

Summary

But it is our ability to choose - whatever you think is true - that makes us human.

There is no book or teacher to give you the answers, to show you the path.

Ezio Auditore da Firenze (*ASSASSIN'S CREED II*)

This dissertation discusses narrative games, or what I call story-structured games, seeing that in these games it is the game script that determines what happens next. They are also referred to as games of progression, as opposed to rule-based games, which are called games of emergence. However, as I explained in the introduction, these two categories are not clear-cut. Games of emergence often have (extra-diegetic) stories, while games of progression also have rule-based gameplay elements. As I further pointed out in the introduction, computer games were appropriated by literary and film studies before game studies established itself as a separate academic field. As a result, the first years of game studies were dominated by a struggle for authority between the narratologists and the ludologists. And, although this difference of opinion was eventually laid to rest, both the earlier appropriation and the power struggle resulted in a certain suspicion of games of progression, in favour of game rules and consequently of games of emergence. Despite this fact, terminology and techniques from literary and film studies were still used to study progression games, as they undeniably possess diegetic narrative aspects. But computer games are not books or films. Consequently, the way they 'tell stories' should differ from the way the other two media do. Therefore, I wanted to explore how games tell stories and how this differs from narratives in books and films. I furthermore wanted to see whether the use of narrative theory from literary and film studies had had a negative influence on the study of story-structured games. Finally, as computer games incontrovertibly depend on technical and hardware affordances, I wanted to look into the way this might have affected progressive games, especially their narrative, and if and how this might have changed over the years.

Before one can study a particular medium systematically, it is necessary to group data into distinct named categories. In literary and film studies, as well as in game studies, media texts are grouped into genres. But, as I showed in Chapter II, although the term is the same, genre categorization in computer games is based on a different concept. Formulaic fiction uses genre to categorize texts by their content. Film uses the term similarly, to categorize films based on certain expectations/conventions related to their

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content or theme. In games, however, the term is used to sort different games based on the gameplay skills needed and the tasks/affordances associated with them. This does not mean that genre categorization in games does not also create certain expectations in the gaming audience; they are just different. A gamer who has mastered the gameplay skills of a particular genre not only expects to be able to play another game in the same genre, she also expects that challenges within the game become increasingly more difficult, so that she will expand and refine her repertoire of gameplay skills. As I pointed out, on the one hand this makes genre in games more critical on a skills based level, while on the other hand it is less critical in the sense that gamers can live with the fluid boundaries of the genre taxonomy. It also means that the term genre in games is not burdened with aesthetic assumptions, as it is in other media, especially film.

In terms of terminology the trickiest category, as we saw, is the (action) adventure genre because the term is used both to describe a narrative content genre, as well as a gameplay genre. As a content genre, it denotes a story that centres on a hero, still usually male, who finds himself in a tight spot and who has to use his ingenuity and (in the case of an action adventure) physical skills to overcome the obstacles placed before him. As a gameplay genre, it denotes a particular type of story-structured game, where the gamer (first or third person perspective) reaches the final goal by picking up items and clues and by solving riddles and (logical) problems. From a comparative point of view this means that, since the term genre is founded on totally different concepts (formal aspects as opposed to paradigms related to iconography and themes), it is futile to compare games and other media based only on the fact that both seemingly belong to the same genre. To overcome this problem I proposed replacing the term game(play) genre with the term type (type of game), especially when discussing games in relation to other media. For game studies, there are no formal reasons why games should not be categorized in types instead of genres, especially as the term type is more neutral.

Other issues discussed in Chapter II, which have to be taken into account when discussing genre, especially when games are compared to other media such as books and films as they apply to all three, are that the term genre is not prescriptive, that genres are not fixed, that genres mix, and that the term genre will always be under discussion because of the constant changes both in the medium itself as well as in the audience. For games this fluidity means that a genre taxonomy that allows for historic change should be preferred over a taxonomy which is completely synchronic. The techno-historical gameplay based taxonomy discussed in Chapter II meets this criterion, and as it is already well established, there are no overt reasons to discard it, particularly as the alternative

taxonomies discussed, especially the one proposed by Djaouti et al. (2008), are not suitable to classify games of progression. The gameplay-based taxonomy should at least be preferred in reception research as it is still used by the gaming audience as well as by game producers and designers.

In the next chapter, Chapter III, I explained how the adventure game genre originated from the practice of war-gaming, *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*, and real-world caving expeditions. I also showed how 20th century recreational wargames and *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*, as well as the role-playing games and the adventure games that stem from them, were influenced and partly shaped by the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, most notably *The Lord of the Rings*. From a techno-historical point of view, it furthermore became clear that most of the changes in the adventure genre were due to advancements in computer hardware. This, however, did not change the defining aspects of the adventure game (exploration, finding objects and clues and solving puzzles and problems). It did, however, change the audiovisual representation of the games, as well as the embodied experience of their gamespace. It also changed the media the games were associated with. Text adventure games were promoted as interactive stories or even interactive books. When graphics were added, the comic book became the new associated medium. What followed was a short flirtation with Hollywood in the form of Full Motion Video, but the restrictions of the technique, where everything had to be pre-recorded, proved incompatible with the freedom of interactivity associated with the medium of the computer game. In a final attempt to go with the times, adventure games adopted the 3D technique of other game genres. But this technique proved to be less suitable for the game skills and affordances of the genre. It did, however, suit the new subgenre of the action adventure game, where real time 3D graphics were used to test another set of game skills, those of the action game, i.e. good hand-eye coordination and timing. The combination of action and adventure elements proved to be so successful that the action adventure game became a genre of its own, supplanting the adventure genre almost completely.

This brings us to Chapter IV, in which I more thoroughly explored the changes in the audiovisual and kinaesthetic game space of the graphic adventure game, to see if and how a change from 2D to 3D graphics might have affected gameplay. According to most game researchers, spatiality is the defining element in computer games. Books portray diegetic space in words, films show diegetic space in images, but games, even text adventure games, give the gamer a diegetic space that she can move through and interact with. The way a gamer does this depends on several aspects, which Stockburger dubbed the modalities of space, i.e. where we play the game (user space), associations we have with

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the space that is created (narrative space), implicit and explicit rules that influence how we interact with the game world (rule space), the visual and auditory portrayal of the game world (audio-visual space), and the input-interface we use (kinaesthetic space). To investigate possible changes in the gameplay skills caused by changes in the audio-visual representation of the game space (2D as opposed to 3D), I chose two games from the same game series¹ to ensure that possible influences could not stem from any of the other modalities. The major findings of this chapter were that the change to 3D, made possible by the technical advancements in the medium, affected the audio-visual representation of the game space in two ways. Firstly, the designers had chosen to give the user control of the game camera. Consequently, the game space was no longer shown one-screen-at-a-time, but fluid, either in the 3D over-the-shoulder-style already used in action adventure games, or through the eyes of the game avatar, as in a First Person Shooter. Secondly, because of advancements in computer graphics, gamespace was rendered more smoothly and more detailed and colour and shading were used more subtly. As a result, the visual grammar of the genre changed. Where before this visual grammar used graphic detail to help the gamer to find objects, visual clues, and puzzles (the defining elements of the genre) in an one-screen-at-a-time 'overview'; a play in light and shadow 'borrowed' from the visual grammar of film was now used to 'guide' the gamer's eye (camera) to find and zoom in on these elements. But, as we saw, at least at the time (1999), the trained adventure gamer was not yet susceptible to this new visual grammar. Moreover, attempting to play the 3D game in the familiar 2D fashion made gameplay more difficult.

The new 3D audio-visual portrayal of the game space also changed the significance of off-screen space. It did so visually, because changes in the on-screen space, most notably the use of shadow, could alert the gamer to possible off-screen threats, and also audibly, because off-screen sound not only made the game world more realistic, it could also be used to advance it, as well as again indicating dangers lurking in off-screen space. The 3D audio-visual portrayal of the game space also meant that the way to navigate it changed as well. Although both games used a mouse as primary input device, in the first game, the gamer would point and click to advance the avatar, and suitable actions were chosen from a non-context-sensitive menu (the navigation bar). In the 3D game, the avatar (i.e. game camera) moved fluidly, not by clicking, but by scrolling the mouse, while appropriate actions were guided by a floating actions menu, which was now object-sensitive. Thus, where avatar control in the 2D game was indirect, i.e. not meaningfully

¹ *GABRIEL KNIGHT SINS OF THE FATHERS* (1993), the 2D game and *GABRIEL KNIGHT BLOOD OF THE SACRED BLOOD OF THE DAMNED* (1999), the 3D game.

related to the action, the gamer now had a more direct connection. This also made navigating the game world a bit more challenging, as it was no longer restricted to a set number of screens (rooms) that could easily be mapped. Still, it was as yet not the vast and challenging game space of the open world game, so that extra on-screen navigational aids were not needed. Thus, where the gamer first pointed and clicked, choosing from a predetermined set of possibilities, she now actively moved the game camera through game space, following her avatar or seeing the game world through his/her eyes. Where first she experienced the game space more as a spectator from a theatrical distance, she now experienced it from 'within' as part of the world, no longer the puppet master, but the actor in the scene. Therefore, even though the 3D game did not change the defining cerebral gameplay skills of the genre, it did change the way the gamer navigated through the gamespace (navigational and kinaesthetic gameplay skills), found objects, items and clues (also navigational and kinaesthetic gameplay skills) and performed avatar actions (kinaesthetic gameplay skills), all indispensable to play and successfully end the game. This shows that gameplay is not only (or even mainly) affected by the game rules, as some ludologists, especially Frans Mäyrä, had suggested.

I returned to the exploration of the audio-visual representation of the game space in the next chapter, Chapter V. The aim was not to see how diachronic change, brought about by new hardware possibilities, changed our perception and experience of space in the medium of the game itself, but rather to see how the audio-visual representation of space influences the way games tell stories, and more specifically how this differs from film. As games and films are both visual media, I focussed my comparison on setting, i.e. the audio-visual portrayal of location, the use of the camera, the function, and use of props and the function and use of colour. The most obvious difference between the two media is, of course, that setting in films is 'passive', it is captured by the camera and later presented to the viewer. Consequently, the viewer cannot actively change location, cannot change the camera angle, and cannot pick-up and handle props, all activities a gamer can do. Furthermore, as we already saw in the previous chapter, the subtle visual grammar of film cannot be unequivocally translated to the computer game. The reason for this is that setting in games is directly linked to gameplay. When rain is pouring down in a film, this adds atmosphere and conjures up all kinds of allusions, but how much this hinders the protagonist and whether or not she will reach her goal is already written down in the script. In a game heavy rain [sic] will also add atmosphere and may well conjure up allusions. It furthermore enhances the visual reality of the game, at least when the appearance of the avatar changes appropriately and when visibility is limited. But in a

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game like *READ DEAD REDEMPTION* (2010) it falls to the gamer and not to the director/scriptwriter to decide what happens next, i.e. whether visibility is still reliable enough for navigation or whether it would be better to advance game time until the weather has cleared².

And contrary to film, in a game every element of the setting has to be created³, not only every part of the location, but also every element that is in the setting, including its behaviour. As I explained in Chapter V, for a gamer the virtual world not only has to have a verisimilitude in graphics, it should also 'behave real', i.e. inanimate objects in the world should look, work, and handle as one would expect them to in the real world, while animate objects should act in a way which seems natural to the gamer in the context of the game, otherwise the illusion is broken. But looking 'real' in games does not mean that the visual experience is the same as in film. How we experience the audiovisual setting in a game depends on the one hand on the technical specifications of the gaming platform (at a particular time), and on the other hand on the visual affordances of the genre. In Chapter III, we saw that Roberta Williams's 2D (2.5D) one-screen-at-a-time design for the then state-of-the-art PC Junior became the new norm for adventure games from *KING'S QUEST* (1984) onwards. Even when the games used Full Motion Video, the game world was still presented one screen at a time. Only when new hardware developments made 3D possible and the technique was used successfully in other genres, did the adventure game move to 3D. But even in 3D, the audiovisual representation of the on-screen world differs from that of film, because games cannot do without genre-dependent superimposed information to aid gameplay. Navigating an open world necessitates a mini-map and games where the avatar is frequently attacked have to show health stats, but when stealth and subterfuge are of essence the gamer needs visual or audible cues to indicate that her status is compromised and, finally, when objects need to be examined carefully or combined, there has to be some form of inventory and a means to zoom in on and perform actions on objects other than just running over them.

The way the gamer 'experiences' setting is also dependent on the game camera. More and more games give the gamer control of the camera, not only First Person Shooters. A gamer-controlled camera creates a sense of immediacy. But it comes at a price. Where before the designer could dictate the best camera position for gameplay, now the gamer has to find out for herself how to frame the image in such a way that she

² Note that there are, of course, instances where game time cannot be advanced because bad weather conditions are part of a gameplay challenge.

³ With the exception of Full Motion Video games and Full Motion Video (based) cutscenes.

achieves her goals. And where first camera could be used as a storytelling means, in games with a gamer-dependent camera, this narrative resource is now relegated to cutscenes and scripted events. Better graphic quality and a gamer-controlled camera also meant that designers had to find other means to make props stand out. Props in games are not merely (symbolic) objects which help tell the story (as in film). They are objects that are indispensable for gameplay, and their function and use is therefore again genre-dependent. In Chapter IV we saw that adventure game designers used graphic detail to make important objects stand out. We also saw that they changed this visual grammar when this technique could no longer be used. But, even though the new more subtle grammar should have been familiar from its use in film, and despite the fact that it suited the slower paced genre, gamers had to learn to use the new grammar in the context of games, and had to unlearn the previous grammar. Fast-paced games, on the other hand, need bolder means to direct the gamer to props. Here the gamer does not have time to scan the screen thoroughly for colour highlights, visual discrepancies, or other means that could indicate the location of a prop. These games, therefore, need bold white circles, large yellow crosses, bright red markings, etcetera, in short, visual markings that are hard to overlook. And open world games need mini-maps, not only for navigational purposes, but also because they visualize part of the off-screen space, using extra markers to guide the gamer to more important in-game elements. But as games, for a very long time, could not do subtle visuals, and because certain types of games still do not benefit from their use, it should come as no surprise that gamers are differently cued to the audiovisual representation of the game world than they are to the on screen world of film.

In the next chapter, Chapter VI, I discussed how the choice of medium influences the way a character is portrayed. To do this I returned to Tolkien's book *The Lord of the Rings*, and more particularly to the character of Aragorn. In the first part of the chapter, I showed that Aragorn was a particular personification of the hero-king, a character often used in stories and myths through the ages. And also a character often associated with the quest story, which makes him/her particularly well suited for the role of (action) adventure hero. In the second part, I showed that in the different portrayals of Aragorn we not only see the choices of the different writers and directors, we also see changes dictated by the nature and the language of the medium. Tolkien could use the limitless resources and the unhurriedness of the written word to create an Aragorn who not only gradually transformed from a solitary Ranger to a future king, but who also showed many similarities with Sigurd the Volsung, Tolkien's favourite hero-king. Like the book, the radio play also lacked the visual means to create an image of Aragorn. But, as the medium also

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could not use elaborate verbal descriptions, such as the portrayals of stance and posture that identify the future king in the book, the radio play, in a way, had an even tougher job to convey Aragorn's transition from hero to king. But, contrary to the book, the play could use dramatic music to give the listener a good indication of Aragorn's nobleness. In this, of course, the defining element was the actor's, Sir Robert Stephens's, voice, which for many listeners did express Aragorn's lost nobility.

Both film adaptations had the disadvantage that they had to condense the story considerably, even though Bakshi, creator of the animated version, originally planned two feature-length films, while Jackson's three fiction films also came in extended versions on DVD. Bakshi's version stayed reasonably true to the book, but the visualization of Aragorn was far from accurate, even when taking into account that animation lacks detail. As the depiction of the other characters also did not concur with Tolkien's descriptions, we have to assume that this was a director's choice, as a character in animation in principle can take any shape or form. Still, Bakshi's Aragorn was not the "lean, dark and tall" man described by Tolkien. The most jarring difference between the two versions, however, was that in the animated film Aragorn does exactly what Tolkien eschewed: he whips out the broken sword Narsil, making what was meant as a scene to identify Strider as the future king Aragorn look completely ridiculous, destroying any notion of nobility. Jackson's depiction of Strider, on the other hand, was visually very accurate, even down to the mud caked boots and the spatters on his cloak. To all intents and purposes, this Aragorn looks the part of the Ranger who has been living in the wild for a long time. But because Jackson envisioned an action hero, albeit reluctant, he has Narsil waiting in Rivendell, while Aragorn carries another, unidentified, sword. And as Gandalf's identifying letter is also omitted, there is nothing that links the Ranger Strider to the future king Aragorn, not even his name, as no other name but Strider is mentioned, not even when Frodo asks him directly who he is. In fact, at the beginning of the Prancing Pony scene, Jackson uses sound, image and camera framing to make Strider look as menacing as possible. For anyone who does not know the books this might well be one of the men who are after the Ring. And contrary to all other versions, Jackson does not identify Strider as Aragorn until the Rivendell council. This choice, i.e. to keep Aragorn's identity hidden as long as possible, fits in with Jackson's depiction of Aragorn as the reluctant hero, the Renaissance Hamlet full of doubt and fallibility, not the hero-king who Tolkien envisioned. This choice is entirely Jackson's, as the language of neither the medium itself, nor its technical restrictions imposed such changes.

The Aragorn in the game, finally, has been shaped by the medium. In the game, the major part of the scene at the Prancing Pony is shown in a non-interactive cutscene. It stays relatively true to the book version, showing us a man who is indeed “lean, dark and tall”. As with the animated film, not all the details of his clothing can be shown. One could argue that in stance and posture, this Strider shows more of the future king than of the present Ranger, but it could also just be a means to show us a noble man. As the scene includes Gandalf’s letter, Strider is identified as Aragorn in this way. For the game version this is also the only possible way, because Aragorn is the game warrior, the character whose role it is to fight. Consequently, he needs weapons and therefore he already carries a fully functioning sword (not Narsil) and a quiver of arrows. He needs his weapons as soon as he leaves the inn, as well as on the way to Rivendell where, in contrast to the book, the party encounters many enemies, who Aragorn has to fight off, as this is his role in the game. Therefore, he is not the Aragorn of the books (who we only see in the cutscenes). Rather, he is the interactive game warrior. So there are no references to the hero-king transition, as it does not happen in the game. In this way the game stays true to its medium and to the expectations of the gaming audience.

In the discussion, finally, based on my findings from the previous chapters, I showed that the way games tell stories differs even from interactive hypertext fiction, because gameplay demands specific skills. A gamer plays games because she wants to have the idea that she can make meaningful choices, i.e. choices that change the course of the game/story. Designers have come up with elaborate story structures which are either non-linear or have several side missions so that the gamer does feel that her interaction influences what happens on screen, even though the designer has, of course, already determined the course of the story path. But story-structured games are not only about choices. Choice in games comes with built-in challenges that have to be overcome, before the story continues. This is what makes storytelling in games fundamentally different from storytelling in books and films. This is also why existing narrative theory from film and literature does not suffice, or can even lead to misconceptions. For story-structured games we need a new narrative theory that incorporates the gameplay skills needed, as these also shape the audiovisual and kinaesthetic world of the game. And as these are also hardware-dependent, this aspect of games has to be taken into account as well, including the changes that have occurred over time. But gamers are not only driven by choice; gaming is most of all about enjoyment, an enjoyment closely linked to the challenges set up by the game. Therefore, I proposed that a new narrative theory for story-structured

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games should also address this aspect of enjoyment, which goes hand in hand with gameplay skills, genre affordances and, consequently, gamer preferences.