Andrew Carhart

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The Art of Interactive Narratives in Video Games:
Reinventing Storytelling Through the Eyes of the Player

As interactive computer simulations, video games embody many of the newest developments in digital media and interactive art. Like any piece of art, they can function as tools for cultural critique and human expression, yet video games have revolutionary techniques of audience interaction, narrative structure, point of view, and plot and character development that arise from the unique qualities of a computerized medium. Though video games present an impressive potential for new artistic styles and commentary, there is much yet to learn about the intricacies of interaction and reaction that the players, critics, and developers of these interactive pieces of art exhibit. Even with the newest technological advancement though, video games still rely heavily on the traditional methods and techniques of storytelling through narratives. By a close examination of the challenges and strengths of video games, what becomes clear are the potential effects of the artistry inherent in interactive media and the techniques that ensure its successful application.

Though the merits of video games are hotly disputed in the twenty-first century, there are many ways that these works of art may go on to educate or enlighten their audience. In some cases, as games like *Simcity* and *Maniac Mansion* bring out, the traditional narrative experience is often substantially altered by the design of the interactive story to bring out new forms of

storytelling. Interactive narratives can be used to bring light to a players decision making process, as a player's choice writes the story of the game. In short though, the application of interactivity in art encourages players to become participants in the experience of storytelling and actively involved with the text. Through a conscious effort on the part of video game developers, these artistic creations may go on to educate or enlighten a vast audience of gamers, many of whom experience art only through the video game medium. With a clearer purpose and a refined outlook, the art of interactive storytelling may further transform the ways that people investigate and absorb human experience through stories.

Adapting Interactivity for Artistic Effect

Critical analysis of video games is a study that is as undeveloped as the medium itself, and the full impact of the new features of interactivity is often only apparent in the contrast between traditional art and interactive art. In "Deikto: A Language for Interactive Storytelling," game designer Chris Crawford, a veteran of the Atari Company, cautions the potential critics of interactive media by citing the great impact that interactivity will have on artistry. He writes that

> It simply won't do to think of interactivity as 'Old Art Form X with interactivity added.'… Interactivity is not a feature to be tacked onto an existing medium. It is the very essence of a new medium of expression… it is the first truly new artistic medium we have seen in a long time – and it cannot be extrapolated from any existing art form. (169)

In Crawford's view, the new development of interactive media merits it a place as a new and strikingly different form of artistry, one which he believes won't even compete on the same level or be recognizable as any existing art forms, which will need a new method of study. Conventional artwork, ranging from painting or writing to drama or sculpture, cannot simply

have interactivity tacked on and function in the same manner as it always has. Thus, Crawford's bold statement lays the foundation for the discussion of the emergence of interactive media and digital art like video games – the vast difference between interactive and non-interactive art indicates that a new view on both the effects and design of interactivity is necessary for developers, critics, and players of video games.

Though there are many categories of digital art, video games emerge as a central focus of Crawford's critique of interactive art for one primary reason; computers only function with an interactive user and video games are at their most basic level computer simulations. In Crawford's description of the relationship between computer simulations and interactivity he states that

> Interactivity is the essence of the computer; everything else is secondary. I give interactivity this special place because interactivity is the one element that is unique to the computer. All of the other nice features of the computer – its graphics, its sound, its animation – are all offered by other media. Only the computer can provide interactivity. (169)

Unlike traditional media, such as books, movies, paintings, etc., interactive media formats like video games begin with the experience of interaction between a player and a virtual world. As Crawford notes, video games use many of the tools of traditional media like images, sounds, or animation, but the focus is placed on the player's subjective experience with the game.

One example that Crawford provides to describe the vast difference between the techniques in which traditional media and interactive media affect their audiences is that of Michelangelo's pieta. He explains that a pieta (marble statue of the Virgin Mary holding the body of Jesus) uses imagery of a mother's grief to demonstrate pathos from the loss of a child.

Though the use of visual imagery has is own complicated techniques and effects on an audience, Crawford asks the reader to imagine how this same image might be presented interactively. He describes his answer for this problem thusly:

> That would require us to create algorithms for the process attending the loss of the child: the circumstances that created it, with the possible parental culpability or inattention; the nature of death and the intrinsic horror of all human loss; the means by which the news of the death is communicated to the parent; and the means by which the parent can express grief. All these factors must be determined at a level of abstraction previously unaddressed in art. (169)

Crawford demonstrates that all these factors that contribute to the emotional response that a player feels in a video game are the reason why interactivity is such a profound step in art. The experience of an interactive narrative requires both the creator and the player to look at the game situation in a different manner than the visual imagery of conventional art. The difficulty of determining these factors may make such an effort of abstraction very challenging, but as Crawford notes, this is one of the greatest artistic potentials of interactive narratives.

The approach that a video game designer must take to impact a player is clearly much different from the way that tradition media functions. Consequently, one of the prime examples of the divergence between conventional art and interactive art is seen in original or unusual narrative structures, which are a product of the uniquely interactive approach of video games. In Greg Costikyan's comparison in "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String" between conventional stories and game narratives, he writes about the ongoing battle in the gaming world over "those who view story as perhaps more important but tangential to understanding the nature of games, and those who view it as essential" (5). Costikyan characterizes traditional literary

stories as a linear progression through a controlled experience that must occur in a prescribed order. A game, on the other hand, he asserts, "is nonlinear. Games must provide at least the illusion of free will… not absolute freedom, but freedom within the structure of the system" (6). In his analysis it is clear that the illusion of free will is a necessary part of maintaining the relationship between the player and the game.

However, what Costikyan describes is one factor that separates interactive art from traditional art – the illusion of free will – which draws the player into the narrative as an active agent. Unlike a conventional narrative where the author determines the sequence, appearance, and every other part of the events of the story, Costikyan explains that a video game complicates this aspect of storytelling as it "constrains what [players] can do, but they must feel they have options; if not, they are not actively engaged… If they are constrained to a linear path of events… they'll feel… that nothing they do has any impact, that they are not playing in any meaningful sense" (6). In a conventional text like a movie or a novel, the author's path through a linear progression is what creates the impact of the story. Yet, as Costikyan expresses, in his viewpoint a player forced to play through a linear path of events will take nothing meaningful away from the game. The video game player's experience that Costikyan describes works in a way that is completely opposed to the traditional narrative structure; he cites interactivity as the most meaningful aspect of the video game experience.

Narrative Constructions and Applications in Interactive Art

Yet interactivity is still only one part of the experience that video games offer to their players. The content and form of video game narratives also makes up a large portion of their artistic efficacy and affects their critical reception. Video games are often seen as simple escapist

or fantastic pleasures and, as Chris Tynes states in "Prismatic Play: Games as Windows on the Real World," "Elves and orcs, spaceships and robots: any survey of well known works of interactive storytelling reveal that most are set in worlds very different from the one we live in" (221). Tynes concludes that, because video game narratives often exist in fantasy worlds populated by elves or robots, "this inevitably consigns such works to a metagenre: *escapism*… But while escapism has its joys," Tynes adds, "it also carries with it a connotation of irrelevancy" (221). The preoccupation with fantastic landscapes and fictional characters can seem childish and this may hamper any critical review. As Tynes points out, the fantasy elements of video games may be seen positively for entertainment value, but the same fantasy elements often undermine any apparent artistry.

However, Tynes presents a solution to the dilemma of irrelevancy; he argues for changes in game development that will transform escapist works into *engagist* works. As Tynes defines them, "an engagist work is one that uses the modern world or the recent historical past as its setting" which then "provides tools and opportunities for participants to explore and experiment in that setting in ways that real life prohibits or discourages." Tynes compares engagist works against escapist ones by explaining that "escapism is a *state* and engagism is a *tool*" (221). Tynes suggests that escapism arises from unintentional factors of the development process, while engagism requires a developer to actively choose game scenarios, settings, goals, and limitations. In other words, a poor game will simply create a world for a player to exist in, while a more artistically ambitious engagist game would be actively designed to use the virtual world to consciously affect a player's life outside of the video game world. While Tynes is perhaps overly dismissive of the fantasy genre, his point is still well taken. Escapism provides no lesson,

progress, or effects on a player while engagism is capable of education, conveying the human experience, and even, as Tynes says, enlightenment.

The contrast between escapism and engagism is not a new debate; since the time of Plato, who banned literature from his ideal republic, people have questioned the validity of every kind of entertaining art. But Tynes' conclusion takes this well-established debate into account. As he says:

> We live in the real world, and our lives are full of real problems and real joys. When works of interactive storytelling can teach us how to solve those problems and discover those joys, while entertaining us just as novels, movies, and music do, these works become worthy of real cultural critique and join the great conversation of human thought. (227)

The artistic value of interactive media is not to be found in its ability to provide an escapist fantasy. As Tynes understands, the potential of this interactive format is in its effects on the player. Admittedly, the potential of video games is limited by the combination of the developer's lack of vision, the player's expected experience, and the lack of critical examination. Without a properly directed and engagist authorial intent, a game will be marginalized as an escapist fantasy which leads to negative criticism of the artistic merits of video games. As game developers perceive a lower artistic value inherent in games, this then drives the cyclical production of more and more banal games that are designed to meet lowered expectations. However, as Tynes points out, there is a real potential for video games to blend entertainment and enlightenment and reflect on the human experience. An active application of engagism can increase the output of games that achieve a higher purpose than just simple entertainment.

The Reshaping Effects of Video Game Narratives on Artistic Conventions

While the possibility of interactive art seems fundamentally revolutionary, there are other ways that video games rewrite the conventional rules of narrative and storytelling. One other technique that seems to remain constant in almost all video games is the nearly universal use of the second person point of view. Video games make use of a variety of perspectives that function like camera angles. The perspective may allow the player to view the game through the character's eyes, through an intermediate over-the-shoulder view, or through a fixed camera angle. But the narrative of most video games, unlike the camera angles, functions by placing the player in the position of the character that is part of the story. In his article on interactive fiction, Jeremy Douglass explains the impact of the game narrative on the player, as he says, "the simulation is addressed to the player from the simulator ('You are in a maze of twisty little passages') creating complementary thoughts in the mind of the player ('I'm in a maze!')" (135). The effect of this complementary thought is total immersion in the game world. By using the second person viewpoint, video games actually bring the player closer into the game world than any other point of view might achieve. While the unique point of view of video games provides another example of the difference between conventional narrative structure and the structure of video game narratives, there is another more demanding reason why second person point of view is important to the artistic nature of video games. Douglass also points out that "a vanishingly small number of novels are written using second person as the dominant mode" and only two other prominent forms of entertainment, *Choose Your Own Adventure Books*, and role-playing games use the second person (134).

While the second person point of view rarely appears in literature, it is not necessarily due to any intrinsic weakness of this narrative device. In fact, the different and new narrative

approaches of the video game narrative provide a haven for innovative artistic ideas. In Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin's introduction to the anthology *Second Person*, they express this importance when they state that "there is the question of how the structures of story differ from one medium to another; telling a story in a novel is not the same as enacting it in a game," (xiv). While this view is similar to Crawford's views on interactivity Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin expand this argument by saying that "new forms of media not only require new approaches to story, but may even force us to reexamine our assumptions about how stories are told in more traditional forms" (xiv). This assertion is directly related to the use of second person narratives in video games. As, Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin point out, new approaches are required to tell stories in the video game format and such a new approach as second person narration may help players to reevaluate conventional stories as well. Both innovation in interactive narratives and the reexamination of conventional narratives are examples of the repercussions of the second person point of view.

The Examples of New Narratives in *Simcity* and *Maniac Mansion*

While the second person narrative structure is one shared by most games, video games are as varied as any other art form in their widely divergent structures and many games break the boundaries of the traditional narrative structure. Maxis' *Simcity* provides a wonderful example of a genre of games that collectively explore the boundaries of narratives in video games. *Simcity*, described by its publishers as a system simulation game, is centered on the activity of urban planning. Released on multiple platforms after its development in 1985, *Simcity* spawned a chain of sequels, spin-offs, and knockoffs in the system simulation genre. The game involves a player, cast as the mayor of a city, who zones properties, builds power plants, stadiums and a variety of

other buildings, and controls taxes, budgets, and spending in a virtual cityscape. The factors of the game include real life occurrences such as crime, pollution, traffic, and natural disasters, which contrasts greatly with the often violent or fantastic fare that other video games present. *Simcity* has two characteristics that make it noteworthy as a departure from conventional narratives.

While a conventional narrative may have a variety of devices like protagonists, antagonists, plots, subplots, conflicts, climaxes, resolutions, beginnings, endings, or a host of other signposts to convey an authorial intent, *Simcity* has none of these hallmarks of a conventional narrative structure. Though there are scenarios drawn from historical events that a player can chose to play through, the main game consists only of a player's experience with city building. In Wright's creation, players are free to imagine their own story to accompany the world that they create. *Simcity* allows a player to have complete control of the narrative by simply providing only the bare bones of a narrative structure. Thus players are given a truly subjective experience where the story comes not from an authorial intent but from the player's experience with the game.

The second way in which *Simcity* creates a unique experience for a player is also linked to the atypical aspects of the game narrative. Though it may seem on the surface that a lack of narrative structure also precludes the inclusion of any narrative, *Simcity* creates an unconventional narrative by foregoing conventional guidelines. In the course of a game of *Simcity*, a player is only given a map with a set of tools that enables them to build a city. Using these tools, a player can create a city with roads, rails, residential zones, power plants, airports, and many other city essentials. Yet, the most important part of this experience is that there are no goals, objectives, or outside influences on the player's experience and, consequently, there is

also no predetermined ending to the game. The game ends only when the player is satisfied or bored with his or her city. Thus, self-determination is also a built in part of the system simulation genre. In the end, the player creates the entire narrative experience by interacting with the game environment.

Many genres of video games tell stories in a much more conventional manner than the system simulation, but even literary conventions can be turned on their head through the interactive nature of video games. *Maniac Mansion*, published by Lucasfilm games in 1987 and subsequently released on various platforms, uses many conventions of literary origin and reworks the art of storytelling to fit the interactive nature of the medium. The story is one that is typical to many science fiction B-movies: Dave, a high school teenager, works to free his high school sweetheart from the diabolical experiments of a mad scientist with the help of two of his friends. This particular mad scientist is also harboring an intergalactic criminal known as the purple meteor and a host of other dark secrets in his old mansion. Though the conventions of the B-movie are strong in this game, the narrative also exhibits one of the primary advantages of the video game format. At the start of the game the player is given a choice of two characters to accompany Dave and this decision affects the resulting gameplay and narrative—each character has unique abilities that allow certain narratives to occur. For instance, Michael is a photographer for the local school paper and, if the player chooses him, then the player has the option to develop pictures of the meteor. This leads to one ending of the game, but there are several possible endings to the story: the meteor police may take away the meteor, Dave may free his girlfriend, and there is even the possibility of a nuclear meltdown destroying the entire mansion. In essence, there is no one way that the story ends and there are many different branching

narratives that a player can play through. This offers video game developers a very unique way to elaborate on the conventional literary narrative.

Though the experience of *Maniac Mansion* is similar to a conventional narrative, the inclusion of multiple endings and a variety of characters and resulting situations provide a player with an entirely new experience. In comparison with preceding literature, the branching narrative is not entirely unique to video games. Costikyan provides several examples of other formats where this technique has been employed by past writers. In one example, "Julio Cortazar's 1966 novel *La Reyuela* (published in English as *Hopscotch),*" Costikyan writes that "Cortazar suggests an alternate reading," other than the published linear format, "and indeed, if you read it in that fashion, you gain a rather different insight into… the story than if you read it in the conventional order" (7). But, as with the story of *Maniac Mansion*, Costikyan explains that "to fully understand the novel, you need to read it both ways" (7). *Maniac Mansion* and other games that employ branching narratives have an advantage over tradition fiction though because, as Costikyan explains, in literature that uses branching narratives, "from a gameplay perspective, its not great. There are no trade-offs to be made, no reason to choose one link over another, no objective to pursue. The elements that make for interesting games are missing, other than some limited freedom of action" (7). What games like *Maniac Mansion* bring to the table is that ability to make a player's choices meaningful. A video game player is forced to make choices with trade-offs or objectives in mind. The interactivity of the game scenario and the player's choices then reflects on the human experience of decision making and free will.

Clearly, there is a vast catalogue of video games and genres and many have comparable artistic strengths to *Simcity* and *Maniac Mansion*, yet only a small subset of games receive critical attention for their artistic merits. At times, games present an entirely new medium, as

Simcity indicates with its boundless experience and open-ended narrative. In other respects, games like *Maniac Mansion* also demonstrate the ways that video games can present players with a reinterpretation and new experience based on the conventions of traditional mediums like film or literature. Whether it is the simple, straightforward conventions like the second person narrative, which may have never been firmly established in literature, or more universal questions of humanity and artistic expression that art always seems to reveal, video games provide audiences with a new way to experience and interact with the world. As the medium receives more critical review, the mindset that games are escapist fantasies may fall away and be replaced by a public acceptance of games designed with engagism in mind. One thing is clear though—video games are a revolutionary new media with much to offer the adventurous artist or the critical player. Enlightenment may be a high goal for such an undeveloped medium, but the opportunity for a player to re-imagine the human experience is a part of the potential magnitude of video games as much as it is a part of any form of art.

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