

Virtual Reality's Second-Person Perspective

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We have first-person Games and we have Third-person Games, so what happened to second-person Games? It's a fair question and many have discussed the concept online. I however believe that Virtual Reality (VR) may not only help answer this question but help define a genre for the new medium.

Ehren Pflugfelder describes Genre as "Typified Rhetorical Action" a feature that repeats again and again over time with few differences⁹. These repetitions can often be seen throughout different forms of media. It seems that these repeating patterns can suit a particular form of media more, possibly a pattern won't foster until it is used in a medium that suits it. So as VR media is in its early stages it stands to reason that a new genre will emerge from its ability to present unique "Ludic"⁸ Elements. Mediums with ludic elements give them room to develop unique genres separate from the medium's narrative.

Video games use the camera to convey many perspectives. A game might switch its perspective, perhaps when choosing a different character or when entering a vehicle but the game will be classified under its most prevalent perspective in which the gameplay takes place. Game perspectives don't directly affect a game's narrative, switching Grand Theft Auto from third to first-person doesn't change the narrative of the game. The player character (PC) is unchanged and the player's role as that PC is maintained. Similar to how you would define a game by its genre/perspective is categorized. Side-scrollers, Isometric, Top-down, first-person, Third-person and arguably "text-based", are all different perspectives from the player to view the game world from. Perspective can find a place as part of a sub-genre such as first-person Shooters, a sub-genre of shooters that require a first-person Point Of View (POV).

The first and Third-person perspectives get their namesake from the grammatical perspective used in writing and if we are to do the same with Second-person. First-Person is the camera POV watching the PC and the Third-person when the POV of the camera views the PC. So if the second person would mean that "the narrator addresses the story to the reader"⁴ so if the narrator were to control the camera you would have the POV of a 2nd character in the game other than the PC. Early on, Text-based games like 1977's Zork use Second-person grammar to tell their story just like the pen and paper role-playing games that inspired it like dungeons and dragons although the grammar is in the second-person. The objective perspective of the game is written and isn't shown through a camera perspective.



In Nick Robinson's "Second-Person Video Game would look like"⁵ video he talks about a segment of the game "Drive san Francisco" where the player is put in the first-person POV of a Non-Player Character (NPC) following the PC. He uses this to define a second-person game as a concept saying. However, I'm on the fence about whether this is distinct enough from what the third-person perspective describes.

Mario 64's narrative, like "Drive", uses the perspective of a 2nd character, "Lakatu" for the player's POV. Mario 64 came around in a time where players were not necessarily familiar with this new 3D perspective and camera controls. By personifying the third-person controls with a character supposedly helped understanding and adoption of this new perspective. Now Lakatu is solely controlled by the player and wouldn't be considered an NPC. He also only takes place in the game's narrative and is never referenced as a part of the Game Mechanics.

"Screencheat", a multiplayer invisible PVP game where players use a Multiplayer split-screen to watch the other player's perspective and use context clues to find their target. This begs the question, would the presence of a split-screen mode be "second-person"? It would still properly be described as a first-person game and although you are using other characters' perspectives they are other Player's PCs.

This shows in these "second-person" games the player's control over the camera is imperative and is reliant on an NPC's POV not a PC's. It is also important to note the grey area that "Dependent Non-Player Characters (DNPC)"⁹ create, NPCs that the player has influence over and who they are responsible for.



In Third Person games where the player's control over the camera may switch to a fixed or tracking virtual camera to aid the player's perception, I'm unsure if the player losing control of the camera would count this as a shift in the game's perspective. As people find utility in considering fixed camera games distinct, such as the original Resident Evil games. This is an account of the series switching to a third-person camera in later instalments of the Series.

It would seem though that defining a game as the second person as a game perspective/genre hasn't emerged in the mind of players as their examples are often edge cases and their lack of repetition in the medium doesn't constitute being given an entire classification of their own.

So I want to take a step back and look towards the new. Virtual Reality is pushing the boundaries. It seems only reasonable to expect Genre to differ and emerge with such a unique form of control and interaction; it's growing into its very own medium partially separate from traditional video games. Now you would be forgiven for thinking that VR is only capable of a first-person perspective and by the standards of game perspectives before you might be right but VR calls for reclassifications of these ideas. The nature of VR means that the camera is always embodied by the player. Variations in perspective are always seen through the lenses of the HMD in a similar way to how written stories Variations in perspective are read as words and seen understood in grammar. If the player has nobody in the game and the intention of the game is for you to be as an interface (like that in RTS VR games) the player will still preserve the experience as "first-person" and as an objective experience of the player.

Hell Blade: Senua's Sacrifice is an easy candidate for defining Third-person VR as it's a Port of a flatscreen game to VR where the player's perspective takes the exact place of the third-person camera. voting to

use the original controls instead of adding any VR interaction leaving it relatively unaltered by its move to VR. The VR Game Chronos has the player's POV be that of a stationary camera. In both cases, The player only acts as a camera and has no interaction with the world besides through interaction performed by the PC. Edge of Nowhere is similar to Hell Blade and Chronos, but when the PC goes to use its firearm it uses the position of the player's head to aim. This however is used as an input of control to incite an interaction with the PC. Unlike games that follow a trend wherefrom the first-person perspective, you embody a PC POV or "Embodied Player Character" (E-PC) whilst simultaneously controlling another External PC. I find that playing with these characters outside of the players own body gives the feeling of playing with remote control toys so ill refer to it as the "Remote Player Character" (R-PC). Cognitively they can provide a challenge that is equivalent to tapping your head and rubbing your tummy and challenges the player to control multiple characters with one mind.



Games like Moss, a hack n' slash puzzle platformer which has the player control a small R-PC mouse "Quill" with the analogue stick, while as a large spirit E-PC you can reach out and move platforms and hold down enemies to give Quill an advantage. Trover Saves the Universe is mostly the same, just with witty self-aware humor and with PC's of a similar scale, like Astro Bot Rescue Mission the game is limited to gamepad controls, However Astro bot utilizes VR elements the best for both PCs. Where the other games seem to hold back on the E-PCs involvement with gameplay interactions Astro bot has the player doge, headbutt enemies and create platforms for your R-PC to interact with. Trover can be played without VR, Astrobot cannot because of these VR specific interactions.



These games are in some ways a product of the limitations of PlayStation VR. These hybrid perspective games play to the PSVR strengths.

The player is still able to get a sense of immersive VR worlds while being relatively stationary by having the R-PC act as a player surrogate. This makes it ideal for couch VR, the kind incentivised by the typical placement of console gaming. This Perspective leads to a rather interesting interaction, where the player may identify as the E-PC and can see the R-PC as more of a companion despite them being a PC. This is probably because most people aren't used to identifying as multiple individuals. These games narratives are majoritively written in a way that reinforces this separation of identity by referring to the E-PC as you and the R-PC as them. But both are the player and it's as much you watching them as it is them watching you, or you watching yourself.

Due to the recent nature of this genre and its relatively small sample size, an agreed-upon name hasn't emerged. Others on forms may call them "Moss-like" in a similar vein to the "Rouge-like" game genre as well as Mix or Hybrid perspective. Sony developer Nicolas Doucet in his 2019 GDC talk "making of Astro Bot Rescue Mission; Reinventing Platformers for VR referred to their game as "Third Person VR"⁵.

However, I find that gameplay with these separate player characters is too distinct from games like Hellblade that fit the prenotions of the Third-Person perspective genre. I suggest defining a second-person game perspective as something along the lines of “A game where one of the player's Characters has a first-person POV of another one of those Players Characters simultaneously”. This would not include games like Last Labyrinth and Giant Ghost as they use a DNPC, not R-PC. With this definition, others may use it to draw inspiration from. I would be interested to see games in which the player may have two external-PCs controlled each with a thumbstick or perhaps one in which the external-PC and POV-PC are separated or perhaps as a PVP game as a sort of VR Rockem Sockem Robots. There is a lot of room for variation and creativity. As VR becomes less restrictive the limitations that created the conditions for the development of these multi-character games may make these console VR mechanics less relevant. Because they provide such a unique interactive experience, this idea will be repeatedly developed in future games and will emerge as a staple VR genre.

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