Les Jeux sont Faits! Immersiveness and Manageability of Game Narratives

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1. Game narratives, interactivity and immersiveness

Narratives are the first means for categorizing experience, whether the experience is real, represented or simulated. As in many textual forms, even in computer games the narrative level is the textual level players are most aware of. *Experiencing* a computer game is not only a matter of playing and interacting but means being part of a narrative universe. Computer game theory cannot fail to acknowledge the importance of game narratives. In the following pages I will argue that the specificity of computer games is not being merely a simulation. Rather, the issue computer game theories – especially semiotic theories – have to focus on is the relationship between video game narratives and the game's unique characteristics such as interactivity, peculiar interfaces, simulated virtual environments.

Through the analysis of variable degrees of interactivity I will point out that the main point of immersiveness is to help the player experience the virtual world the game creates. Again, this will result in a strong emphasis on the narrative components of the computer game that will therefore be considered as crucial elements of the gaming experience of many new and old computer games.The study of these issues and of computer games as complex semiotic artifacts will lead to a better understanding of the role of semiotics in the investigation of different aspects of the gaming experience.

2. Macro-/Micronarratives and variable interactivity

The way the relationship between narratives and interactivity is articulated within the game (world) is the essential element of the video game. This relationship has the utmost relevance for immersive strategies and it is strictly related to the issue of authorship. When contents are narrated, players do not participate in the enunciative process as authors/enunciators. On the other hand, computer games' interactivity ensures players a variable level of control on narrative developments. While in the first case the player is not the author, whose role is taken by external instances, in the second case the player becomes co-enunciator of the game. As different degrees of interactivity are possible within video games, in order to analyse this *variable interactivity* (Galofaro 2003), more refined theoretical tools are necessary.

By distinguishing *macro-* and *micronarratives* (Jenkins 2004) it is possible to separate different layers of interactivity within a game. While macronarratives are larger narrative structures, defining main characters, plots and broader narrative developments, micronarratives are *interstitial narratives*, developments occurring simultaneously to the main plot and affecting it only in a minor way. Local quests, different ways to achieve a goal and game sequences bearing small narrative developments can be considered micronarratives – like different paths to get to the same macronarrative point. This distinction is not a repetition of the hypertextual argument that reduces interaction to a multiple choice. Neither it is a revision of the distinction between base, instrumental and annex narrative programs (Greimas & Courtés 1979). Micronarratives can either influence or have no impact at all on the main (macro-)narrative developments. The way interaction between the character impersonated by the player and the virtual environment is limited in graphic adventures helps us discern the two types of narratives. Graphic adventures can easily be described as hypertexts narrating an interactive story in which the player can interact in limited ways with the virtual environment. Each play and player will endlessly reproduce an identical narration. Within the economy of graphic adventures' overall narratives, as for example in *The Secrets of Monkey Island*, even if major changes can occur – e.g. different finales and diverse narrative developments – the story threads are not infinite. The plot follows different predetermined possible developments and, no matter how complex the hypertextual structure of the game can be, the player's contribution to the narratives is reduced to a simple "choice of paths" within a predetermined narrative scheme.

This type of computer game can hardly be described as a simulation. The player's control over the ongoing narrative is very limited and interactivity is reduced. The character impersonated by the player can interact with the virtual environment in limited ways: he is able, for instance, to 'use' a lever within the virtual environment or to 'open' a door with a key he had previously found; it is unlikely, however, that he will be able to pull any lever or open any door of the virtual game world. As the player asks his character to perform actions that will not help him progress through the adventure, the avatar will eventually answer that he doesn't see how this can

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be useful. Indeed *useful* it has to be to the discovery of the underlying and previously determined hypertextual plot that the player is supposed to follow. While discovering macronarratives is what these games have been designed for, micronarratives are *residual narratives* that the player can control only in a partial way. The design of the game's virtual space sets limits to the interaction between the narrative environment and the player, thus constraining his ability to create and influence game narratives. However, while the narrative component is the main feature of specific types of games like graphic adventures, it has to be noticed that "the experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story. Many other factors which have little or nothing to do with storytelling *per se* contribute to the development of a great game" (Jenkins 2004). In fact, whereas "many games have narrative aspirations [...] and want to tap the emotional residue of previous narrative experiences, [...][1] not all games tell stories." (*ibidem*). First person shooters such as *Unreal Tournament*[2], for instance, almost completely lack macronarrative developments. There is no plot other than the general goal of winning a tournament by repeatedly striking multiple opponents down within the different arenas the game proposes. On the other hand, this game is a true source of micronarratives. Every time the player engages an opponent he creates a narrative: the duel is a narrative development the player is in control of, even though this micronarrative segment is not related to the game's general narrative structure. The kind of virtual environments built by *Unreal Tournament* ensures a degree of interactivity that is radically different from the type of interactivity found in *Monkey Island*. The player is given extensive control over the avatar and can interact with the environment and with other players thus creating and managing local narratives. The partial manageability of these narratives participates in a more complex immersive strategy that can be considered the core feature of the game. In this case, the aspects that a study of games as simulations highlights are the most relevant features of the *Unreal Tournament*: rich and structured narratives are sacrificed in order to maximize immersive effects achieved through devices other than narratives – e.g. spatial design, enunciational strategies, interface devices.

The purpose of introducing the distinction between macro and micronarratives is to develop more accurate theoretical tools, not simply in order to study narratives alone, but to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between game narratives and immersiveness.

As games can be designed with very different characteristics according to fairly diverse goals, different features have to be emphasized according to what the game *means* to the player. Games with bold narrative developments and major macronarrative constructions are usually built on narrative devices and on the identification of the player within the story. On the other hand, games built without a strong macronarrative environment and on the proliferation of micronarratives will more likely use different immersive devices to place the player within the game world.

It is necessary, however, to point out that in contemporary computer games these two different families of strategies are almost always overlapping. The distinction between macro- and micronarratives must be thought as an operational distinction for the purpose of making textual analyses and not as an ontological difference. The following example will stress how different segments and parts of the same game can be designed to focus either on narrative developments or on immersive experience.

3. Narratives and immersiveness

As a part of the Star Wars universe *Jedi Knight – Jedi Academy* exploits several different narrative devices traditionally used in serial narratives: *cliffhangers*, *twists*, *hooks*, various tensive and rhetorical devices, as *recognition* (Eco 1976), and various forms of suspended narration. *Jedi Knight* is a *transmedia narrative* (Jenkins 2006) that stretches the narrative universe of Star Wars through multiple contexts and platforms while ensuring its *continuity* (Barbieri 1992). Many characters of *Jedi Knight* are the same characters appearing in the main *Star Wars* saga the game is inspired by. Additionally, both old and new characters are defined by using common narrative techniques and devices: archetypes, strong figurative and ideological contrasts, very clear roles, etc.[3]

The transmedia narratives of *Jedi Knight* exploit previous narratives and game experiences of the player: the story narrated by the game is part of the Star Wars narrative universe and it is in continuity with the other computer games of the *Jedi Knight* series. As for *Monkey Island*, story threads are not infinite: the player is able to control local micronarratives – e.g. duels, interaction with the environment and other characters – but he is not allowed to manage the main macronarrative threads, crucial linkage to the Star Wars universe.

On the other hand, while the story and the narratives play such an essential role for the game experience, *Jedi Knight* makes wide use of various other immersive strategies I mentioned previously. As in *Unreal Tournament*, different enunciative strategies – e.g. the point of view and the perspective, mainly – adopted during the most interactive segments of the game emphasize the importance of immersive effects placing the player within the virtual world, thus confirming that immersiveness is a significant part of the *Jedi Knight* experience.

The composite nature of this game, and of many others, allows us to distinguish different sequences according to different filmic frames and to variable interactivity, thus emphasizing a *direction proxy* (Galofaro 2003). The player is simultaneously *observer* in the game world and *enunciator* of the game itself (Greimas & Courtés 1979). However, while the player is constantly an observer of

the game world, he is not always the main enunciative instance: the distinction between macro and micronarratives helps us discern different layers of interactivity within the game. In fact, the relationship between macro/micronarratives and variable interactivity can be associated to the distinction between different types of *observers. During the less interactive segments – e.g. videoclips – the player is a mere onlooker* (*ibidem*), an impersonal instance that is not installed on a particular character. On the other hand, more interactive and less *narrated* parts "engage" (see "débrayage", *ibidem*) the player within a character, usually his avatar. This engagement of the player in the text is particularly effective in terms of immersiveness: the player becomes an *actor-participant* (*ibidem*) and, therefore, is given not only an impersonal point of view within the virtual world, but a specific cognitive, evaluative and emotional point of view to embody in.

From a narratological perspective, the most important parts of the game are the macronarrative segments. These parts are generally less interactive than the micronarrative segments where the player is allowed to structure narratives locally. On the contrary, from the point of view of ludology, focused on games as simulations, the most peculiar parts of the game are the interactive segments[4] . But who is establishing the rules allowing the player to interact with the fictional simulated world and giving him the ability to manage narratives? Game rules regulating the simulation have to be (meta-)enunciated by an authorial instance. Indeed, it makes sense to think of "game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects" (Jenkins 2004). Game designers create narrative environments allowing the player to *inhabit* the partially manageable narratives.

Secondly, whereas some segments of the game – or even entire games – focus on interactivity and simulated environments – eventually enhancing the player's ability to create and manage stories – broader and non-manageable narratives are always present – either *virtual*, *actual* or *salient* – and constantly modulate game experience. We could, for instance, imagine a hypothetical *Unreal Tournament* player who is killing all the opponents in the arena. Each killing performed by the player is a micronarrative development, an interaction with the virtual environment and other virtual players that creates a small narrative. This micronarrative managed by the player is part of the overall narrative trajectory of the game – "kill all the opponents" – but is too underdeveloped and weak to become a macronarrative segment. The essential aspect of *Unreal Tournament*'s game experience is indeed simulation, the fact that the game immerses the player within the virtual environment; the player inhabits the game world and enunciates its minor narratives.[5] Nevertheless, if we imagine that only one opponent is left in the arena for the player to kill, we realize how this final duel has a different *meaning* for the player. While this interaction does not differ from the previous killings and game rules are unchanged, a significant narrative investment modulates the simulation and eventually enriches the player's experience. The player can manage the micronarrative development of this duel. He can win or lose; kill the opponent in this or that particular way. However, even if he has control over the trajectory of this micronarrative segment, he will not be able to manage the general meaning of the duel, which will indeed remain a 'duel' and retain narrative connotations and characteristics of this specific narrative structure.[6]

4. Immersiveness in narrative game worlds

The previous example shows that even in games whose core features are related to powerful immersive devices, real-like simulated environments and to the activity of players as storytellers, non-manageable narratives are always present and constantly *meaningful* to the player. And indeed meaning is what semiotics studies.

The relationship between the virtual environments the player is immersed in and the game narratives is what defines game experience. In fact, even in the most interactive and simulation-like games, "choices about the design and organization of game spaces have narratological consequences" (Jenkins 2004):

> "Spatial design can [...] enhance our sense of immersion within a familiar world [...], the story itself may be structured around the character's movement through space and the features of the environment may retard or accelerate that plot trajectory [...]; the game space can become a memory palace whose contents must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot [...]; game spaces can be designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players." (Jenkins 2004)

This relationship between immersiveness and narrative components can be accurately represented by the producer's description of *Star Wars - The Force Unleashed*, an upcoming (at the time I am writing) computer game of the Star Wars series from LucasArts. The first feature of the game that the producer emphasizes is the narrative component. The game is "the next chapter of the Star Wars saga" that gives the player the control of "the character you would like to be"[7]. The Star Wars game exists in dialogue with the films, conveying new narrative experiences through its creative manipulation of environmental details. As for *Jedi Knight*, the transmedia construction of the game puts a significant emphasis on its narratives. However, while stressing the importance of the "endless possibilities of a narrative galaxy", the producers highlight *The Force Unleashed*'s unique and innovative features as follows:

> "*The Force Unleashed* takes full advantage of newly developed technologies that will be seen and experienced for the first time: Digital Molecular Matter (DMM) and Euphoria[8]. DMM creates *truly interactive environments* that *behave as they do*

in real life. Materials in games usually break in *predetermined* ways. DMM calculates the breakpoint in *real-time*. It *simulates* what would happen to a material when broken, shattered, cut into two, snapped, splintered, pushed, squeezed, etc... *Carbonite (yes, the very alloy that encased Han Solo) dents*. Everything reacts exactly like it should." (*our emphasis*)

In *The Force Unleashed*, as in many other games, several immersive devices will be combined: some will be specifically related to the narratives, others to the simulation of virtual environments. This description emphasizes the "truly interactive environments", the "real-time" simulation and the real, non-'predetermined' behaviors of materials and characters. But above all the description points out that the main purpose of creating such an accurately simulated environment is to immerse the player not in *a* real-like game world, but in *the* Star Wars game world. Simulated elements – e.g. broken materials as wood, steel, etc. – are not anonymous environment details but significant parts of the Star Wars universe – "*Carbonite (yes, the very alloy that encased Han Solo)"* – whose narrative features are enhanced by a real-like interaction with the player. Immersive strategies merge with the narrative features of the game and, up to a certain point, can be considered instrumental for the player to inhabit a specific *narrative* and *narrated* game world.

Therefore, rather than as a '*clash*' (Juul 1998), the relationship between narratives and game specificities has to be studied as a complex balance that allows/prevents the development of partially manageable game narratives. The relationship between these narratives and the games' interactive nature has a crucial influence on the development of different immersive strategies for different type of games.

By studying how the user gives *sense* to game experience, the semiotic approach to video games can emphasize their multi-layered and heterogeneous nature, accounting for its specificity both as an interactive practice and as a narrative form.

Notes

[1] It is indeed the case of *Monkey Island*'s several 'sequels'.

[2] For the present purpose I am here considering the regular and the multiplayer game modes only. I am not considering the Capture the Flag or the Assault modes.

[3] Apparently, the entire saga was inspired by the works of J. Campbell and their revision by C. Vogel.

[4] The game's interactivity is the aspect of video games ludology wants to emphasize. Games are not narratives but simulations, "models of a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system" (Frasca 2003). The core components of the game as a model are the rules regulating the virtual environment (Johnsen 2003).

[5] Notice how multiplayer game is crucial to *Unreal Tournament*, as well as to many similar games. Typically, multiplayer modes remove macronarratives – if present – in order to enhance the story-constructing activity of players.

[6] Frames, scripts, competences (Eco 1979) and other non-manageable – or only partially manageable – (macro-)narrative constructions are always present and constantly influence and modulate (gaming) experiences.

[7] Quotes are from LucasArt's website: http://www.lucasarts.com/games/theforceunleashed.

[8] Repeated references to the two third-party developers are part of a broader branding and advertising strategy. It is interesting, however, to notice how fragmented video game authorship can be, even in the branding discourse. It almost seems that, while the authorial contribution of the two credited companies is the simulation technology, LucasArts owns and exclusively manages the narrative universe in which the simulation is meant to immerse the player.

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section three
Revisiting Enunciation: Embodied Players