

On Video Game Storytelling

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I'm being escorted onto a hovercraft by two grunts dressed in camouflage. We take off from the landing pad and fly above the landscape of trees. The hovercraft starts to hiccup, then stops mid-air.

“Oh great. I suppose we're out of fuel. Way to go, Gorf breath!” one of the guards says. The argument is cut short as gravity reasserts itself. We crash through the trees onto the grassy surface.

“Good thing that guard broke your fall. He doesn't look too happy about it, though,” a text box says as I get up. I look around. The broken hovercraft is emitting a high-pitched beep. This isn't good – I'm a prisoner and don't really want to be found. I type “press button” to turn off the beep tracking the crash, and walk deeper into the forest.

The year is 1994 and I'm playing Space Quest 2, a humorous space-themed computer game released in 1987. I'm seven years old. The game has sixteen colours and is graphical, yet the story is told through text boxes. It's totally interactive. If I type a command, such as “look around,” the game will respond with more information to help me in my quest. I'm led through an interactive narrative.

I'm completely enthralled by this game. I don't realize that I'm developing my reading and typing skills. My daily life may be that of elementary school, basic mathematics, and peanut butter sandwiches. But now I'm Roger Wilco, wrongly imprisoned janitor, lost on the planet Labion.

Janet Murray, interactive designer with a Ph.D. from Harvard University, describes this new type of storytelling as cyberdrama, a modern way of storytelling that is emerging just as the novel emerged to tell the story of a previous culture and time. The narration is masked in a feeling of virtual reality and followed by an active participant responsible for the outcome, as opposed to the reader as an observer. There are a variety of ways to create and produce cyberdrama, as video game styles differ greatly and have vast ranges of interactivity and prefabricated story. Space Quest 2 is just one example, a text-based adventure game, following a mostly linear story.

I'm in control of a family household. The house is square, with aluminum siding and shades of green carpets. I've also constructed a pool, basketball court, and sprung for the most expensive beds possible. Each person in the house has a job, astrological sign, collection of likes and dislikes, friends, and wardrobe. I've made them look like my real life friends if they aged twenty years. My best friend Troy is a bald scientist. Another friend of mine, Mike, wears a tuxedo around the house and is a high-profile actor. I'm in the "life of crime" career track (journalism is only in one of the add-ons) and wear jeans all the time. I'm in love with a girl living in a crowded house down the street. Everything is observed from the top of the house. While I designed myself, I'm playing as God more than anything.

This time the year is 2002 and I'm playing The Sims, released in 2000. I'm fifteen years old. The game is fun and groundbreaking, but doesn't feel like a narrative journey. I don't feel like I'm part of a story, because there isn't really one. I'm

observing and manipulating the actions of a family. It mimics the trivialities of real life in a simulation environment.

Ken Perlin, computer science professor at New York University, analyzes the game with a similar perspective. “The player ends up thinking of The Sims as a sort of probabilistic game, not really a s a world inhabited by feeling creatures.” He concludes, “The Sims remains, dramatically, a world-building game, not a psychological narrative in which one believes in the agency of characters.” If this is the case, are story and narrative not essential to gameplay?

I’m placing blocks on a two dimensional plane. Every time I make an even horizontal line with my blocks, the line disappears and I get some points. There are no characters and no span of time other than the falling blocks. There’s no story. I’m playing Tetris, the wildly popular Russian puzzle game. Tetris is a perfect example of a game completely devoid of story, proving that stories are only one element that can be integrated into a game.

There are other video game genres that rely on very little story. Fighting games usually involve brief dialogue between fighters. Such as in Dead or Alive 2 for the Sega Dreamcast:

“You!”

“Well, what do you know?”

“You killed my mother!”

Cue two minutes of sex-charged fighting.

So maybe narrative isn't essential to video games. There are a number of games nearly devoid of story, relying on logic and reflexes alone for entertainment. User interaction, however is always present. It's the combination of user interaction and narrative that reaches towards innovation in narrative techniques.

A potential problem of video game storytelling is that immediate entertainment is the primary goal. Jordan Mechner, one of the designers of the game Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, says "the traditional way to tell a story in a video game is to create a series of cinematic cutscenes that serve as 'rewards' – transitions between gameplay levels." The story and the gameplay end up separate. This isn't really interactive storytelling, just using story as a gimmick. He goes on to say, "However, the cool way to tell a story in a video game is to eliminate or reduce the canned cutscenes as much as possible, and instead construct the game so that the most powerful and exciting moments of the story will occur within the gameplay itself." And that really is a deciding factor in the effectiveness of a game story.

My best examples for game stories like this are within adventure games and role-playing games. The integration of story into gameplay is often seamless within these two genres, because both rely on the framework of a story.

Now my name is Ryo and I wear a brown leather jacket. I have a band-aid on my cheek and spiky black hair. I'm searching for the man who killed my father. I know he left in a black car. I can ask the local citizens if they know or remember anything. Or, I

can go to the restaurant and get something to eat. Or the local arcade. I can practice my fighting skills. I can gamble all my money away. I can even collect little virtual toys. Or I can just walk around in the small Japanese town.

This time the game is Shenmue, a role-playing game that guides the player loosely through a broad narrative, while introducing more immediate events as the player wanders around. The effect is that of simulated freedom. Each character's dialogue contributes to the virtual world. And more complications unfold as the days pass within the game.

Traditional stories have a timeline of events. An engaging piece of fiction or memoir covers a span of time. When I read 100-Mile Diet by J.B. MacKinnon and Alisa Smith, it was more exciting than a textbook on sustainable eating. Why? It follows a timeline of the authors' experiences. Christian Metz, film theorist, said "one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme."

I'm walking through the city of Stormwind. My staff glows with fiery embers, leaving a trail of sparks in my wake. The priest trainer has some new spells for me to learn, now that I've gained enough experience. But what's this? Some other alliance members in the city are having a conversation.

[02. Trade] [Bootstraps]: do you need a flying mount to goto Mechanar?

[02. Trade] [Ralakor]: yes

[02. Trade] [Estlin]: actually locks can summon you in now

[02. Trade] [Dragonfigo]: WTS [Void Crystal]x35, 33g ea, pst

These are four lines of chat in the online multiplayer role-playing game, World of Warcraft, on the server Dragonblight. An online game has potential to create an array of stories through interaction between users. People aren't always that creative, though. As shown, the trading chat channel is one of the most active, with users using poor spelling and requesting help in the game. Or, in Dragonfigo's case, the goal is to sell items he has acquired. It's like a mix between ten-year-olds on MSN Messenger and a newspaper's classified ads.

Blizzard, the company that created World of Warcraft, realized the need to write in a storyline. As of February 2008, there are 5919 quests in the game, each with an accompanying story and a goal that must be completed in the game. Some are as simple as delivering a lunchbox, some are as difficult as travelling to the depths of the Deadmines and beheading Edwin VanCleaf. The vast number of quests within a single world has created a massive cult-like community. There are ten million subscribers to the game. Blizzard has created a few servers designed for real role-playing, or acting out the role of your character.

World of Warcraft has even gone on to be the target of criticism for its level of immersion. Since it's an online game that is rapidly receiving updates and expansions, it can never be completed. It's an unfinished story, and thus very addictive. When I play it, I feel like I'm getting close to an end that is never going to come. My equipment gets better and I learn more about the Alliance and Horde factions. A good story sucks the reader in so perhaps a good game sucks the player in as well.

I grew up playing these games, oblivious to the presence of storytelling within them. The concepts are often cliché and corny, yet the execution was entirely new and different. The literary world is paying more attention to video games, with books on video game analysis being published by universities like MIT and with professional writers such as Wendy Despain being hired to write the stories.

My interest in writing stemmed equally between books and games. While reading books immersed me in a character's life through careful writing, games made me responsible for a story's outcome. Video games helped me learn to read. The potential for experimentation in narration grows as we move into the future, and the relatively young medium of video games is an overlooked forefront. Memoirs and novels can easily be adapted to the video game format, as long as immediate entertainment and user interaction doesn't suffer. Video games' main goal may be entertainment, but isn't that the case for writing as well?

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Tetris (Alesey Pajitnov, 1985)
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