

Hans-Joachim Backe and Petri Lankoski

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# Theorizing the Player-Playable Figure Relationship

**ABSTRACT:** The paper revisits a central question in the study of characters in digital games: Do players of, for example, a racing game steer the virtual car directly themselves, or are they controlling the body of a virtual driver? This seemingly technical question is shown to be primarily cognitive and conceptual: players draw on their real-life and fictional frames of reference in an ongoing epistemological process of situating themselves vis-à-vis gameworld and playable figure. The traditional metaphor for this relationship, that of a cyborg, neither captures the variety of relationships suggested by games, nor the range of interpretations open to players. To overcome this limitation, I propose six conceptual types, based on the significance that tools and vehicles have for the playable figure. I ask: is there a co-dependence between equipment and user, is it permanent, and do they have a metonymic relationship to each other? These abstract categories are shown to be connected to archetypal proto-narratives epitomized by characters from mythology and popular culture, which players implicitly refer to in conceptualizing their relationship to the gameworld. The essay, then, offers a framework for the conceptual variety of player-playable figure-relations, which, in drawing on cultural history, should be equally transparent to scholars of game studies and narratology.

**KEYWORDS:** *videogames, digital games, popular culture, character, epistemology*

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**Hans-Joachim Backe** is Associate Professor at the Center for Computer Games Research of the IT University, Copenhagen. He has published extensively on the aesthetics of digital games and comic books, transmedia, ecocriticism, and narrative theory.

**Petri Lankoski** is an Associate Professor of Media Technology at Södertörn University. His publications include "Player Character Engagement in Computer Games" (in *Games and Culture*) and the edited collection *Game Design Research* (with Jussi Holopainen).

## Centaurs and Horsemen: Composite Avatars and the Epistemology of the Playable Figure

Hans-Joachim Backe

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### Challenges of Conceptualizing the Playable Figure

In many digital games, players control a single entity in a virtual world. Such “figure games” (Vella 12) are only one of many different types of digital games, yet for humanistic approaches, they occupy a somewhat privileged position.<sup>1</sup> Not only do they invite personal identification, but they also resemble traditional cultural texts more closely than more abstract games. The majority of digital games that would be identified as narratives are figure games. In fact, one of the longest-lasting debates in games studies has been whether the interactivity of games, enacted through the main character, does not actually preclude them from being narratives in the strict sense of the word—a position largely overcome by now in favor of “a functional ludo-narrativism that studies how the fictional world, realm of make-believe, relates to the playfield, space of agency” (Ryan 203). The player’s representation in the gameworld, traditionally referred to as an “avatar,” is where these domains of make-believe and agency meet (and frequently clash). The common case in which these playable figures use tools and vehicles poses some additional issues: when playing, for example, a racing game, is the player controlling the driver or the vehicle? While existing research tends towards one of these two alternatives, the following argument proposes a third option: to conceive of them as composite avatars, located in a long narrative tradition in which characters are identified in part by their relationships with pieces of clothing or equipment. Like these traditional characters, composite avatars invite alternating focus on the person, the object, or their unity. Faced with the same composite avatar, different players might not only gravitate towards one view or another. Their focus might shift regularly during play, with their playstyle and the different dimensions of the composite avatar mutually influencing an ongoing process of reconfiguration.

Given the need for brevity, I will not attempt a full review of the relevant research, which involves functional, visual, and discursive aspects of representation (Vella 196–224) as well as complex identity politics even on the level of theory formation (Wildt et al.). For the purposes of the following argument, I will draw on Daniel Vella’s terminology. He uses the umbrella term “playable figure” for the entity the player controls, within which he distinguishes between “an avatar—a game component under the player’s direct control—and a character—the representation of an individual within the ludic heterocosm” (22). This distinction builds on earlier ones drawn by Klevjer and Linderoth, particularly the latter’s triadic model which adds to the two aforementioned dimensions (in his terms “tool” and “role”) that of the “prop.”

“a part of the player’s presentation of self” that is mainly relevant in multiplayer settings (Linderoth).<sup>2</sup>

These fundamental considerations are epistemological in nature. We understand the complexity of our play activity in a gameworld by foregrounding different dimensions—what the avatar allows us to do, who the character suggests we are in the gameworld, and how the prop communicates how we want to be perceived. Yet all these dimensions are co-present and cannot be separated from each other. The range of possibilities of interacting with the game environment, and even of perceiving it, are (phenomeno-)logically connected to the sensory and motor apparatus of the playable figure. Identification and self-expression as well as representations of diversity and minorities cannot be uncoupled from the (lack of) agency players have over the appearance of their in-game representation. The actions we perform as the avatar shape the character, but the character defines what actions we can take in the first place.

This relationship is further complicated when the playable figure uses tools or controls vehicles, and it is precisely this complication I want to examine here. Our relationship to the gameworld is vicarious: we act through the playable figure in its avatar- or tool-dimension. Many early theories in game studies give ultimate and exclusive importance to the avatarial dimension of the playable figure. Among the most well-known expressions of this sentiment are statements like “Mario is a cursor” (Frasca 168), or the claim that one will “see through [. . .] and past” the appearance of the playable figure (Aarseth 48), and the proclamation that games are generically incoherent because the convention of Mario’s three lives in *Donkey Kong* is never explained (Juul 123–25). While it is certainly true that some players care little for the player character, this position cannot be generalized across all games and players. Furthermore, perceiving the playable figures exclusively as tools of the player’s agency produces an aporia whenever these virtual characters use tools, which is the rule rather than the exception in games. Thus, the question arises of whether the player of a racing game is embodying the driver of a car, controlling a car directly, or maybe even embodying a car. Again, extreme positions have been generalized in existing research, positing either that such a player is clearly embodied in the car (Klevjer 6) or that players naturally assume that they embody a driver even if this driver is never seen (Vella 366).

Similarly radical positions have been formulated for other situations in games, for example that “the player is the gun” (Mukherjee 162, emphasis in original) in First-Person Shooter games. The overarching explanatory figure for these positions is that of the cyborg, which imagines the player, the playable figure, and their tools to become one indivisible virtual unit (Dovey and Kennedy 109).

In the following, I will argue that none of these positions can be generalized. The relationship between a player and their playable figure is not an ontological constant that resides in the game artefact, identical for all players; instead, it is a culturally situated and frequently renegotiated process of meaning-making. The master trope of the cyborg is inadequate because its underlying assumption that one-size-fits-all fails to acknowledge the diversity of player-playable figure relationships.

I propose to add five additional models which, like the cyborg, draw on fictional configurations of individuals using equipment and vehicles. Western cultural history, including contemporary popular culture, has countless narratives that revolve around configurations of characters as self-sufficient, tool-dependent, or vehicle-dependent. My hypothesis is that players will interpret their relationship to the playable figure (and the equipment they are using) in the light of these established proto-narratives (in the sense of the German *Stoff*).<sup>3</sup> Not every player will identify the same type of relation in the same example, but games provide intertextual (as well as interludic) clues that prime players to some degree.

The point of the following typology is not to provide an exhaustive list, or to make claims about cognitive or phenomenological empirical validity. It is meant as a heuristic to aid our understanding of the diverse relationships between player, playable figure, and their tools, relationships that are inadequately captured by the trope of the cyborg alone.

### Equipment, Vehicles, and Composite Avatars

Players of figure games cannot explore the gameworld or interact with it independently of the playable figure's abilities and equipment. In most examples, the interaction possibilities are tied to specific equipment and the movement possibilities to a vehicle. The combination of both is common, the absence of either uncommon, and most examples orchestrate their availability to some degree. For example, the opening of *Half-Life 2* (Valve) only allows the playable figure Gordon Freeman to walk, pick up a few objects, and listen to people, until he acquires a protective suit and crowbar (a vehicle and a tool).

The player's access to the gameworld is thus mediated through the affordances of the player character's technological apparatus, which is prone to permanent or temporary changes (for example, using a sword instead of a crossbow). When players encounter these changes in games by drawing on their cultural knowledge, the cognitive and referential processes are highly individual and therefore extremely diverse. Players have different cultural frames of references, and regardless of cultural references can intuitively gravitate towards one static conceptualization or oscillate between different models.

Some factors, however, suggest a type of relationship, namely whether the playable figure uses tools, vehicles, or is limited to inherent abilities, and whether the used objects are generic and interchangeable or permanent and symbolic for the character, making character and equipment/vehicle essentially indivisible.

As a result, there are six types (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Archetypes of equipment users

TYPE	CLASSICAL	POP-CULTURE
Only inherent abilities	Heracles	Superman
Variable equipment	Odysseus	MacGyver
Static composite (symbolic equipment)	King Arthur	Thor Odinson
Variable composite (some equipment)	Moses	James Bond
Fusion with “vehicle” (one body)	Chiron	Robocop
Variable symbiosis with vehicles	Bellerophon	Avatar

1. Characters with inherent abilities are probably the most common in fiction, particularly in serious literary texts. Dramatic “everyman-characters,” epic heroes such as Heracles, and the proverbial Superman of popular culture do not (need to) make use of tools and vehicles to reach their goals, and are not defined by extrinsic objects in their abilities. These characters might have iconographic attributes associated with them—lion skin and club, suit and cape—yet these do not imbue them with powers. The narratives of these characters are centered around their (mundane or superhuman) physical and mental faculties. Playable figures of this type are relatively rare, but found in all genres. *Gone Home* (The Fulbright Company) and similar “walking simulators” reduce interaction with the environment to the study of clues (like notes or books). *Braid* (Jonathan Blow), a side-scrolling platform game, gives its playable figure the ability to manipulate the environment manually or through his supernatural (and hence inherent) ability to change time. Such characters suggest radically different relations to them: While solving a particular puzzle, the limited and known abilities of the playable figure might be internalized to the point of Aarseth’s “looking past and through,” while the narrative emphasizes the particularity of them as fictional characters. Because of the lack of additional factors, this type tends towards an oscillation between self and other, avatar and player character.
2. Variable equipment users are characters who face challenges that are overcome through ingenuity, improvisation, and the use of different tools. Odysseus loses his possessions as fast as he obtains them in his journey home (and reaches his goal without his personal bow that only he is able to wield). In popular culture, TV character MacGyver has become eponymous with

the ability to use one's wits and the environment to overcome challenges, and like Odysseus, MacGyver is not identified by any specific tools. There are many playable figures that similarly appropriate or create equipment without one piece becoming a singular indispensable tool that defines them. Survival games with a pronounced crafting aspect tend towards this type, for example *Minecraft* (Mojang) or *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly), as do point-and-click adventures. This type potentially changes constantly (because of new and perishable equipment), so that it might be conceptualized as an ingeniously improvising character or a constantly improving composite avatar. Here, the narrative is often less important than a player's preferred playstyle.

3. Static composites with symbolic equipment are epitomized by King Arthur, who is no king or even person of note until he draws the sword from the stone. King Arthur and Excalibur are inseparable to the point where one of them invokes the other. The same metonymic relationship between weapon and wielder is found in Marvel Comics' Thor and his hammer Mjölnir. Only Thor is able to wield the weapon, and the weapon represents him as an unequivocal symbol. Playable figures of this type are common in all game genres. *Portal's* (Valve) playable figure Chell would not be able to interact meaningfully with her environment without the portal gun, just like *Splinter Cell's* (Ubisoft Montreal) hero Sam Fisher depends on his the three-lensed night-vision goggles, to the point where in both cases, tool and user are metonymic of each other. Conceptualizations of this type are the least flexible, as they work with composite avatars in a narrow sense: The equipment-derived abilities of these playable figures are as essential to them as the inherent abilities of the first type. It is mostly when the iconic equipment malfunctions or is lost that players will conceptualize this differently, as a reversion to a "natural" human state or the painful absence of a part of the character.
4. Variable composites are only able to perform extraordinary actions through the use of one or several tools, yet without either creating them or forming a stable and iconic connection with them. The staff of Moses is not nearly as representative of him as Excalibur is of King Arthur, although the staff is essential for the miracles he works (parting the sea, producing water in the desert). Similarly, pop culture icon James Bond's preferred utensils of Tuxedo, Walther PPK, and Rolex have developed into a generic formula of well-dressed man with smallish hand-gun, fancy watch, and discardable gadgets. This type might be the most common in digital games. The innumerable items and weapons of *Borderlands* (Gearbox) are as essential as generic and are swapped out continuously for incrementally better versions. In *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo), the helpful objects scattered around the gameworld are equally important and form a rather distinct iconography of the series when taken together, but there is no single piece of equipment that defines Mario. This type leans most to Frasca's description of the avatar as cursor, in that the usually short-lived effects of equipment can outweigh the abilities of the avatar, reducing them to a platform for these varying effects.

5. Composites of character and vehicle are comparatively rare. Centaurs like Chiron are amalgams of a human upper body and head, and the body of a horse, giving them the mobility that humans will attain by riding a horse. This physicality is unchanging, more of a unity than a symbiosis. In popular culture, this type is found in Robocop's cyborg body. Killed in the line of duty, policeman Alex Murphy is "reincarnated" in a mechanical body, fusing his brain and thus his personality to a machine. In both cases, the result is an indivisible body that fuses aspects of a human with elements that are distinctly non-human. Racing, armored combat and some FPS games draw on this tradition. The *Crysis* (Crytek) series bases its gameplay on the Nanosuit, the game's distinctly vehicular armor, and its narrative revolves around the (negative) side-effects of merging with technology. Here, players' conceptualizations will be most diverse, both heuristically—some will perceive the active functionality of the vehicle rather as iconic equipment (type 3)—and philosophically—if the Nanosuit cannot be taken off, are its functions not inherent to the wearer (type 1)?
6. The user of a powerful "vehicle" who is neither fused with it nor uniquely identified with (or by) is prominently found in classical and medieval literature. Bellerophon is only able to defeat the chimera when riding Pegasus. Still, he is neither the only (or even the most famous) rider of Pegasus, nor are he or the winged horse identified by a physical or even metaphorical union with each other. Both need one another for the purpose of their (narrative) destinies, yet have separate lives before and after one shared adventure. In popular culture, we find special vehicles with a series of different users (the TARDIS used by the different incarnations of Doctor Who) as well as individuals with several special vehicles (Iron Man's endless series of improved flying suits). In digital games, this type manifests in quite different ways. In *Mario Kart 8* (Nintendo), it is never possible to use any of the playable figures in the game independently of a vehicle, but every character can be freely combined with any vehicle, resulting in a broad variety of composite avatars that have distinct strengths and weaknesses. In the Western game, *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games), mounting a horse merges the player's control of the humanoid avatar with that of the horse. The player's direct control over horse and rider as a unit fuses them into a temporary centaur, a functional amalgam of equestrian locomotion and human object manipulation. Because the player character, the scripted fictional person of John Marston, remains the same, it is unlikely that players will conceive of him suddenly as a centaur. Yet some might perceive parallels between shooting from horseback and controlling a tank in other games, while others will rationalize the control of horse and rider as a temporary unit through a fictional comparison, or both.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how ludic and discursive elements of digital games suggest to their players a wide variety of epistemological models for understanding their relation to the playable figure and for the role of the playable figure vis-à-vis the gameworld. The proposed six types of relations, based on patterns established in mythology and popular culture, serve as templates for the different conceptualizations of the player's relation to their representation in the gameworld and the gameworld as a whole.

The typology of six categories—distinguished by the composite formed with tools or vehicles and the degree to which the interdependence is inherent to the avatar or undergoes changes—is a framework for analyzing the cognitive and epistemological processes at work during play. It allows for conceptualizations that differ from the traditional model of the cyborg, thus addressing the different ways in which empirical players understand their playable characters. *Crysis*, which I categorize as an example for static composites between playable character and vehicle, might be conceptualized by players as belonging to the fourth type, the universal tool user (if they put little stock in the narrative or the Nanosuit's abilities, and play the game as a regular First-Person Shooter). Both views are equally “valid,” as they are not ontological statements about the game, but epistemological models for conceptualizing the relationship of player and playable character.

The model presented here is limited to my own cultural context—Western-European, cis-male, white, middle-class, born in the 1970s—and will therefore inevitably exclude conceptualizations as well as pertinent examples. The categories themselves can, of course, be discussed and modified, yet the idea behind them should remain valid, namely that there are more diverse higher-level logics for conceptualizing our relation to the gameworld through the playable figure than usually discussed. Beyond what has been discussed here, digital games can offer a non-human perspective that “prompts humans to apply their cognitive and perceptual equipment as well as their subjectivity to a context that could not be encountered in their ordinary life” (Gualeni 5). Understanding how we make sense of a distinctly non-human incorporation in digital environments would be a long-term application possibility of the ideas presented here.

## Endnotes

1. I am indebted to the extraordinarily helpful feedback of my colleagues at the IT University of Copenhagen's Center for Computer Games Research, particularly Joleen Blom, Ida Jørgensen, and Miguel Sicart.
2. Linderoth's additional category is of lesser significance in studies of game objects like Vella's or mine, which is why I will use Vella's terminology throughout. It allows me to distinguish in simple terms between the holistic view (playable figure) and its ludic (avatar) and discursive-representational (player character) components.



3. Common in German literary history, *Stoff* (literally ‘matter’ or ‘fabric’) is understood as a proto-narrative, less abstract than a theme and more complex than a motif (Frenzel, 24). The term describes the basic plots connected to archetypal characters—an Odysseus-narrative will typically include a protracted journey home, a Quixote-narrative will center around a misguided quest—which includes central character traits or iconic scenes—high intelligence and recognition by the hero’s dog, or a disheveled appearance and a fight against windmills, respectively. A *Stoff* is malleable and open to sometimes radical changes, yet also sets some parameters and expectations, resembling those of playable figures in games who are designed and equipped to achieve specific goals.

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## Response: Composite Avatars and the Epistemology of the Playable Figure

Petri Lankoski

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BACKE'S GOAL IS TO EXPLORE THE QUESTION, "Do players of, for example, a racing game steer the virtual car directly themselves, or are they controlling the body of a virtual driver?" To answer this question, he provides an avatar-tool/vehicle relations categorization that includes categories such as *variable equipment* (the character uses tools, for example, MacGyver and his improvised tools) and *Fusion with "vehicle"* (the character as tool/vehicle are integrated, for example, a cyborg Robocop). To Backe, these categories connect to proto-narratives from folk tales and popular culture: the proto-narratives form the bases of interpretation of bodies/avatars within game worlds.

In my response, I agree that Backe provides a starting point for considering composite avatars and their interpretation. Backe is correct that previous positions—the playable figure is a cursor (Frasca), a tool (Klevjer), a gun in First Person Shooter games (Mukherjee)—are simplistic. However, to understand the phenomenological experience of controlling something we need to first inspect more closely peoples' relationships to tools and meaning-making processes in general. Such an inspection will lead us to consider the links between players' feeling of control, narration, and gameplay.

The meaning of a hammer is tied to the actions it can be used for. The meaning of abstract concepts is also tied to actions and their use in the language. Proto-narratives are beliefs that are tied to shared patterns of actions in fictions. However, the fundamental interpretation framework relates to peoples' surrounding reality and habits. Walton calls this the *reality principle*. The common facts that are typically true in fictions foregrounds only if the fiction prompts this: *a man and a horse is the man riding the horse*, not *a centaur* unless fiction specifically makes that fact true. Similarly, MurraySmith argues in *Engaging Characters* that interpretations fill in details based on schemas such as person schema (*a person has a human body*) unless the information given makes us think otherwise. Making sense of other people and characters in fictions have the same bases: our own action possibilities and bodily states (Lankoski, "Computer Games"; "Player").

According to Merleau-Ponty tools are not just extensions of our bodies but they become part of our bodies. When we learn to use tools well enough, the tool gets integrated to our body schema (that is the sensorimotor map of one's body) while we are using the tool. While we are aware that something is not permanently part of us, in the sensorimotor level, we do not distinguish tools from other parts of our bodies, except that in the sensorimotor level we can attach and detach tools unlike our real body parts (see also Longo et al.). Playable figurines are tools. However, the aspect of

the tool is only one dimension of the playable figurines. Backe stresses the fictional dimension with his classification of the playable figurine–tool relationships.

Backe (cf. figure 1) defines the figurine–tool relationships as *Archetypes of Equipment Users*, between the (playable) figurine and the player. The archetypes describe different types of combinations of characters and tools from the point of view of narration. With *narration* here, I mean information which the game communicates to the player about characters; *narrative* would be an interpretation of narration in a form of causally connected actions of characters.

Playable figurines that are human-like are interpreted as human beings (the reality principle). However, playable figurines are also, as Backe notes, tools that enable players to act in the game world and can use other tools such as cars. What the player–playable figure relation is might depend on other factors of that narration rather than *archetypes of equipment users*. Consider the case of *Grand Theft Auto 4*: when Nico Bellic drives a car, he (default view) is hidden in the car. The player sees the car from a third-person perspective. When the player is stressed about the demands of steering the car, the sensorimotor loop is about the car and the actions the player does. Bellic, as a character, is not likely to have a part of that experience (Lankoski). The situation might be different with the first-person view: if the player sees Bellic’s hands on the wheel and those hands react to the players action, the hands are part of sensorimotor loop. Even in this case, the hands become the players’ hands as in a rubber hand illusion (Longo et al.). Bellic will be part of the interpretation when the cognitive load for making decisions and motor control is low and the game foregrounds Bellic by showing the aspects of the character by different means (Lankoski). Force feedback is a way to convey information that can put focus on the character or to the vehicle. Hitting obstacles or bumps communicated with force feedback amplifies the driving experience (in contrast to heartbeats implicating fear, which would move the focus to the character, as in *Silent Hill 3*).

I have earlier argued that the player goes between character-centric interpretation and I-centric interpretation depending on how the game narrates characters and events (Lankoski). “I” as actor interpretation is always present when the player has (some) control over the character’s actions. The character-centric interpretation requires information prompting character interpretation and some capacity from the player to take that information in. (Information about the character and story might not get processed when the player is stressed with strategic decision making and motor actions requiring cognitive focus).

In conclusion, I argue that in addition to the question posed by Backe, we need to also ask, “When are players feeling that they control something directly, and when are they feeling that they are controlling something via a virtual character?” The player–playable figurine/character–vehicle relationship and interpretation might be changing based on the narration and gameplay in a specific stage of the game.

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## Towards Post-Phenomenology and Posthumanism

Hans-Joachim Backe

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LANKOSKI'S POINTS ARE VALUABLE AND WELL-TAKEN. I particularly agree with his conclusion that the player's interpretation of who or what they are controlling (and in what way) is subject to changes during the playing of a game. Where Lankoski and I disagree is in the more fundamental positions and assumptions that I admittedly did little to address in my text.

The central difference in approach seems to be that Lankoski's position builds on phenomenology and Waltonian ideas about fiction, while my approach draws on post-phenomenology, neo-formalist narratology, and posthumanist philosophy. This concerns mainly different positions towards anthropocentrism.

As Lankoski puts Walton's reality principle: "the fundamental interpretation framework relates to peoples' surrounding reality and habits." Applied to actions in gameworlds, this leads to the assumption that players start from the (implicit, sub-conscious) assumption of their abilities in the real world. However, in the light of newer theories, this recourse to a normalized human set of abilities is not a given – not the least because the "post-anthropocentric turn, linked to the compounded impacts of globalization and of technology-driven forms of mediation, [...] shifts the parameters that used to define *anthropos*" (Braidotti 57, emphasis in original). Accustomed to the commercial and technologically mediated form of the digital game, players know that they are interfacing with a virtual environment, where the range of possible actions will always be limited and where actions are performed differently. This leads to a set of expectations based not (only) on general proto-narratives, but on medium- or genre-specific ones. Lankoski's phenomenological remarks hold true, but, as post-phenomenologist Don Ihde has observed, when interacting with simulation environments, the sense of embodiment (and frame of reference) of users oscillates between the real and the virtual (136).

While in some sense, players orient themselves towards their real abilities, at least experienced players will pick up on the crucial differences between their playable figure and not only a real-life human, but comparable characters from games and fiction. That is why Walton's reality principle with its assumption of a stable extra-gamic real as referent seems to me less useful than Marie-Laure Ryan's principle of "minimal departure": in understanding games, the minimal departure will often be one from another game, not from reality (Ryan, *Possible Worlds*). Even more radically, Lubomir Doležel's concept of the heterocosm "stresses the radical incompleteness of fictional worlds: because it is impossible for the human mind to imagine an object (much less a world) in all of its properties, every fictional world presents areas of radical indeterminacy" (Ryan, "Possible Worlds").

Ruminating the character of ludic “horsemen” is an attempt at grounding and concretizing these lofty philosophical questions in a tangible argument that emphasizes the relation to narrative fiction.

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