are added to the missions. The game gives you the chance to either complete assignments normally, with possibly some basic objectives or restrictions, or to complete it in a certain manner, often making it more difficult to complete them. The 'normal' mode would sync-up 50% with Ezio's memory, but the added tasks may increase up to a 100% completing the memory entirely, supposedly reliving Ezio's actions to the letter. Finding certain items or artefacts hidden throughout the game also adds up to the completion of Ezio's 'memory' in its entirety. This is visualized in the following figure, portraying the game advancement both linear as well as the percentage of completion per chapter.
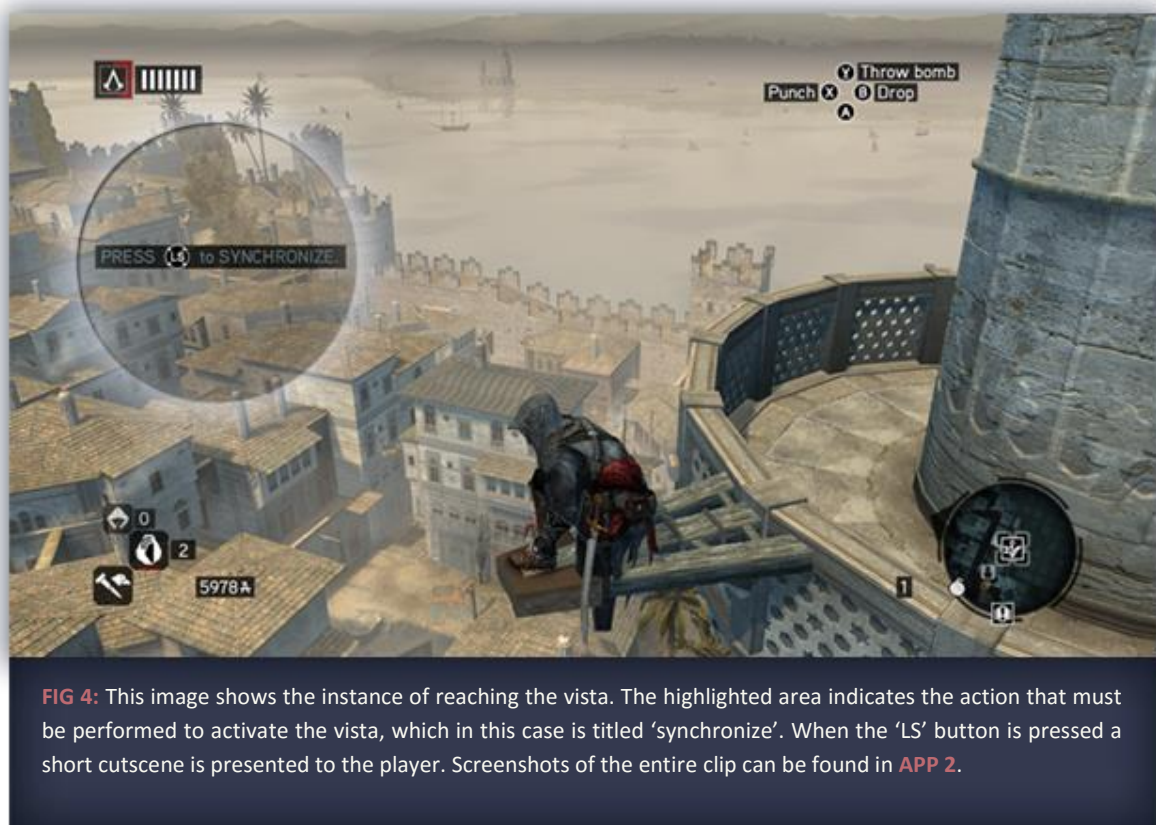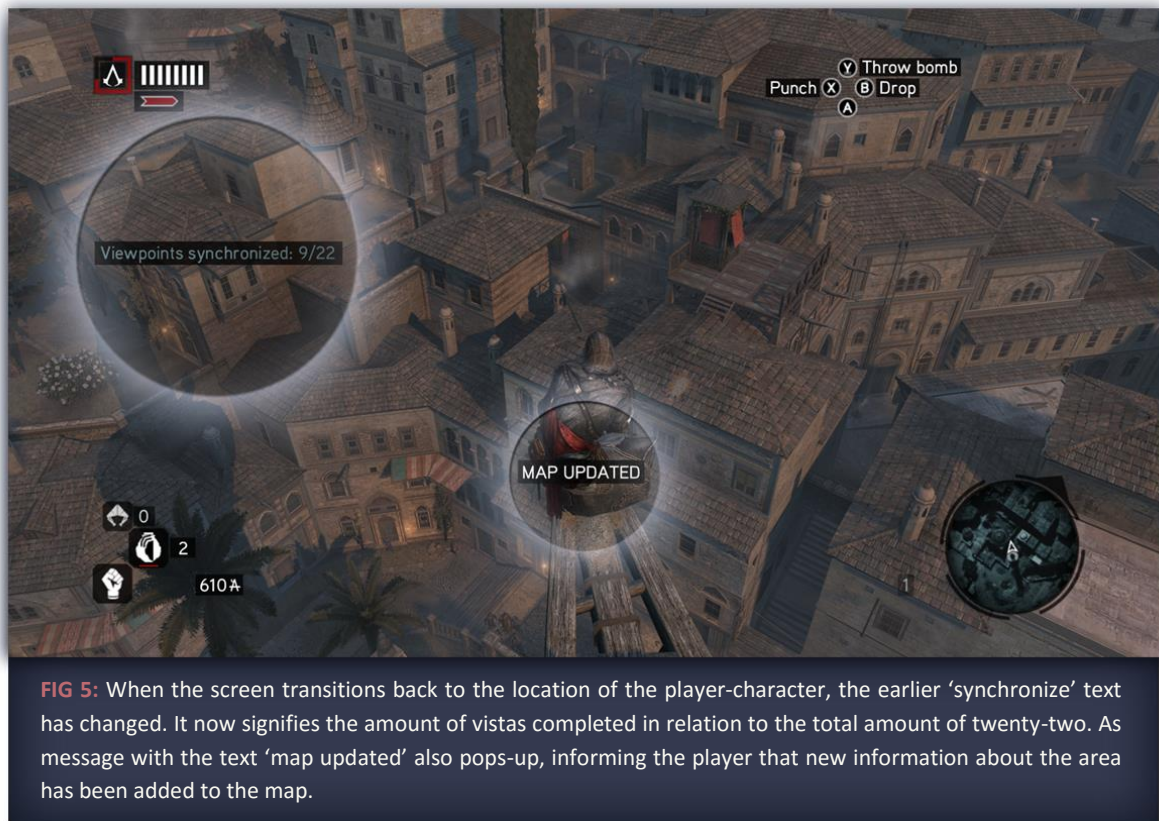

FIG 4: This image shows the instance of reaching the vista. The highlighted area indicates the action that must be performed to activate the vista, which in this case is titled 'synchronize'. When the 'LS' button is pressed a short cutscene is presented to the player. Screenshots of the entire clip can be found in APP 2.

---

[7] *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (2003) featured a similar flexible notion of time. In this spiritual predecessor the player could rewind the game during playing, giving you the option to try over without starting the whole mission anew. This can be regarded as a reaction towards the use of save games, or save points in many games which have an illogical relation with its narrative and undermine the gravity of the story in the game world.

FIG 5: When the screen transitions back to the location of the player-character, the earlier 'synchronize' text has changed. It now signifies the amount of vistas completed in relation to the total amount of twenty-two. As message with the text 'map updated' also pops-up, informing the player that new information about the area has been added to the map.

One last part of the gameplay uses this synchronization trope: the vista, or in the jargon of this specific game, the viewpoint. As instructed during the tutorial phase of the game, the player can, and should, climb high structures in the game-world and reach a set location. When you reach this location, often signified by lifting beams on which an eagle is resting, the interface lets the player know to press a button to synchronize, as seen in **FIG 4**. The interactive component of the gameplay experience is shortly interrupted by a cutscene in which the 'camera' perspective changes and takes more distance from the character. The interface disappears and the player no longer has control over the movement over the character. The circling motion reminds of an establishing shot in cinematography, with its seamless transition with the previous shot, whilst also rapidly changing in standpoint, matching the freedom of movement to that of a camera-mounted helicopter (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010: 238). When the perspective is returned to the player-character, the screen turns to black briefly, after which the interface reappears and the message 'viewpoints synchronized: X/22' pops-up (**FIG 5**). This singular vista action is now completed, but the overall 'incompleteness' also indicates that there are still more vistas to be reached. To come down from this elevated point the player jumps down in an iconic fashion. This 'leap of faith' has become one of the most characteristic elements of the *Assassin's Creed* series, even portraying it on its film adaptation poster.

This demarcated set of rules and interactions is more complicated than a rule or goal within the game. It is not just a 'don't get eaten by the ghosts or you die' rule which we find in *Pac-Man* (1980). This sense of completion and the bundle of different rules and goals ask for a different definition. **Game mechanics** is a term often used to describe this grouping of rules, although the precise meaning varies greatly as proven by Miguel Sicart (2008). In order to unify its use he proposes the following: "Game mechanics are methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state". This definition indicates some sort of change in the game world through interaction with it. It is different from a rule in the way that it cannot be reduced to one single action. It is the collaboration between different rules, creating a certain mechanism that can be used by the player, or limit her/his options. Hunicke (et al.) rather sees mechanics as the entirety of all rules in the game, but I negate this definition because these rules are not necessarily interdependent or collaborative. For example, the way in which the monetary system works in *Revelations* is dependent on a certain set of rules, the sum of which can be seen as the monetary mechanic. This, however, has no direct relation its core combat mechanics. The practical use of this action and the changes it invokes will be further elaborated on during the *formal aspects* chapter.

Space

Since *Revelations* takes part in an open-world environment, it can largely be regarded as one space. The most important notion in analysing IDM, is the fact that its spaces are navigable (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 103). In contrast with film, photography, painting or literature, the subject can move through, interact and manipulate elements within this space. Although indirectly or mediated, IDM is quite unique in this, outside of the performing arts at most. Although this open space can be explored in relative freedom, there are some restrictions to the player. Some locations are only accessible after completing a certain part of the narrative of the game, or are too hard during the early game. One of the first notions of game space was introduced by Huizinga and was titled the 'magic circle'. This imagined space has its own rules and system of meaning-creation. Outside of this 'circle' the same rules and props might be meaningless, but inside they enable play (Flanagan, 2009: 5). Moreover, the players are aware of the perceived meaninglessness outside of the circle, but choose to subscribe more meaning to it. For years, this has been the leading model to analyse gameplay, analogue in Huizinga's time, but later on digital as well. Michael Nitsche perceives space mainly through the act of playing, and created a model which takes apart the different space in which play takes place (Nitsche, 2008: 15-16). This includes the *rule-based space*, or the programmed entity of the game; the *mediated space*, or the representation of said program through a screen; and the *play space*, the interactive relation between the game and the player. The act of playing in this case in mainly focussed on the subject in a room, watching a screen. The 'magic circle', so to say,

surrounds the player and the game device, but the spaces within the game world are not further explored outside its interactive component. The spaces created in three-dimensional, open-world environments are widely neglected, both by Nitsche and Fernández-Vara. In their eyes, the magic circle situates the act of play not in the game's simulated world, but in an imaginary circle of rules surrounding the player. In other words, *Revelations* is not so much situated in Constantinople as it is in your living room.

Ian Bogost further explores Huizinga's idea, translating his notions towards IDM with his idea of the **possibility space**. His notion of play is: "the free space of movement within a more rigid structure" (Bogost, 2008: 120), this free space being the possibility space. He often refers to the work of Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman to indicate the paradoxical relation between rules and play. In their work, the appropriately titled *Rules of Play - Game Design Fundamentals* (2004), they explain that rules do not suffocate play, but enable it. Bogost adds the spatial element to the equation and internalizes it to the game world, instead of the play environment. Although *Revelations* is an open-world game, it is still limited by a number of rules, one being the synchronizing mechanic earlier in this chapter. Game Mechanics on the other hand are the 'means' through which you can achieve certain, often specified goals. By exploring the possibilities the game has to offer, by for example trying out how to climb up a tower to reach a vista, one encounters the rules and limitations the game imposes. These could be very simple rules such as 'falling from a great height may cause you to die' (or desynchronize in this case). They could also be more complex. An example could be that the player is not able to reach a ledge or has to perform a special action in order to cover a greater range. This, in Bogost's notion is what we call play. The *possibility spaces* of the vistas invoke different rules by the developers, which in turn invoke a different kind of play by the player. The exploration of the rules is what creates are core part of the gameplay: the more complex and interpretive the rules, the bigger the sense of play.

Guild Wars

There are two main game modes in *Guild Wars 2*: the open-world, and instanced content. The open-world mode, as the name already suggests, is openly accessible. Players can roam around freely without any physical restrictions or limitations, to protect the progression of a linear narrative. The instanced gameplay embodies different uses, amongst which are single player missions with geographical restrictions, multiplayer dungeons with a fixed amount of players in a static environment, and player-versus-player modes. For the remainder of the analysis of this case study, I will focus on the open-world content. Instead of the historical setting of *Assassin's Creed*, *Guild Wars 2* is set in a high fantasy environment. This is a distinction that resolves in a very different experience

of the story within the game. Historical, near-future, what-if or science-fiction scenarios situate the subject between the known, or recognizable; and the unfamiliar, or new (Wolfe, 2011: 75). The border is sought and is experimented with, often commenting on our contemporary life through the lens of this fictional world. High fantasy, on the other hand, sketches an environment that is (almost) entirely new to the subject. This is also the case in the *Guild Wars* universe, which features numerous mythical creatures, multiple fantastic civilizations and Lovecraftian leviathans (idem: 86). The locations, characters and events of *Guild Wars 2*'s story only refer to its own predecessor or other fictional works. Counter to many other high fantasy universes, *Guild Wars* does not include Elves or Orcs, something that many other franchises stuck with because of the everlasting tradition of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (Katsaridou & Thibault, 2016: 260). Instead, *Guild Wars* features characters and fictional races which they developed themselves.

Storytelling
The player can choose one of five main races as their character, which they can attune to their own preferences. This can both be reflected in the visual appearance of the character, as well as its back-story and personality. According to developer O'Brien this interreferential vacuum and choice to the player, leaves more space for the construction of one's own story (O'Brien, 2010). This could indicate an emphasis on emergent storytelling, in which the player's system of meaning-creation is stimulated through gameplay. This is recognizable in the way the story is conveyed in the majority of the open-world component of the game. Whilst roaming around the world, the player encounters events and missions, which happen instantaneously. Players are not forced to involve themselves, although ignoring the real-time could influence the area later on. You could imagine your character to be a valiant knight, aiding the ones in need, or leave it be and continue exploring the environment to your own convenience. Moreover, this open-world mode is accessible to many other players which could change your experience from being a heroic individual to a group of vigilantes.

Visual markers on the mini-map or textual markers in the interface inform the player of these events, but this is also incorporated in the game-world. Non player-characters (NPCs) can be overheard talking about these events or missions, whilst some even walk up to you, shouting for help. This starts to touch more strongly upon embedded storytelling in which the player is more steered towards a certain outcome or narrative. The fact that the player still has a choice makes it more dubious to put it in either category. Most of these so-called world-events are scripted and inherently have their own narrative, possible autonomous from the story at large.

Rules and Goals
The main rules in the game rely on the health bar of the player. When it runs out in a combat situation, the player is given the chance to fight for her/his life one last time before the character

'dies'. In this situation, the character will be resurrected in a fixed location in the area of its death. As many RPG's, the character can earn experience points in order to gain a new level.[8] This means that the character's abilities increase and the player gains access to new content. So-called 'gear' can be collected as well to improve the character's strength and health (Barton, 2008: 148). *Assassin's Creed* chooses to limit this RPG element to only a limited selection of different weapons, not evoking different types of play, but merely increasing the strength of your character. It is, however, a core part of the gameplay of *Guild Wars 2,* and reaches great complexity.

FIG 5: After a jump-puzzle, the player reaches this vista in *Guild Wars 2*. The highlighted area indicates the action that must be performed to activate the vista, which in this case is titled 'view'. When the 'F' button is pressed a short non-interactive clip is presented to the player. Screenshots of the entire cutscene can be found in **APP 3**.

The main goals in *Guild Wars 2* aren't as much plot-driven, as they are connected to the idea of 'completion' outside of the narrative, not dissimilar to *Assassin's Creed*. The results of one's gameplay are made quantifiable through percentages. The player is informed by this sense of completion through percentages of completed missions, areas or side content. This is one of the first things the player encounters when the game is launched (**APP 3.1**). Reaching the highest level in the game is one part of completing it, but exploring its entire map is also stressed. The exploration is

---

[8] Gaining a 'level', or leveling-up, in this case signifies an increase in a numeral status of the character by earning experience points. In other contexts, especially older platformer games, 'level' refers to the stage of the gaming environment.

achieved through different actions by the player. One is expected to reach certain locations, visit certain areas and, last but not least, reach vistas. As in *Assassin's Creed*, an often elevated location must be reached after which the player presses a button. One major mechanical variation makes the experience of reaching the vista's somewhat different. *Guild Wars 2* characters cannot climb as the player can in *Revelations*. The only way to climb on top of an object or structure is by jumping on them by using the spacebar. This limits the height the character can reach in one jump. The inability to grasp onto ledges or an accelerating running motion also limits the length which the character can bridge. These restrictions make reaching vistas substantially harder in *Guild Wars 2* compared to *Assassin's Creed*.

Space

These selected spaces evoke different kind of uses due to their different rules. Trial and error is a better description for these actions than the almost chore-like use of the vista in *Revelations* in which almost nothing can go wrong. There are less different options to complete this challenge, more rules and limitations to take into account. The same paradox occurs again in what Bogost titled the possibility space. One would initially tend to argue that this also limits the gameplay experience, but the opposite happens. The optional nature of the vistas and challenging outset provokes 'play' to a greater extent. Failing to reach the vistas in *Guild Wars 2* does not greatly impact the game (the worst that could happen is some falling damage and the knowledge that you have to try again). However, if you reach it, you are rewarded by adding onto your 'completion' rate and you gain some experience points. This sense of exploration or discovery is represented both in the rules and rewards of the game as well as the gameplay itself. The visual effect that occurs when performing this mechanic is somewhat more elaborate compared to the AC games. The camera makes a similar circular motion around the character, but in some instances also changes its point of focus away from it, to bring certain specific landmarks into frame. A fade to white tries to mask the cuts and give the feeling of a seamless transition, to and from of the cutscene.

Shadow of Mordor

Shadow of Mordor, in its core, portrays your run of the mill revenge story, with 'the little guy' who works his way to the top via intimidation and a proper dose of killing bad guys. If you wouldn't know better, this set-up could be interpreted as a film noir, or mafia story, if only it wasn't set in the lands of Mordor and the goons wouldn't be so Orc-like. For obvious reasons, *Shadow of Mordor* is tightly bound to the clichés that come with the high fantasy genre, since it is based in Tolkien's fictional universe. Like *Assassin's Creed*, this game tries its upmost to incorporate its rules and goals in the overarching story, or vice versa. This causes many widespread mechanics to be tweaked to fit the

kind of story the developers try to tell. In short, the story is twofold, united in one body by Talion and the wraith (Celebrimbor) that possesses his body.

Rules as a Form of Storytelling?

This storyline is braided into the overarching revenge plot in which Talion, aided by the supernatural powers of the wraith, tries to kill Sauron's captains responsible for the death of his family. Apart from a number of flashbacks from Celebrimbor's past, the majority of the plot is linear and is dominantly focussed on bending Orc captains to your will and command. Monolith proudly titled this mechanic the 'Nemesis System', a model which is heavily influenced by the actions of the player during the game. For example, when the player dies in battle with a certain Orc, this NPC will remember this encounter and respond to it during your next time the two of you meet. Rising from the dead seems to be a common event in many games with nobody batting an eye, but *Shadow of Mordor* actively ties this in with its story. Some of the Orcs will act surprised, even terrified of your re-appearance, others just do not grasp what happened.

Shadow of Mordor has many of the typical singleplayer Action RPG characteristics in a dominantly open-world environment. A key component is however missing. The amount of customisation of the character(s) is fairly limited to skills and abilities, not giving the player any way to influence the visual representation of Talion, or Celebrimbor for that matter. The weapons they carry and the armour they wear remain the same throughout the game. This character is in this way very story-driven, fixing it in place so it can serve a stable function in the plot. On the other hand, the world surrounding the player seems to be adapting to their every move. It is revealed during the unfolding of the plot that Talion is already technically dead. He died during the beginning of the game by the hands of the very same characters that killed his family. An accidental turn of events bound the body of Talion, upon the moment of death, to the soul of Celebrimbor, who keeps the body alive. When the character 'dies' during the game, the body and soul are briefly separated. The story remains linear in the sense that the player is not sent back in time to try the same thing again, but the death of Talion becomes part of the story. Regaining the memory of Celebrimbor is a large catalyst for a number of plot points. One way of reconstructing these events of the past is 'reforging' the so-called forge towers, or as I see them: vistas (**FIG 7**). The first of these is immediately forced upon the player when you complete the prologue, or tutorial of the game. Whilst already situated on top of such a 'tower of starlight', as Celebrimbor dubs them, you are imposed to press a button in order to 'reforge'. The camera pans down and moves up in a 'zooming-out' motion, transitioning into the in-game map of the game world. Similar to Assassin's Creed, the vistas dispense the gameplay to some extent by withholding key information from the player until she/he reaches and 'unlocks' new towers. This seems to be a reoccurring theme in open world games, as evidently seen earlier on as

well. Developers feel the need to administer smaller doses of the gameworld, instead of opening it up at once.

FIG 7: When the player climbs the 'forge towers', the structure lights up and the character changes from Talion to the bright appearance of Celebrimbor. In this case study the catalyst for the activation of the vista is physical, namely the anvil shown in this figure. It is activated by pressing the 'RB' button after which the characters hits the anvil with his hammer and the screen transitions to the map.

Space

This incorporation further blurs the lines between Jenkins' embedded and emergent storytelling. The effects of emergent storytelling are commonly limited to the imagination and personal meaning-creation by the player. In-game responses towards emergent story elements are mostly reserved for simulation-type games (*The Sims*, 2000; *Simcity*, 1989-2013) as Jenkins points out (Jenkins, 2004: 10). This creates a sense of narrative satisfaction, as he calls it, which seems to reflect one's own choices and type of gameplay into the game experience. In other words, it makes the player feel like their choices mattered in the remainder of the game, even though this might the mere illusion of choice. What Jenkins does not include is that negative experience, such as failing a mission or the death of a character, could also be included in this type of storytelling. This is exactly what happens in *Shadow of Mordor*. The gameworld feels alive and in connection with your actions, changing alongside you whilst progressing in the game, even including the things other games punish you for. With this knowledge, the player can manipulate the emergent storyline to fit their image or interpretation of the game. The combination of play and meaning-creation brings us back to Bogost's notion of the possibility space. Although the manipulative world seems to attribute a lot of agency towards the

player, it is also clearly intended by the developers. Furthermore, the player discovers the precise effects of the 'living world' around the character whilst playing. Both the narrative and the possibiliy space unfold in front of the player's eyes, exploring the changing rules again and again.

2.3 Formal Aspects

If the game overview analysis describes the goals, rules and mechanics of IDM, the formal aspects layer analyses the cogs in those mechanisms. Fernández-Vara further describes the difference between both analytic layers as differentiating the game from others in the game overview analysis, after which the **formal aspects** chapter explains how and why this happens. The latter is based on a very linguistic approach towards analysing IDM, which again stresses her problematic relation with the structuralist and poststructuralist traditions. In her view, a game can be dissected into the smallest elements, or building blocks, but would still be meaningless for someone who is not familiar with the game. In other words, one can learn all the words and even understand the basic grammar, but this doesn't mean that one can speak the language (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 117-118). This is why a key part of analysing IDM should be dedicated to expanding on logic and rational behind certain mechanics and choices by the developers. This chapter will focus dominantly on the vistas in each game separately, only mentioning other characteristics when they are interrelated with the use or effect of the vistas. Similar to the previous chapter I will use the case study *Assassin's Creed - Revelations* to exemplify some relevant notions and terminology after which I will use these to analyse the other two case studies. Since a large portion of this chapter relies on visual representation, I will once more address the elaborate collection of screenshots that can be found in the appendixes to better visualize the descriptions in the text.

Assassin's Creed - Revelations

It was previously established that the vistas (or viewpoints as they are called in *Revelations)* are tied in with the notion of synchronization. This quantifying mechanism, to illustrate the completion of the game (or the extent to which you succeeded), is visible for the player during the game in the interface upon completing certain actions, or in a special screen in the game's menu. Reaching full completion, or 100% synchronization, is only possible when the player performed every mission perfectly, collected every artefact and completed every vista. But the vista has more effects than just adding to your completion rate. The player is first informed about new vistas on their map in the game's menu, or on the mini-map, indicated by the eagle icon . The mini-map is a miniature version of the map that is found in the lower left part of the interface (**APP. 2.3**). This mini-map only shows the direct environment of the player's location and will only signify the player of nearby viewpoints when in close proximity. In both the entire map, as well as the mini-map, a large portion

is mostly still to be uncovered (**FIG 8a**). When the vista is completed, the surrounding area is cleared and new icons appear on the map informing the player on new activities in this area. This mechanic is called the 'fog of war' and was popularized in map-based games up from the early '90s (Lewin, 2012: 218). A cloud formation of sorts blurs of the map to mask information, which in the case of *Revelations* is new events, collectables and shops. The more viewpoints the player synchronized, the more of the map is uncovered. This mechanic has been present during the entire series, but is varied upon for the second time in this instalment (*Assassin's Creed – Brotherhood* being the first). **FIG 8a** also shows locked content (signified by the lock symbol). In earlier games in the series, synchronizing viewpoints automatically unlocked all the content in its area, but *Revelations* adds a new layer to this game, which is based on the power struggle between the Assassins and the story's main antagonists: the Byzantine Templars. **FIG 8b** shows a similar 'fog of war' style map, which indicates different districts of the city of Constantinople. If the district is marked with a dark colour, it means that some of the content is still locked due to Templar presence in the area. It also shows the location of the Templar dens, which the player can capture by killing its captain. The rules on how to kill him may vary from each den, but the main objective is to reach the top of the den's tower afterwards, and light a beacon. One of the tutorial missions explains that this is done to inform other Assassins that the coast is clear, but the effect of this action is very similar to the viewpoint. The same circular shot follows, and the message 'viewpoint synchronized' also pops up on screen. Surrounding parts of the map are cleared up as well, in line with the effects of completing a vista.

FIG 8: The highlighted area in 8a shows the viewpoint, or vista, indicated by the eagle symbol. The edges of the map all appear to be incomplete, covered by the 'fog of war'. 8b shows different districts controlled by the Templars (black) and the Assassins (white).

Operationalizing Mechanics

The bilateral use of the viewpoints and dens don't stop here entirely. Apart from the completion of the game and unlocking the map, it also has some extra uses. One of the extra functions is that the vistas serve as a 'savepoint', as are many of the other instances of 'synchronization'. Saving a game is a way to secure your game until that point in time. If the character dies, the game will reset to this point earlier in the game from which you can try again. Saving can be done by completing varying game objectives, although the player might not be so actively aware of this. This type of saving the game is often referred to as 'autosaving', which makes most of the player's aware saves obsolete because of the numerous instances the game saves itself. The logic behind these synchronized saves tries to connect to the story to some extent as well. These moments are memorable events for Ezio and when he and the player are desynchronized, both will be reconnected back in these instances of synchronization.

As mentioned earlier on, *Assassin's Creed* tries to actively tie its mechanics and rules to the story they present, or, in fact, the other way around. This is what Fernández-Vara refers to as **diegetic**, the process of internalizing features in the game world (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 125). The term is lend from film studies where its mostly used to indicate whenever music and text are part of the fictional world (diegetic) or only audible or visible for the viewer (extradiegetic). The interface, for example, consists of extradiegetic elements in IDM, and so are opening screens or menus. Although they represent elements from the game world, the NPC's and player-character are not aware of, nor can they comment on them. The rules and effects of the vistas are, however, diegetic elements which are internalized into the gameplay experience. To exemplify, traditionally the player has to save the game themselves by exiting the gameworld to a menu and select the save function. This action has no connection with the gameworld or narrative. Other games that do support 'autosave' do this at fixed time intervals or locations, but this also has to be considered extradiegetic, since it is not logically tied in with the gameworld. Moreover, this is not applicable in an open-world game since the player is largely in control of their own movement. *Assassin's Creed* changes this by integrating savepoints into the story by using synchronization as a 'logical' approach. It is still debatable if this is entirely true, because it mostly relies on the framed story in order to be viable. The player, theoretically, controls Desmond, who in turn controls Ezio's memories through the animus. But if one only takes Ezio's storyline into account, the other functions of the vista could also be seen as diegetic (or diegeticized) rules. Unlocking new content or clearing the map might rely on extradiegetic rules, like completing an X-amount of actions, or getting a certain score or level; but these are merely mediated towards the player, not the gameworld. With Ezio's direct involvement in the story and rational of its rules, these events become diegetic, fitting the overall logic that the game presents.

Guild Wars 2

The vistas in the *Guild Wars* universe have a more singular use in terms of function and/or effect. Rather, with *AC*'s use of the vista in mind, a diffusion of its function is evident in the rules of the gameworld. Firstly, the similarities of the vista will be analysed, after which the alternative uses will be elaborated upon. As in *Revelations*, the vistas are presented to the player via the game's map. The 'fog of war' is also represented, although it has its own aesthetic variation by portraying large, rough brushstrokes in the covered areas, and more precise and detailed elements in the uncovered parts of the map (**APP 3.3**). The same goes for the mini-map (dubbed compass), which is a direct representation of this map, only centred on the player and just showing its direct surroundings, similar to *Assassin's Creed*. Information about the covered areas, however, can already be obtained by 'talking' to a scout. This NPC will briefly uncover the map and show certain locations of interest, after which they will be covered again. However, the icons of these locations remain visible to the player. The locations of the vistas in *Guild Wars* are also signified by such an icon, but instead of an eagle, these seems to be the outlines of a mountain range ▲ . The top left of the interface also dedicates a small portion to direct the player towards different types of locations nearby, one of which could be the vista. When the vista is completed and a cutscene is played, the icon changes to a full shape ▲ . The action can be repeated, although it will have no effect on the completion rate, nor the rewards gained.

This is where the similarities stop to a large extent. When the player approaches the vista's area, the map will clear up by itself, adding the final icons and locations while entering the area for the first time. A text appears to indicate that this area is now 'discovered' whilst also rewarding a set amount of experience points. Whilst reaching the vista is far harder to achieve, this action seems to be far less rewarding in a direct sense in relation with *Assassin's Creed*. Since *Guild Wars 2* is an online game, it does not use savegames since everything is registered in real-time. Every step you take is recorded and even when your character dies, the game world continues, progressing while you are revived at one of the 'waypoints'. If the map is already uncovered and its locations are unlocked, what is the use of a vista? In *Guild Wars 2* every zone has a number of actions which can be performed. These include quests, but also exploration of 'points of interest' and vistas. If all of these actions are completed, the player is rewarded with an additional amount of experience points and a number of items as well as in-game currency. There are many other ways to obtain all of these, but the developers apparently felt the need to encourage players to explore every nook and cranny of the game world. In this sense, the reward is increasingly placed in the gameworld, rather than a practical effect for the gameplay as seen during *Assassin's Creed.* The cutscene that is presented to

the player in *Guild Wars 2* is not a way of diegeticizing map updates, but rather a mediation of directions towards the player. Although it varies from time to time, the vistas' cutscenes mostly show other points of interest: hidden locations with more items for the taking, or mysterious places which contribute to the game's story, or which tell their own. This extra content is largely autonomous from the greater plot, but offers the player some alternative gameplay. This type of play is often seen in open-world games, hiding so-called Easter Eggs in the game reward the player that wants to explore every location.

Shadow of Mordor

The bare lands of Mordor make for the most open environment between these three open-world games. Whilst *Assassin's Creed* shows significantly more structures and *Guild Wars 2* is clearly much larger, *Shadow of Mordor* would claim to be the liveliest. For the most part, it lends a lot of their mechanisms from the standard open-world Action RPG's, especially the *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry* series (both developed by Ubisoft). The semi-linear storyline, combat style, character progression; all fall heavily into the existing frameworks, something that we already established during the past chapters. Is this also the case when we further analyse the use of the vistas? For the most part it can be said that they do rely greater upon the representation of the vista in *Assassin's Creed* than *Guild Wars 2*. Although some of the outlines of the uncharted areas on the map are visible, most of the content is still hidden. As was the case for the other case studies, the mini-map also refers to the forge towers, but only when the player is close to them. The varying areas on this map are clearly marked with a specific name and an [icon] icon referring to the fact that the forge tower has to be visited before it is revealed (APP 4.2). The word 'new' also indicates that the area has not yet been visited by the player. Like *Assassin's Creed*, the vista serves as a hub after which more content is made accessible. After the player 'reforged' the tower, changing the icon to [icon], it becomes a 'waypoint' and respawn location. The waypoint was already mentioned when analysing *Guild Wars 2*, where it was a separate function in a different location. In *Shadow of Mordor* it is part of the vista's function. In short, a waypoint, or fast travel hub, is a way for the player to instantaneously travel over larger distances. While playing, one can access the map and travel to one of the hubs by selecting it. In the case of *Shadow of Mordor*, the character appears at the top of the tower from which the game can be continued.

Respawning is a mechanic which occurs when the character dies and is revived in a certain location. Whereas *Assassin's Creed* simply puts the player back to a previous game state, *Shadow of Mordor* keeps the clock running. Moreover, some time passes between the death of the character and its

revival on top of the tower, while the world adapts to the effects of your death. The player is also respawned on top of the tower when he exited the game without reaching another savepoint first. Like *Assassin's Creed*, there are different ways of autosaving, most of them related to completing a mission or collecting artefacts. But when reforging a tower was the last action before quitting the game, the player will appear here when he continues to play. Since there is no way to manually save the game, the player will often find that he is on top of one of vistas after launching *Shadow of Mordor*. Although a minor completion mechanism is present in the main menu of the game, it is not as complex and widely used or referred to during the game as the other two case studies. Completing the vistas is however vital to complete the game's story, because important information and other clues will otherwise remain hidden to the player by the fog of war.

The 'magical' bound between Talion and Celebrimbor are the developer's way of adding logic to many of the game's mechanics. The forge towers are definitely a clear example of this, although the explanation of how this works is kept vague throughout the game. Celebrimbor suffers from amnesia and although the towers seem to be connected to his past in some way, he can merely refer to them as 'familiar'. No reason is mentioned upon resurrection of how, amongst other things, the body of your character ends on top of these towers. The dogma 'you are banished from death' is repeated a few times throughout the game, indicating that Talion cannot truly die, but this still doesn't explain his sudden reappearance. Inconsistencies aside, a definite attempt is made to incorporate these mechanics into the larger story of the game. The diegetic rules of this game tighten the relationship between how the player conceives the event and what actually happens in the story. Both Talion and Celebrimbor are heard talking about recent events, amongst which are these vistas.

Chapter 3
Findings and Continuance

In the previous chapters I analysed a broad set of data via the model provided by Fernández-Vara. In order to perform a deeper analysis, rooted in cultural theory, I will first assemble the most vital conclusions from the previous chapters to be able to pave the way for the rest of my research. In this way, I will also be able to point out any areas which have been left untouched, and formulate my plan of action for the remainder of this thesis. At the end of this chapter the work of Friess will be elaborated upon, as well as theoretical additions and adjustments to the narrative/aesthetic divide.

3.1 Preliminary Findings

For all three case studies, there are some general statements which can be made regarding the use of the vista trope. In all occasions the vista is situated on an elevated location. The player has to perform a short climbing or jumping puzzle to be able to reach it. Although the levels of difficulty to reach this point vary, the player is rewarded for this effort in some sense. When the player reaches the location, the activation of the vista is signified by the title of the act (synchronize, view, reforge) and the corresponding button. Upon pressing this button, the player is briefly broken with the interactive component of the game whilst a cutscene is played. The third-person perspective makes way for a different point-of-view and movement of the 'camera', no longer tied to the motion of the player-character. Some cuts are visible when transitioning to and from the cutscene, even though this clip attempts to be seamless with the overall gameplay experience. Overall, the vistas are linked to a sense of exploration, both literally by exploring the locations of the game, as well as metaphorically, in the sense of play defined by Ian Bogost. In this metaphorical sense, the vista creates a possibility space in which the player is confronted with certain limitations, imposed by the rules and mechanics of the game. Exploring these rules in order to reach the vistas is the core definition of play, according to Bogost. The literal sense is illustrated by the strong connection to the map in all cases. The vistas are clearly signified on both the map and mini-map of the games and performing this act is somehow connected with discovering the gameworld.

When analysing the effects of the vistas, the case studies show different uses. *Shadow of Mordor* shows the strongest connection with the game's map. The 'fog of war' surrounding the vistas covers

up key information from the player. Via visual and textual indicators (such as the incomplete tower icon or the word 'new') the player is strongly directed towards the vista when exploring a new area of the gameworld. Upon completion, the cutscene transitions not back to the player, but directly towards the map, showing the newly gained information. From this point on, the vistas also serve as a savepoint, waypoint and respawn-location. This bundle of mechanics can be seen as a hub for the player's logistic movements, as well as a hub of different rules and functions of the game as a whole.

The same idea of uncovering the surrounding area is clear in *Assassin's Creed's* use of the vista. However, unlocking certain aspects also compel the player to perform a variation of the vista, which adds a new layer of rules. In both this and the previous case study, unlocking and uncovering other aspects of the game are braided into the story via these vistas. In the case of *Revelations,* the synchronization mechanic recreates the memories of your character, as well as literally gaining an overview of the area. The sense of completion is also strongly connected with this mechanic, quantifying your success rate, while, among other things, completing the vista. Although the game instantly returns to the interactive element after the vista's cutscene, the changes on the map are signified and stressed clearly.

Guild Wars 2 seems to be the odd one out when analysing the effects and role of the vista in these three cases. Although it shares the clear indicators of its presence on the map, it has no effect on clearing the fog of war, or unlocking any content directly. The sense of exploration is rather expressed in the gameworld itself, searching the environment for ways to scale the hill on which the vista is located, or trying to jump up certain object, to be able to reach this point. The cutscene also shows other interesting locations, not by transitioning or referring to the map, but by showing these in the world. Although the role of this content is not always expressed, it seems to trigger the player to keep exploring. In a direct sense, completing the vista does reward the player experience points and ultimately some in-game items when all the content in a certain area is completed. No effort is made to tie this in with the greater plot of the game, but it rather lets the player create their own story.

From a theoretical standpoint, a couple of elements have been left bare. This is partly due to the model of Fernández-Vara, the foundation for these previous chapters. Her use of Jenkins' notion of space, but even my addition of Bogost's interpretation of space, both fail to address the term directly. In both Jenkins and Bogost's work, performance is key to defining a certain space. Although Bogost does allude to spatiality, it is only in relation to the rules and context of this space. The fact that these fictional universes represent vast landscapes, cities and scorched worlds does not seem to influence their notions one bit. The elevated vista surely shows off the immensity of the open-world

environment, but there is no way to express this theoretically in this model. This brings me to the second aspect which has been neglected: the aesthetics of the game in general, but also the vista in particular. Apparently the sheer beauty, affect or meaning-creation during the gameplay experience has no place in an objectified analysis.

Resuming on Friess

The text analysis approach by Fernández-Vara has given many tools to gather data from these case studies, but puts aside other, more subjective experiences. Her 'building blocks', as shown during the first chapters, aim to label, categorize and differentiate varying aspects of videogames. But the use of those aspects, as well as the underlying intentions by the developers, remains untouched. To return to Ghosh's notion of (In)fusion, Fernández-Vara's model is largely based on a structuralist approach towards the medium. While she does refer to player-experience and context throughout her book, she does not provide the tools to analyse these as part of the 'building blocks'. Furthermore, I do not expect that the sum of all these 'building blocks' make up the entirety of the game, it misses the essence of these games. For the majority of this analysis, I have been focussing on the relation between these artefacts and an identifiable truth about the medium, dissecting its entire entity in order to draw any conclusions from them. Though this approach proved to be very helpful in such a broad analysis, I want to shift this traditional view on the arts to a more perceptive one. Instead of the artefact as such, the subject-artefact relation might provide an insight towards the missing mortar between the 'building blocks'.

Katja Kwastek explains to great extent how complex the experience of an interactive medium can be (Kwastek, 2013). The enumeration of different perspectives on the subject boils down to two dominant traditions of Art perception, which represent the same tension as the outcome of Fernández-Vara's method. On the one hand, a number of theorists see the artwork as a sacred holder of meaning, a vehicle of intended design by an author. On the other hand, the subject receives far more agency, seeing her/him as co-author of the artwork since the aesthetic experience is depended on their interaction. In his article *Kant on Art and Truth after Plato*, Tom Rockmore recognizes a similar shift in perspective towards artefact analysis. After a long tradition of approaching aesthetics as a quantifiable judgement, dating all the way back to Plato, Kant rejects this purist way of thinking in relation to the Arts. As articulated by Rockmore, Kant searches for a new way to view the arts.

> *First, we cannot prove that a work of art is beautiful since the ultimate test is pleasure. Second, we do not judge works of art according to concepts but according to the so-called 'free play' between imagination and the understanding (Rockmore, 2013: 46).*

Especially this last part should sound familiar in relation to the prior understanding of the *possibility space* by Bogost. This sense of play, meandering between the mechanics and rules of a game, and your own performance and practise, seems to be central in both of these theories. This is different from the types of embedded and emergent storytelling as proposed by Fernández-Vara, since this only focuses on the creation of a fictional story, rather than a structure of meaning-creation.

To deeper analyse this sense of play and its relation of meaning-creation, I aim to use Friess' divide of narrative and aesthetic perception. Recapitulating on these terms shortly, they illustrate the recreation of an intended construction of meaning-creation (narrative perception) and an individual process of meaning-creation based on the valuing of perceived structures (aesthetic perception) (Friess, 2012: 250). Note that narrativity in this context does not signify the story or plot per se, but a pre-constructed or scripted progression of events. As pointed out, Friess continues to formulate a model for structuring qualitative sociological research, a model that will not be applicable in this context. The divide she proposes does create a clear starting point to analyse the two seemingly opposite poles: the developers' intended play and the gameplay experience from the player. Any type of element of IDM does not exclude either of these, but could lean towards one or the other.

Analysing games from these two perspectives has already been proposed in the experimental paper by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc and Robert Zubek as the result of the Game Developers Conference in San Jose (Hunicke, LeBlanc & Zubek, 2004). By introducing the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics) model they aimed to increase the understanding of IDM by both the producer as well as the consumer, resulting in a better understanding of games from both perspectives. A noble and justified cause, but a very observant reader might recognize this paper since I cast their definition of mechanics aside earlier on. In their view, the mechanics are all rules and code of the game from a designer's perspective. This goes against my earlier definition which explains mechanics as methods to operationalize certain rules. I do agree that their MDA model accurately depicts the perception of IDM from two different perspectives, but I believe that the signifier 'mechanics' does not match their intended definition. To clarify the distinction between their definition of mechanics and Sicart's notion which I appropriate, I will refer to Hunicke's term as **design** instead of mechanics. Apart from this different definition, Hunicke (et al.) does introduce an analytic model which is very useful in this deep analysis. Their formulated framework incorporates both the production as well as the consumption in an attempt to theorize IDM. I will build upon their model by complementing it with the theory and findings previously established in this thesis.

Mechanics

| Design | | Dynamics | | Aesthetics |

In **FIG 9** the red arrows signify the perspective of the developer of a particular game; the green arrows signify the perception of the player. They start out with the **design:** the code, rules and architecture which shape the skeleton of the game. Many of these will remain invisible to the player because they include rules like 'this wall is a solid object, you cannot walk through it'. They also represent the virtual space in which the player-character is situated to a large extent. All objects and structures present in the game are part of its design. **Dynamics** are the interplay between the rules and the play; certain rules invoke a certain type of play. In my opinion, **mechanics** are used from a developer's perspective to initiate these play styles, or systems of rules to influence a certain type of play. Moreover, knowledge of the rules can be used to your advantage, deconstructing the game to great depth can make it easier to achieve a better score, or beat other players (or beating the game, so to say). When the player is first confronted with the game, certain stimuli are triggered; **aesthetics** in the eyes of this model. These experiences of pleasure are closely linked to Kant's definition of the experience of art. Hunicke (et al.) further deconstructs eight categories into a taxonomy, all with their own attributes (**FIG 10**). Different games can embody multiple of these categories which are both influenced by the game's design as well as the performance by the players.

FIG 10:

from Hunicke, LeBlanc & Zubek, 2004

1. **Sensation**
   Game as sense-pleasure
2. **Fantasy**
   Game as make-believe
3. **[Lyrical]**
   Game as drama
4. **Challenge**
   Game as obstacle course
5. **Fellowship**
   Game as social framework
6. **Discovery**
   Game as uncharted territory
7. **Expression**
   Game as self-discovery
8. **Submission**
   Game as pastime

Distinguishing these two perspectives brings another theoretical framework to mind. In the model above we can recognize an intended, conceived perspective on the game in its design, the way the developers envisioned the game to be. On the other side of the spectrum is the aesthetic category in which the players perform and use the game, still unaware of its deeper structures and rules. The two of these come together in the dynamics of the game, creating a space for play, both influenced by the rules by the developers and the performance of the player. This dialectical model leaves much to be discussed, one being the active role of the dynamics. In its current state, dynamics is only a meeting place, or clash between the other two perspectives, but could this category also have an

agency of its own? When defined in such a manner, it comes very close to Lefebvre's lessons on space. Through the lens of Edward W. Soja, this trialectic of the construction of space illustrates a proportional relation between three distinct categories.

Trialectics of Space

My former complaints about the neglect of spatiality will be compensated by the use of spatial theory in order to deeper analyse narrative and aesthetic perception. Edward W. Soja largely bases his so-called trialectics of space on the trichotomy by Herni Lefebvre from his *Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1991) and *Writings on Cities* (Lefebvre, 1996). Soja adapts this spatial framework into a model with more distinct and active components, making it more applicable for an analysis like this one. Whereas Friess will serve as the starting point for the upcoming chapter, the trialectics will be the leitmotiv to structure these chapters internally, as well as a model to conclude my findings. One might question the connection between this spatial theory and IDM, but the subtitle of Soja's book gives enough indication towards this relation, namely: *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Soja, 1996).

As one would expect, the trialectics are made out of three components. While many former theorists on architecture and spatial theory only approach this notion in a singular manner, or bipartite at most, Lefebvre introduces a third. In short, he envisions the construction of space as a collision of three powers: *Representation of Space* (conceived space), *Spatial Practice* (perceived space) and *Space of Representations* (lived space) (Idem: 66-68). I will briefly define and polish these categories separately, after which I will expand upon its use for the upcoming chapters. Firstly, the **Representations of Space** (or conceived space) indicates the intended use of the space by a hegemonic power like the municipality or a property developer (Idem: 66-67). They foresee a certain use of a certain space, evoking this through visual signs as well as imposed rules. In practise this could be literal street signs indicating directions or prohibitions, or more passive intended actions like putting down benches to offer a place for recreation. Local tourist boards that put down signs saying 'This is a photo opportunity' are a clear example of conceived space, trying to compel certain behaviour by the people in this space. When applying this component towards IDM, these agents are represented by the developers and publishers of the games. While making these games, they most likely have a type of gameplay in mind, which they will enforce upon their players with rules and mechanics. The narrative in Friess' sense is constructed by the conceived space, offering a progression of events for the player to reconstruct, or relive. Even a total freedom for the player with very limited rules is a type of conceived space. This also ties in with the **design** (or mechanics) component in the model depicted in **FIG X**. Although the developers might evoke a specific type of play, they can only enforce it from this end of the spectrum.

Spatial Practise (or perceived space) is the practitioner's counterpart to conceived space. This perceived space, like the term indicates, is the contemporary experience and practise within the space, based on production and reproduction of a certain use, also called performance. Although influenced by the intended use by hegemonic powers, the lived space can rebel against this by appropriating the space for other uses. Skaters, for example, are a group of users who actively rebel against the imposed rules and restrictions by the policy and law, by using the space for other means. In turn, the conceived space tries to constrain this rebellion by both making spaces unsuitable for skating, or creating a skate parks designated for this practice. In an IDM context, the perceived space portrays the actions of the player. Although restricted to a number of rules, they can create their own kind of use while playing. They could even rebel against them by using cheats or remodelling the game to their own use. Both Hunicke and Friess describe aesthetic (perception) as this performance by the player, as seen on the left end of the model.

Lastly, **Space of Representations** (or lived space) as described by Soja as: "both as distinct from the other two spaces and as encompassing them" (Idem: 67). This lived space (in the past tense) is the history of a certain space and all connotations to other spaces it musters. This is your personal memory, a collective nostalgia, or symbolic relations to a non-verbal structure of feeling that surrounds this space. Conceived space might wish to tap into this memory by putting a plaque, or found a museum, but this lived space remains autonomous to a certain point because it operates on both an individual as well as a collective level. Moreover, it is a changing entity which hardly lets itself be contained by a temporal commemoration. The spatial practice could reconstruct this memory by returning to the space where you first met someone, reliving this moment. Both could influence the lived space, but it surely also affects the other two. The location of a great tragedy will not soon be turned into a place of entertainment, and frolicking by an individual on such a location will also be looked down upon. This imagined space is invisible by the outsider and could also be expressed as a discourse; unwritten laws and rules present in a defined community. This set of unwritten rules is part of a social environment, but are only enforced by the repetitive performance to keep it alive. Logic would suggest that lived space would be embodied by the dynamics component of Huninke's model. Dynamics, however, only portrays the collision between the two perspectives. Soja's definition of lived space clearly sees it as an entity of its own, with its own agency and influence over the conceived and perceived space. Moreover, Friess does not incorporate this entity in her division. In order to reflect on the lived space in IDM, I will first analyse the first two components in relation to the vistas with the help of the case studies and preliminary findings. The components will be titled after Friess' division, but also embody parts of the trialectics as defined above. After this I hope to pin-point the lived space and its role in IDM, exemplified by the vista.

3.2 Narrative Perception

The pre-constructed space by the developers takes up much of the gameplay experience. When analysing Hollywood cinema or bestseller literature, it is rather clear what the object is and what the role of the subject will be, namely a passive one. The narrative unfolds in front of us and the subject is a mere bystander. When you throw an interactive component into the mix, the lines become far more blurred. In this chapter, I will address the way how developers structure their narrative progression via vistas. The role of space plays a large part in understanding this structure. This is why conceived space will be the framework from which these notions will be contextualized. Although author's intention might be lurking on topics like these, I will merely use 'intended' as an adjective to illustrate the conceived narrative structures, as recognizable in the case study. With the help of the preliminary findings from the three case studies, I hope to find out how vistas: create a micronarrative, dispense the progression of the game as a story, and dose the game as an environment.

Vistas as a Micronarrative

As introduced by Henry Jenkins, the term micronarrative indicates an instance of memorable perception, standing out from the overall gameplay experience (Jenkins, 2004: 124). I understand vistas as a micronarrative in this sense because the events are separable from the rest of the game, whilst also building up to a memorable, isolated experience. In relation to the conceived space in a greater sense, vistas show a clear recreation of intended gameplay. Whereas architects in our reality would emphatically design buildings and towers to be not suitable for climbing, the three case studies encourage the player to do so, via the in-game map, but also via the game's design. In *Assassin's Creed* most of all, the structures are made to fit this style of use. Instead of suiting the needs of all other NPC's in the game, the ledges and ridges mostly allow and even invite the player to scale them. Like skating, free-running can be seen as an act of breaking the rules of an intended, conceived space. In this case however, its design serves as a sign to indicate this use, although other in-game characters will still comment negatively on the player when he climbs a building. In *Shadow of Mordor*, the structures even appear as incomplete as long as they are left to their own devices, only (re)appearing when you climb them. Like *Assassin's Creed*, these towers show very conveniently placed ledges, enabling the player to scale them more easily. *Guild Wars 2* disguises these features as circumstantial, thereby adding more challenge to reaching the vista. The cutscene after this challenge completes this 'memorable moment', after which the remainder of the game can be resumed.

Dispensing the Game's Story

All three games show a completion rate to the player, either when starting, or in a menu during the game. Moreover, all case studies show a direct or indirect relation between this sense of completion and reaching the vistas. When looking at the mechanics related to the vista in *Assassin's Creed* and *Shadow of Mordor*, they are purposefully tied in with the overall story of the fictional universe. To recapitulate, in *Assassin's Creed* the player relives the memories of protagonist Ezio. Succeeding certain elements of the game synchronize your play, or performance, with the ´past events´ of this character. In *Shadow of Mordor,* the character Celebrimbor suffers from amnesia, but ´reforging´ these towers spark memories of his past. This mediated form of storytelling represents the intended design on a meta-level by incorporating it into the game's story. On the fundamental level, the player recreates the intended progression of events, created by the developers (narrative perception). On the surface, the player experiences this as a reconstruction of a story, fulfilling narrativity in a more lyrical manner. This is what Fernández-Vara titled diegetic earlier on: the incorporation of rules and mechanics into the gameworld (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 125). Even *Guild Wars 2* shows a connection with this idea of the developers who want to convey a certain story. When the cutscene is shown to the player, it shows new areas to discover, opening up new, minor stories to be found. In this case the vista is less connected to the overarching story, but more focussed on the small mysteries hidden in the game environment.

Teun Dubbelman explores this idea of storytelling through visual means in great length in his 'Narratives of Being Here' (2015). In a direct sense, one can convey a story by literally telling the player what is happening, or what she/he should do. This is called exposition, something that is also present in cinema and literature. This is a moment during the game when the author, director, or developer in this case, takes the time and puts the player down to tell him a story. According to Dubbelman this stands in the way of immersion during gameplay, hence developers search for other means to transfer this information (Dubbelman, 2015: 127-128). Apart from visual storytelling, editing and symbolic imagery, which are all techniques used in cinematography, the interactive nature of IDM can also make use of the player-character to tell the stories while playing. Dubbelman describes that in earlier games, the story was seen as a way to reinforce the gameplay, but more contemporary games show a more mutual relation. Mechanics, in this way, can be story elements, much like how visual storytelling is a non-verbal way of transferring information. In other words, instead of informing the player via text or narration, the mechanics show that there might be something interesting lurking around the corner. Narrative perception structures space in this way, stopping the player for a moment to reach the vista in order to show something in relation to the

plot, or synchronize with the character's memories. In the literal sense this means saving the game, or pointing something out, but the player would perceive it from a narrative standpoint.

Cognitive Mapping

I already pointed out that all three case studies show a strong connection with the in-game map and the use of the vistas. *Assassin's Creed* and *Shadow of Mordor* clearly use the vistas to update and expand their map, clearing the 'fog of war' and adding new locations on the map. Meanwhile, *Guild Wars 2* uses the map to discover the vistas, devoting other mechanics to uncovering the map. The location of the vista is portrayed by icons on the map in all cases, informing the player of its location and inviting them to it. The construction of the map, dividing districts and structuring space, are all mental processes in what Kevin Lynch titles *cognitive mapping* (1960). I will draw a parallel between the process within these case studies and the theory of Lynch to further exemplify this notion. According to Lynch, a space is constructed upon different elements of the space, namely: paths, landmarks, edges, nodes, and districts (Lynch, 1960: 8). The experiences of these elements can both be personal or collective, as Jameson also notes in his response to Lynch's book (Jameson, 1990). Social boundaries as well as discourses invite or prohibit access to a certain space, influencing the elements to your personal map, or that of a larger social group. The home, or similar space, is always the focus point for the mental map, from which it is constructed outwards. It is no coincidence that the starting area in the case studies is already revealed as well. In *Guild Wars 2* this is literally the character's homeland, in *Shadow of Mordor* this is the area were Talion stood guard for many years. In *Assassin's Creed*, Ezio is given a small tour of the harbour area and Galata district by some local characters. From this point on, the first elements which are added to your map are the edges (coastlines, mountains, and inaccessible areas) and the landmarks (skylines and recognizable structures). The former are the outlines which are already present in the game maps, even though much else is still covered under the 'fog of war'. The latter provides a reference point for the subject within a certain space. Height is of great influence to these structures because they are visible from a distance.

As established, almost all vistas are positioned on an elevated location, serving the same role as the landmarks described by Lynch. In the case of *Assassin's Creed*, these are literal landmarks since the locations are often on top of famous Minarets like the Hagia Sophia's. When unlocked, the 'fog of war' disappears in the direct surroundings of the vista. The same goes for *Shadow of Mordor*, especially because it works on a very personal level to the player-character, since they are only visible to her/him. This idea of meaning-creation around a structure is key to the cognitive map, according to Lynch. He describes how these hubs of elements make you able to construct your personal map (Lynch, 1960: 8-10). Maybe you visited a certain skyscraper, making it more meaningful

to you when you encounter it later on, relating new information to this location. The rigid structure of the game environment manifests itself in a very similar way within IDM. Instead of giving the player all the information from the beginning of the game, the player has to make the environment their own, literally by conquering it in *Assassin's Creed*, or more metaphorically by exploring and adding meaning to it in the other cases. In this way, the process of cognitive mapping shows many parallels with the way space is represented through maps in IDM. Instead of being flooded with information, developers ease the players into their vast gameworld, introducing small doses of the world, one at a time. Sybille Lammes illustrates a very similar practise in her *Digital cartographies as playful practices* (2015). The mapping process in a digital environment seeks the balance between the environment of the subject and the virtual, game-like representation of that world. This can be mobile apps which represent these digital maps in our worldly environment, or maps in IDM. The process of meaning-creation connects stories to locations, opening up the environment for the subject within this space (Lammes, 2015: 202-203). Without this organic process, the environment, and its representation, remains incomprehensible. From the player's perspective they unravel the structure of this environment by adding meaning to locations through experiences in the game world. From both ends of the spectrum, vistas provide the mediated agency on which information can build, or a map is constructed.

3.3 Aesthetic Perception

This process of exploring, discovering and unravelling the space for the player would neglect a central aspect to interactive media: interactivity. Instead of taking all this effort to (re)construct a pattern or narrative progression of the author's intent, the players can do whatever they want to do, as far as the rules allow them to. The notion of perceived space indicates this focus on the player and their personal motives. If the player wants to perform their own perception of the game, neglecting the plot of the game, or learning its rules, she/he is free to do so. The interactive component of IDM offers the player a choice, something other media rarely do. To return to Kwasteks' text, she debates to what extent this freedom is a construction by the artist as well, or if the agency truly lies in the eye of the beholder. For example, she cites Roy Ascott to indicate that the interactive potential and individual meaning-creation are implemented by the artist (Kwastek, 2013: 48). Or can we create a complete sense of free play, as Kant described? Is the act of rebellion as described by Soja possible within the game's original content, without using cheats or remodelling methods? I will elaborate on a number of practises in relation to the vistas, and how aesthetic perception behaves within IDM through the ideas of aesthetics as a pleasurable experience and aesthetics as complete freedom.

Pleasurable Experience

First of all, and I have been waiting a long time to state this, could we just say that the images during the vista portray a prism of emotional affects? Apart from all the connections with game mechanics, spatial structures and narrative progression, can we just establish that the view of the represented space is a pleasurable experience? For the extent of this thesis and the majority of the academic literature, the term aesthetics have been used to signify a construction of personal meaning through 'free play'. Hunicke (et al.) even differentiated different elements of this idea of 'fun', but does not touch upon the more traditional notion of aesthetic as in 'beautiful', or pleasurable in a visual sense. Especially with the graphical achievements since the origin of digital simulation, simulated environments show an increasing detail and level of reality which has not gone by unnoticed. Photographers like Leo Sang have traded in their real-life camera and moved to digital environments to capture their images. VRP, or Virtual Reality Photography, shows how people perceive the gameworld as being visually pleasurable without a direct sense of interactivity involved. The idea of 'stop and smell the roses' could be a style of play in itself, either appreciating the view, or capturing it in screenshots to preserve or share. If we return to the vistas, the immensity of the gameworld is represented in a single camera movement which is especially present in *Assassin's Creed* and *Guild*

Wars 2. *Shadow of Mordor*, although featuring a shorter vista segment, gives the player the opportunity to pause the game and move the 'camera' around to make the perfect screen shot. One could almost see the parallel between those moving images and Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). The sudden change in distance in the third person perspective and the sublime experience shifts the focus from the player-character to the overwhelming environment in which it is situated. In searching for literature to support this claim, I came across the following statement in Perron & Wolf's handbook for game analysis, creating a perfect description for the lack of literature in this field:

> *… Curiously video game aesthetics as such have been underexplored in video game studies. The reason may be due to the aforementioned debate about the legitimacy of video game as a cultural and art form, but also probably because of the low esteem of the "aesthetic" as a dated classical discipline, which in the twentieth century was associated with subjective and obsolete notions of "Beauty" or the "Sublime." Questions about genre, narrative, emotion, space, time, graphics, style, game design, and even gameplay, have all been affiliated with video game aesthetics. These various approaches imply a more profound need in video game theory for a poetics of the video game and a better understanding of the functioning of art and aesthetics within it.*
>
> (Picard, 2009: 334)

Although it is debatable if this shortcoming is due to the overlapping and inconsistent game discourse or its position in relation to the traditional Arts, it is not hard to imagine that games can be visually pleasing as well. Moreover, it wouldn't be so hard to imagine that developers create such an opportunity for the players. The level of detail in animations and simulations, and the time it takes to design game environments takes up a large portion of the game's development. Could mechanics like the vista also be a way for designers to show off their creation? Due to the lack of targeted literature I do not dare to make a defying statement on this matter, but based on the previous findings and representation of the vista within the rest of the gameplay, I would argue that it is. Like the tourist board that puts up the 'this is a photo opportunity' sign, developers evoke players to look around and appreciate the sheer beauty of the game.

Complete Freedom

In his 'Unit Operations', Ian Bogost introduces his notion of freedom within a digital environment. On the surface, freedom operates in the fact that the player can perform actions which would be prohibited in real life, by natural laws (such as flying) or human laws (such as steeling or killing

someone). The illusion of freedom within the context of the game is quite meaningless, since the rules and mechanics of the game allow you to do so (Bogost, 2006: 156-157). Bogost links the contextual level to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the nomad space, a space in which judgement and result are postponed. In this space, potential is highlighted, rather than one specific path, focussing on the range of possible outcomes. Bogost specifically uses open-world games as examples in which the player is given the option to follow the storylines and quests, or create her/his own path, neglecting the intended route. The earlier example of photographer Leo Sang would be such a practise, looking for photo-locations within the gameworld, rather than progressing its plot. In his choice of words, you could already sense Bogost's later work on the possibility space, in which this notion is further expanded upon. The idea of meandering between the rules and your own performance is what makes the 'play' in Bogost's eye.

As seen in the three case studies, the player is made aware of the success of this 'play' by a quantifiable mechanism, a sense of completion through a percentage. The widely used handbook 'Rules of Play' by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman even sees this aspect of quantification as a core aspect of 'the game' as an artefact. "At the conclusion of a game, a player has either won or lost or received some kind of numerical score. A quantifiable outcome is what usually distinguishes a game from less formal play activities" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004: 102). In their eyes, 'play' is not possible without some subsequent numeral result. Moreover, developers design their environments in such a way that the player can perform their free play, outside of the main goal of the game, and still be rewarded for it. Moreover, completion is often associated with devoted players who try to get the most out of a game (Khanolkar & McLean, 2012: 975). I won't go into great detail, but achievements and collectables are often represented in a quantifiable way, as seen in *Shadow of Mordor* and *Assassin's Creed*. This comes very close to the conceived space, allowing and rewarding certain uses of the intended space. This is the skate park, the encapsulated rebellion, that offers a false sense of freedom outside of the main plot, goal of progress of the game. An example of the early stages of the vista I used during the introduction of this thesis was 'mountaineering' in open-world games as *World of Warcraft*. The way in which especially *Guild Wars 2*, but also the other case studies, incorporates the vistas shows a very similar process. The player-driven performance of exploring and discovering the edges of the game's rules and boundaries, is now part of the intended gameplay experience. Scaling the mountains and structures in the *Guild Wars* environment is rewarded and acknowledged as an activity that the game offers the player. To what extent is the player aware of this history when playing these incorporated conventions and practises? Do players have a collective memory, or do developers only have so many tools in their shed when designing a game?

3.4 Conventional Perception

Based on my findings during this thesis, the theoretical frameworks present, and the dominant contemporary models, I believe that a certain perception is not considered. Though there are some hints towards a sort of 'conventional perception' present in the works of Fernández-Vara (2015: 57) and Bogost (2007: 75), they do not go as far as labelling it as such. In their cases 'conventions' are linked to a value judgement, serving as an antonym to 'original' or 'inventive'. Besides this negative connotation, could a conventional memory be present in the experience of an artefact, as well as the medium as a whole? Chances are, a certain game could be the first a player ever experienced, but otherwise many gamers would have played numerous different games over many years. These prior encounters with IDM build up understanding, not only with a single game, but with the medium as a whole. I would therefor rather argue that conventions make up the collective memory of past gameplay experiences, memories and performances by both developers and players. This is the lived space of IDM, the lingering consciousness of a history of play (or aesthetics) on the one hand, and design (or narrative) on the other. As indicated by Soja, the lived space is not a singular truth or law which is written down, but rather a discourse of unwritten rules that is kept alive both by the contemporary performance or use, as well as the incorporation into the conceivers of this space. In other words, because players keep using the game space in a certain tradition and the developers keep facilitating this kind of use, the convention is kept alive. 'Reading' the space and its use(s) can be confusing for new players, as it is confusing to understand a new discourse for a newcomer to a defined community. For this reason 'conventional perception' can be interpreted as form of IDM literacy; the knowledge of a collection of conventions and practices build up by experiencing different games.

Literacy

The term 'game literacy' has previously been discussed by Eric Zimmerman in an article by the same title. The understanding of the game design, embodying the system, play and design, illustrate a form of knowhow about the medium as a whole. In his words: "Game design, as the investigation of the possibility of meaning, truly gets at the heart of gaming literacy, and ties together systems, play, and design into a unified and integrated process" (Zimmerman, 2009: 29). Zimmerman's article, like Hunicke's MDA model, sketches a relationship, or communication between the developer and the player. The developers create a system, or design the game which is **mediated** towards the player. In its own right, the player **interprets** these 'messages', each in their own way. In both their work there is a sense of player-quality within this system. In their eyes, a 'good' player knows how to decrypt the

messages from the developers so it uncovers an intended gameplay, or the 'right' way to play (Zimmerman, 2009: 28; Hunicke, 2004). But the related 'media literacy', or even literacy in general, does not have a similar competitive component. In the first chapter I used Fernández-Vara's analogy of the moviegoer and the cinephile to describe the importance of understanding the Interactive Digital Medium. In connection to media literacy, it would be strange to praise someone for their ability to watch films. You could, however, compliment someone on their good taste in films, or their knowledge of the medium; the same goes for conventional perception in IDM. It is more than literacy as defined by Zimmerman, as it not only focuses on the structure within one game, but a recognition, understanding and application of knowledge in the entire medium. The acknowledgement of something as a trope and anticipating its role in the game requires an insight that has yet to be defined in the IDM discourse.

When returning to vista, it relates to this enhanced notion of literacy in a number of ways. Firstly, as seen as a convention throughout the history of IDM, vistas were a player practise fixed on exploring the boundaries of the game environments. This idea was later incorporated by developers in order to quantify the side-content, focus the player's attention on space and narrative, or serve as a hub for other mechanics. This first example shows how the collective memory of a performance is appropriated by the developers in a new game. On the side of the developer, the knowledge of this practise is present and applied in a next artefact, keeping it alive and carrying on the tradition, although altering it in the process. Whereas *Guild Wars 2* stays closer to the source, *Assassin's Creed* and *Shadow of Mordor* take the general practise and appropriate it for their own use. This is where the second use of the vista is evident. The player has experienced these, or similar, mechanics before and without much explanation knows what to do. She/he does not just understand how to read this game and its intended use, but the medium as a whole. Although the vista carries many different names, spanning many games and franchises, the player recognizes the patterns of gameplay. This is not because she/he is a 'good' player in Zimmerman's sense, but because of the knowledge of the conventions within IDM. Knowing how to read these structures, what the role of the map is, how to uncover the 'fog of war' and how to explore the gameworld, are all part of a form of literacy that transcends one game. The conventional perception is the knowledge of a lived memory, a tradition that is scarcely written down, but understood and experienced by many.

Conclusion
Conventions and Clichés

Much like the vista, this thesis has been a process of completion. Throughout the past chapters the many performed and intended uses of the vista have been uncovered. Whilst starting out as a playful practise from the perspective of the player, it has slowly become a vehicle of agency for the developers of videogames. From the prism of these different uses, the title *Guild Wars 2* has the most affiliation with the earliest, player-based practises. Their application of the vista has the closest connection with personal meaning-creation, or emergent storytelling. The performance of the vista is mostly depended on the player´s inherent motivation to explore the gameworld, while the developers look for a way to reward them for this effort. The cutscene as well as the corresponding rewards tie in with the type of play that is evoked. A more integrated use of the vista on a mechanical level is present in the title *Assassin´s Creed – Revelations.* This game's story is purposefully connected with its mechanics and in this way the vista also has a part to play. The term diegetization is applicable here; a process in which the rules and mechanics of the game are integrated in the story, creating an overarching logic. By reliving the memory of the main character, the player visits vistas in order to synchronize with them, obscuring the fact that this is mostly aimed at saving the game and updating one's map. A similar process is present in *Shadow of Mordor* in the form of so-called forge towers. These vistas, serving as save points, waypoints and plot locations, are closely related with an amnesia-struck character. In all occasions the vista is a way to complete the game, not by finishing its story, or beating the last level, but by performing every possible quantifiable action in them.

The history of this trope, as well as its continued use, shows that both developers and players are aware of its potential applications. Instead of reinventing the wheel, developers tap into the collective memory of past applications of similar uses. This creates a hub of rules, which is especially evident in *Shadow of Mordor*, combining different functions into a single location. The player is made aware to these functions with similar visual cues on the game's map as well as the interface. The open-world types of games are especially prone to the application of the vista and prove that developers are looking for familiar and recognizable mechanics to steer the player, or dispense the gameworld. The player is aware of these conventions and without much effort will understand its use. When looking at the circumstances in which these games are produced, one could argue why the developers chose these conventional methods. *Guild Wars 2* recognizes the player-practise of

discovering the world as seen in earlier MMORPG's like *World of Warcraft* and tried to instigate and implement this in its own title. The longstanding series of *Assassin's Creed* continuously uses the trope in all their titles, creating returning characteristics over and over. A fan of the series would recognize the vista in a new instalment and immediately knows what to do. Even the variation of the 'Templar den' in *Revelations* is similar enough for the player to understand its specific rules and effects. Other games by *Assassin's Creed*'s developer Ubisoft also show the vista trope which operates in a very similar manner. As seen in the introduction, the *Far Cry* series also features the vista in connection with discovery of the map and a climbing puzzle. Finally, *Shadow of Mordor* shows that these relations do not only operate between two titles, or in the tradition of a single developer. The eclectic nature of *Shadow of Mordor*'s gameplay shows connections with many other games, part of which are the similarities between their vista and the one in the Ubisoft games. Although theorists used in this thesis add judgement of value towards this conventional, or cliché application of tropes like the vista, I see it as a collective memory which has been neglected in academic writing up to this point.

This conventional perception, as I called it, is the memory of IDM which influences both developer and player in the process of production, consumption and meaning-creation, which shows similarities with the lived space as defined by Edward Soja. This memory operates on both an individual level, indicating your personal experiences and knowledge about the medium, but also the collective memory of all players over multiple generations. This is more than mere literacy as described by Eric Zimmerman, because it not only applies to the quality of play, but also the understanding of underlying structures and patterns which make up this medium. This is a form of perception which is hard to materialize, but the application of the vista proves to be a good example. Its use over multiple generations, developers, titles and consoles illustrates its widespread application. The vista is a convention, understood by player and developer, which is used to bundle mechanics or evoke certain types of play. Although more superficial examples could have been used in this research, I believe that the vista shows a broad variety, whilst also holding on to a certain tradition in visual signifiers.

Many questions remain, but I hope this thesis opens doors to future research. I opted to put aside much of the ludology-narratology debate during my research, since I found both sides provided helpful for constructing my theoretical framework as well as defining concepts in order to construct my own. This alternative, not dissimilar to Lefebvre's trialectics, would hopefully balance different agencies, instead of the wedded debate in its current state. With this framework in place, future research in the fields of nostalgia in IDM, indie games with retro characteristics, and other conventions, would all be interesting directions to further explore. The overarching stimuli remain

similar, as videogames continuously embody characteristics from this medium's past, while it is dominantly seen as innovative and inventive. The nostalgia and recognition one experiences, not in visual or audio aspects, but in the rules and mechanics of the game are truly unique to this medium.

>> Thesis reached 100% completion

Appendices

Similar to the thesis as a whole, I will use *Far Cry 4* as an introductory example, after which I will explain the remaining three major case studies, namely *Assassin's Creed – Revelations, Guild Wars 2* and *Shadow of Mordor*. The first number of images will illustrate the manner in which the player is made aware of the vista; its location, completion and effects. Hereafter, the way in which the vista is to be reached is shown, followed by the performance of the vista event and the resulting cutscene. Finally the effects of completing the vista will be shown, as portrayed on the interface or map.

APP 1: Introductory Case Study *Far Cry 4*

When approaching a vista for the first time, the player is informed of its use via a pop-up screen, as seen in APP 1.1. In this game, the vista is titled 'Bell Tower', represented by the image of a radio tower of sorts in the icon below the image and on the game-map. This clear-cut explanation is not always present in games using this trope, but it makes for a good introductory case study in this explanation. The player is informed that this action is to be performed to: "remove fog from the maps, give access to free weapons, and unlock new quests". Again, *Far Cry 4* is one of the only titles I encountered which is clear about the effects of the vista beforehand, whilst others only reveal its use after the player explored it themselves, or tie it in with the story, rather than be explicit about its practical use. After this screen, the player is free the scale tower, which is not without danger. Motoric (game) skills are tested when the player is challenged to perform varying climbing and jumping puzzles as seen in APP 1.2 and APP 1.3.
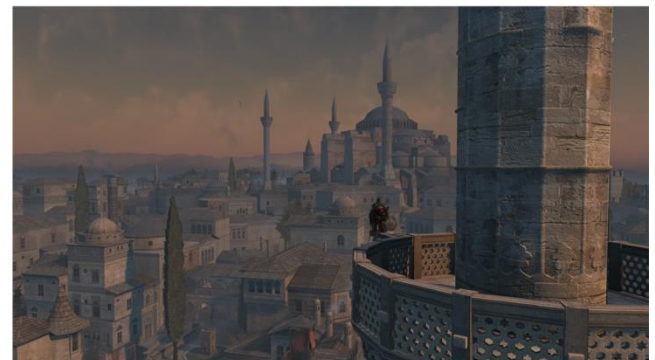
When the top of the bell tower is reached, the player is informed by an extra-diegetic text in the interface that the vista-event can be performed. In this case, the description reads "Hijack signal", referring to the radio messages which have been broadcasting from this location. The player is immediately informed by the completion of the vista in relation to the total amount in the game, as seen in APP 1.5. The character switches off the signal and destroys the console, representing the action in-game. A rapid succession of fluidly transitioning images follows as the camera moves up and pans down. Images on the screen change in bright colours and the 'camera' seems to fly freely through the game environment. Because of the speed of the images, proper screenshots were hard to come by without portraying a pink blur. I therefor left them out of this appendix. During this flying movement, the camera slows down and shows certain locations in the game-world, as seen in APP 1.7. This represents the description on the pop-up in which the player is informed that new quests are uncovered. After the cutscene, the player returns on top of the tower from which the game can be continued.

APP 2: Assassin's Creed – Revelations

A representation of the completion rate of the vistas, or viewpoints in this case, is found in the game's menu, as seen in APP 2.1, but whilst playing the player is more likely informed of their existence through the map (APP 2.2). The eagle icon on the map, representing the vista, is also seen on the mini-map, as seen in APP 2.3. In this, and following, images, this icon directs the player towards the minaret, and more specifically towards the beam attached to it. The path up this tower has some challenges, although the chances of falling down are quite slim. Ledges and extending objects offer a path for the player to climb as seen in APP 2.4 and APP 2.5.

When the exact location of the beam is reached, the player is informed by a message on the screen that the vista event can commence. (Please note that the time of day changes up from APP 2.8 and is not corresponding with the previous ones. This is due to the multiple recordings of screenshot of the same vista on my part. Collecting all images in one performance proved too difficult, which kept me from recording them on the same moment in game-time). When the vista is instigated, the interface disappears and the cutscene is started, featuring the circular motion around the player and tower. When the screen transitions back to the player-character, texts inform the player of their vista-completion rate, as well as new information of their map. Lastly, when the player jumps down, she/he is also informed that the game is saved.

APP 3: *Guild Wars 2*
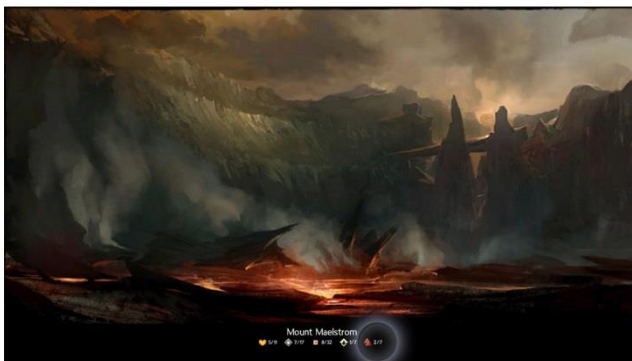
When the game is started, the player is first confronted with their completion rate in relation to discovering the world (APP 3.1). The vistas directly add up to this rate, as seen when in the loading screen in APP 3.2 when this rate is broken down different elements, from which the highlighted part is the vista. This represented yet again when the player opens up their map (APP 3.3) in the top left corner. When a new area is uncovered (by simply entering it), vistas might appear on the player's map, represented by the mountain range icon as seen in APP 3.4. When in closer proximity, the vista is also represented in the gameworld in the form of a beacon, as seen in the distance in APP 3.5. The mini-map does not show this location yet, since the player is still too far away.

APP 3.6 shows the player at closer range to the vista. Its location is now also featured on the mini-map. The path towards the vista is obscured and hidden in the game environment, but a trained eye can recognize the plateaus and extending structures as highlighted in the same image. A close-up of the path in APP 3.7 shows that reaching the vista is not as simple as climbing up a tower, since the path is far more hidden. Upon reaching the vista, the player is informed by the text that it can be 'viewed' by pressing a certain button. The screen transitions to white, after which the 'camera' moves freely, away from the player-character. The cutscene shows locations which are not explicitly featured on the map, for example this open gate in APP 3.10. When the 'camera' comes to a stand-still, the screen fades to white again, returning to the third-person perspective of the player-character. The player is informed of their completion rate in the lower right corner as seen in the highlighted area in APP 3.11. This also represents the completion for the next reward, represented by the chest of the far right.

APP 4: *Shadow of Mordor*
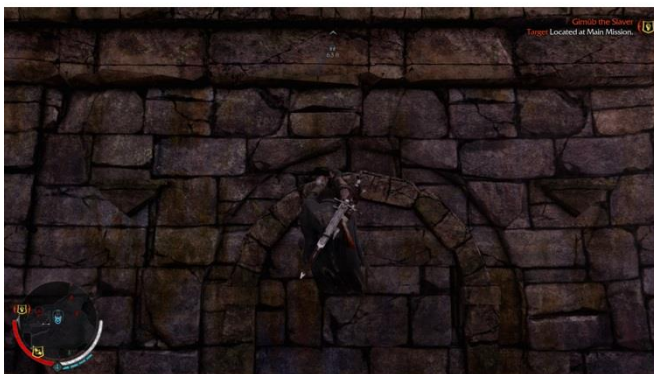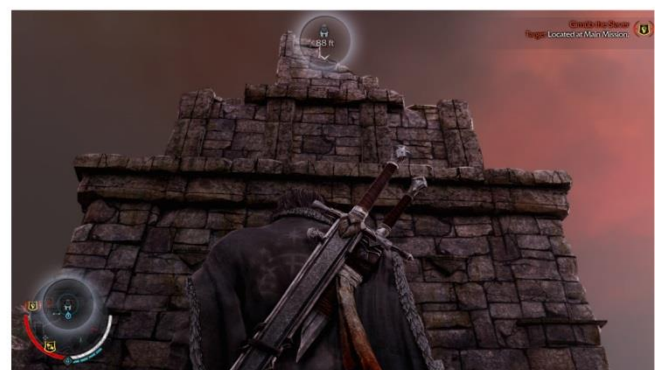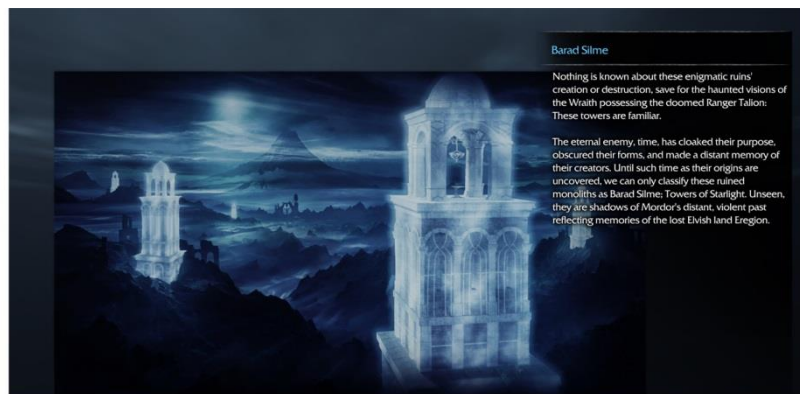
Instead of featuring a quantifiable explanation for the vista, as seen with the previous two case studies, *Shadow of Mordor* only features an explanation of these tropes in relation to the game's story (APP 4.1). Although they do add up to a completion rate, they are not represented as such. Recognizing and finding the vistas all happens in the game's map, as seen in APP 4.2. The text in the top left corner, the icon of the incomplete tower, as well as the covered area on the map, all urge the player to visit the vista before exploring the rest of the area. The same icon is used on the mini-map and as a pointer on the screen, as seen in APP 4.3. When the player scales the tower, the character is first represented in his original state, but when a certain point is reached, the character changes, as well as the tower itself, changing to a bright blue colour. This change is represented in APP 4.4 and APP 4.5.
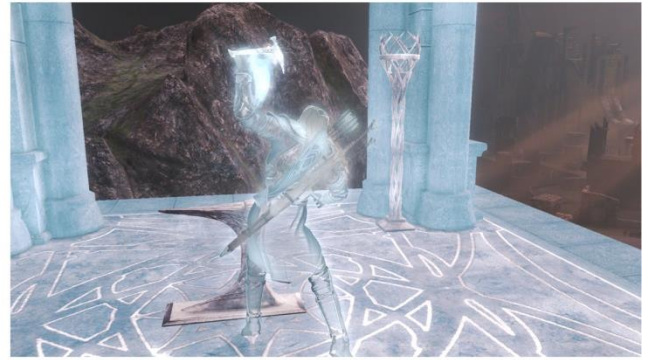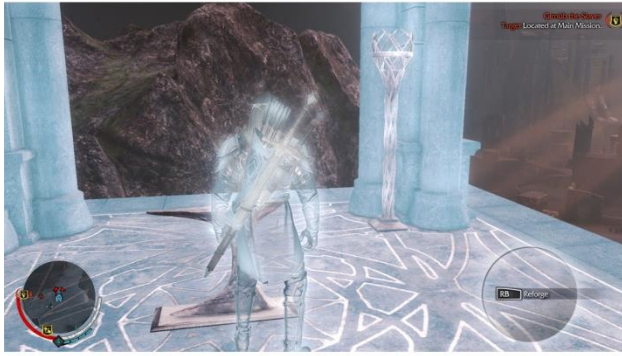
When the top of the tower is reached, the player is informed by on-screen text that the vista can commence. The interface disappears and the character uses a hammer to 'reforge' the tower. The moment that the hammer hits the anvil, a bright light appears, as seen on 4.8, from which a fast a short transition starts. In this transition, the camera moves up and pans down very rapidly, fading into the map. Instead of the legend and other features, the map only shows a message in which the effects of the vista are explained to the player. When a button is pressed, the map changes back to its ´normal´ state, similar to APP 4.2, but now with update information as well as an uncovered area surrounding the vista.

Bibliography

Literature

Balicer, R.D. (2007) 'Modeling Infectious Diseases Dissemination through Online Role-Playing Games', in: *Epidemiology*, Vol. 18, No. 2: 260-261.

Barak, A. (2008) *Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace: Theory, Research, Applications*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barton, M. (2008) *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games*, Wellesly: A K Peters, Ltd.

Bogost, I. (2006) *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, in: Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Bogost, I. (2007) *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Bogost, I. (2008) 'The Rhetoric of Video Games', in: *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning,* Salen, K. (ed.), Cambridge: The MIT Press: 117-140.

Bogost, I. (2015) *How to talk about Videogames*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. (2010) 'The Shot: Cinematography', in: *Film Art: an Introduction*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

Cuddy, L. & Nordlinger (2009) *World of Warcraft and Philosophy: Wrath of the Philosopher King*, Chicago: Carus Publishing Company.

De Castell, S. & Jenson, J. (2007) *Worlds in Play: International Perspectives on Digital Games Research*, New York: Peter Lang.

Dow, D.N. (2013) 'Historical Veneers: Anachorism, Simulation and Art History in Assassin's Creed II', in: *Playing with the past: Digital games and the simulation of history*, Kapell, M.W. & Elliott, A.B.R. (ed.), New York: Bloomsbury Academic: 215-232.

Dubbelman, T. (2013) *Narratives of Being There: Computer Games, Presence and Fictional Worlds*, Utrecht: Utrecht University, Centre for the Study of Digital Games and Play

Dubbelman, T. (2014) *Narrative in Transition. How New Media Change Our Experience of Stories*, Utrecht: Utrecht University, Centre for the Study of Digital Games and Play.

Fernández-Vara, C. (2015) Introduction to Game Analysis, New York: Routledge.

Flanagan, M. (2009) *Critical Play*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Friess, R. (2012) 'Symbolic Interaction in Digital Games: Theoretical Reflections on Dimensions of Meaning Construction in Digital Gameplay', in: Computer Games and New Media Cultures: A Handbook of Digital Games Studies, Fromme, J. & Unger, A. (ed.), New York: Springer: 249-264.

Frissen, V. & Lammes, S. (et al.) (2015) ´Homo ludens 2.0 : Play, media, and identity´, in: *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 9-50.

Ghosh, Ranjan (2006) *(In)fusion Approach: Theory, Contestation, Limits: (In)fusionising a Few Indian English Novels*, Lanham: University Press of America.

Golumbia, D. (2009) 'Games without Play', in: *New Literary History*, Vol. 40, No. 1: 179-204.

Grau, O. (2003) *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Custance, G. (tr.), Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Huizinga, J. (2007) 'Homo ludens: Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur', in: Johan Huizinga, Verzamelde werken V. Cultuurgeschiedenis III, Brummel, L (et al.) (ed.), Leiden: Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren: 26-246.

Jameson, F. (1990) 'Cognitive Mapping', In: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Nelson, C. & Grossberg, L. (ed.), Campaign: University of Illinois Press: 347-360.

Jenkins, H. (2004) 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture', in: *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Wardrip-Fruin, N. & Harrigan, P. (ed.) Cambridge: MIT Press: 118-130.

Katsaridou, M. & Thibault, M. (2016) 'Architextuality and Video Games: A Semiotic Approach', in: *Contemporary Research on Intertextuality in Video Games*, Duret, C & Pons, C.M. (ed.), Hershey: IGI Global: 253-273.

Kent, Steven (2001). *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokémon and Beyond- The Story That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World* (First ed.). Roseville, California: Prima Publishing.

Kevjer, R. (2014) 'Cut-scenes', in: *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies,* Wolf, M.J.P. & Perron, B. (ed.), New York: Routledge: 301-309.

Khanolkar, P.R. & Mclean, P.D. (2012) '100-Percenting It: Videogame Play through the Eyes of Devoted Gamers', in: *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 27, No. 4: 961-985.

Klevjer, R. (2002) 'In Defense of Cutscenes', in: *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, Mäyrä, F. (ed.), Tampere: Tampere University Press: 191-202.

Kwastek, K. (2013) 'Interaction as an Aesthetic Experience', in: *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Lammes, S. (2015) 'Digital cartographies as playful practices', in: in: *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, Frissen, V. & Lammes, S. (et al.) (ed.), Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 199-210.

Lefebrve, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*, Nicholson-Smith, D. (tr.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Lefebrve, H. (1996) *Writings of Cities*, Kofman, E. & Lebas, E. (tr.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Lewin, C. (2012) *War Games and Their History,* Stroud: Fonthill Media.

Loguidice, B. & Barton, M. (2009) *Vintage Games: An Insider Look at the History of Grand Theft Auto, Super Mario, and the Most Influential Games of All Time*, Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Lynch, K. (1960) 'The Image of the Environment', in: *The Image of the City*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Nitsche, M. (2008) 'Introduction', in: *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Game Worlds*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Nitsche, M. (2012) 'Growing Game Worlds', in: Computer Games and New Media Cultures: A Handbook of Digital Games Studies, Fromme, J. & Unger, A. (ed.), New York: Springer: 161-172.

Ottens, M. (2015) 'Film in Computer Games: Experimentally tracing the remediation of film properties in select computer games, and the different forms of transmediality that emerge', Nijmegen: Radboud Universtsity.

Patton, M.Q. (2002) 'Purposeful Sampling', in: *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods,* London: Sage Publications: 230-244.

Perron, B. & Wolf, M.J.P (2009) *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, New York: Routledge.

Picard, M. (2009) 'Art and Aesthetics', in: *The Video Game Theory Reader 2,* Perron, B. & Wolf, M.J.P (ed.), New York: Routledge: 333-334.

Rockmore, T. (2013) 'Kant on Art and Truth after Plato', in: *Washington University Jurisprudence Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1: 45-58.

Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. (2004) *Rules of Play - Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Soja, E.W. (1996) *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Cambridge: Blackwell.

Steinkuehler, C.A. (2005) 'The New Third Place: Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming in American Youth Culture', in: *Tidskrift för lärarutbildning och forskning*, Vol. 12, No. 3: 16-33.

Tavinor, G. (2009) *The Art of Videogames*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Tschang, F.T. (2007) 'Balancing the Tensions between Rationalization and Creativity in the Video Games Industry', in: *Organization Science*, Vol. 18, No. 6: 989-1005.

Wolfe, G.K. (2011) *Evaporating Genres: Essays on Fantastic Literature*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Zagal, J.P. & Fernández-Vara, C. (et al.) (2005) *Towards an Ontological Language for Game Analysis*, Atlanta: Georgia Institute of Technology.

Zima, P.V. (2002) 'Derrida: Deconstruction, Philosophy and Literary Theory', in: *Deconstruction and Critical Theory*, Emig, R. (tr.), London: Continuum: 29-82.

Zimmerman, E. (2009) 'Gaming Literacy: Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century', in: *The Video Game Theory Reader 2,* Perron, B. & Wolf, M.J.P (ed.), New York: Routledge: 23-32.

Correia, A.R. (2013) 'Why Assassin's Creed always launches last on PC', *Polygon*, http://www.polygon.com/2013/10/2/4795024/why-assassins-creed-always-launches-last-on-pc (28 July 2016).

Désilets, P. (2008) 'The Making Of: Assassin's Creed', *Edge Online*, https://web.archive.org/web/20131228044009/http://www.edge-online.com/features/making-assassins-creed/ (28 July 2016).

Frasca, G. (2003) 'Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place', *Ludogoly*, www.ludology.org/articles/Frasca_LevelUp2003.pdf (28 July 2016).

Gaston, M. (2014) 'Shadow of Mordor director discusses Assassin's Creed copycat claims', *Gamspot*, http://www.gamespot.com/articles/shadow-of-mordor-director-discusses-assassin-s-creed-copycat-claims/1100-6419812/ (28 July 2016).

George, R. (2011) 'Assassin's Creed Revelations Review: Even a master assassin has regrets', *IGN*, http://www.ign.com/articles/2011/11/14/assassins-creed-revelations-review (28 July 2016).

Jenkins, H. (2007) 'The Future of Sandbox Games', *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, http://henryjenkins.org/2007/12/gambit.html (28 July 2016).

Karmali, L. (2014a) 'Why Lord of the Rings Fans Should Be Excited For Shadow Of Mordor', *IGN UK*, http://uk.ign.com/articles/2014/02/20/why-lord-of-the-rings-fans-should-be-excited-for-shadow-of-mordor (28 July 2016).

Karmali, L. (2014b) 'Shadow of Mordor Dev Was Never Worried By Assassin's Creed Comparisons', *IGN,* http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/10/01/shadow-of-mordor-dev-was-never-worried-by-assassins-creed-comparisons (28 July 2016).

MacDonald, K. (2012) 'Assassin's Creed 3 Pc Review: As much of a revolution as was promised?', *IGN,* http://www.ign.com/articles/2012/11/23/assassins-creed-3-pc-review (28 July 2016).

Makuch, E. (2015) 'Far Cry 4 Dev Raising Money for Nepal Earthquake Relief', *Gamespot*, http://www.gamespot.com/articles/far-cry-4-dev-raising-money-for-nepal-earthquake-r/1100-6426979/ (28 July 2016).

McWhertor, M. (2014) 'Ubisoft is bringing an Assassin's Creed parkour course and more to Comic-Con', *Polygon*, http://www.polygon.com/2014/7/15/5902357/ubisoft-assassins-creed-unity-parkour-comic-con-san-diego (28 July 2016).

Microsoft Corp. (2003) 'Xbox Live Subscriptions Double Expectations', *Microsoft News Centre*, https://news.microsoft.com/2003/01/07/xbox-live-subscriptions-double-expectations/#sm.000001knk7zqtrcf3lsajrkcmndlq (28 July 2016).

O'Brien, M. (2010) 'Guild Wars 2 Design Manifesto', *Guild Wars 2 News*, https://www.guildwars2.com/en/news/guild-wars-2-design-manifesto/ (28 July 2016).

O'Brien, M. (2015) 'Play For Free Today', *Guild Wars 2 News*, https://www.guildwars2.com/en/news/play-for-free-today/ (28 July 2016).

Pereira, C. (2014) 'Shadow Of Mordor Accused Of Using Assassin's Creed Ii Code', *IGN*, http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/01/23/shadow-of-mordor-accused-of-using-assassins-creed-ii-code?abthid=52e1a3452c0ab7624b00002e (28 July 2016).

Schiesel, S. (2009) 'On the Scenic Trail of Intrigue: Adventures in 15th-Century Italy', *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/08/arts/television/08assassin.html?_r=0 (28 July 2016).

Sicart, M. (2008) 'Defing Game Mechanics', *Game Studies: The international journal for computer game research*, http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart (28 July 2016).

Sterling, J. (2014) 'Shadiness of Mordor', *The Escapist*, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/videos/view/jimquisition/9782-Shadow-of-Mordors-Promotion-Deals-with-Plaid-Social (28 July 2016).

VanOrd, K. (2011) 'Assassin's Creed: Revelations Review', *Gamespot*, http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassins-creed-revelations-review/1900-6346892/ (28 July 2016).

Young, S. (2014) 'How Shadow of Mordor is a Poor Man's Batman: Arkham Game', *The Escapist*, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/columns/experienced-points/12516-Shadow-of-Mordor-Mimicks-the-Batman-Arkham-Games (28 July 2016).

ArenaNet (2005) *Guild Wars*, Seoul: NCSOFT.

ArenaNet (2012) *Guild Wars 2*, Seoul: NCSOFT.

Blizzard Entertainment (2004) *World of Warcraft*, Irvine: Blizzard Entertainment.

Maxis (1989) *Simcity,* Redwood City: Electronic Arts.

Maxis (2003) *The Sims,* Redwood City: Electronic Arts.

Monolith Productions (2014) *Guardians of Middle-earth*, Burbanks: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment.

Monolith Productions (2014) *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*, Burbanks: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment.

Namco (1980) *Pac-Man*, Tokyo: Namco.

Origin Systems (1997) *Ultima Online,* Redwood City: Electronic Arts.

Rockstar North (2004) *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, New York: Rockstar Games.

Rocksteady Studios (2009) *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, Burbanks: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment.

Sony Online Entertainment (2003) *Everquest*, San Diego: Daybreak Game Company.

Ubisoft Montreal (2003) *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, Rennes: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2010) *Assassin's Creed – Brotherhood*, Rennes: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2011) *Assassin's Creed – Revelations*, Rennes: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2012) *Assassin's Creed III*, Rennes: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2012) *Far Cry 3*, Rennes: Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal (2014) *Far Cry 4*, Rennes: Ubisoft.