

Computer Games and Narrative Progression

- [Mark Finn](#)
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¹ As one of the more visible manifestations of the boom in new media, computer games have attracted a great deal of attention, both from the popular press, and from academics. In the case of the former, much of this coverage has focussed on the perceived danger games pose to the young mind, whether that danger be physical (in terms of bodily atrophy due to inactivity) or social (in terms of anti-social and even violent behaviour, caused by exposure to specific types of content). The massacre at [Columbine High School](#) in the United States seems to have further fuelled these fears, with several stories focusing on the fact that the killers were both players of violent video games (Dickinson 1999; Hansen 1999). These concerns have also found their way into political circles, promoting a seemingly endless cycle of inquiries and reports (for example, see Durkin 1995; Durkin and Aisbett 1999).

² Academic discourse on the subject has, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, tended to adopt a similar line, tracing out a return to the dark days of media effects theory. This is especially true of those studies that focus on the psychological aspects of computer game usage. For example, Scott (1995) conducted a study specifically aimed at investigating "to what extent, if any, aggressive computer game playing would have on individuals of different personality composition, and in which particular aspects of aggressiveness this might be experienced" (Scott 1995, 122). Similarly, Ballard (1999) examined the relationship between gender and violent computer games arguing that the level of violence depicted in a game directly affects the interaction between players of different genders.

³ Almost without exception, these studies come from the experimental tradition of media research, often employing laboratory experiments in order to test their hypotheses. As the problems with this methodology have been covered extensively elsewhere (for example, see Hall 1982; Murdock and Golding 1977; Lowery and DeFleur 1983) I will not go into detail here, except to point out that most experimental research underestimates the importance of physical context in media use.

⁴ Other studies have attempted to approach the subject from a more qualitative perspective, often utilising theories derived from post-structuralism to examine the construction of identity in games. For example, Alloway and Gilbert (1998) explore relationship between computer games and notions of masculinity, arguing that simplistic notions of effects dramatically underestimate the sophistication of the readers. Similarly, Beavis (1998) argues that it is necessary to more fully explore the relationship between games players and games before engaging in debates about the social benefits or dangers of the medium. According to Beavis:

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⁶ However, while arguments like that of Beavis clearly take the debate in another direction, in many cases the writers find themselves mired in the same ideological paradigm as the effects theorists. While stressing the need for a more nuanced conceptualisation of the game-player relationship, Beavis also implies that games are potentially destructive, stating that "young people need to be helped to critique and resist the subject positions and ideologies of video games" (Beavis, 1998).

⁷ In response, the games industry itself has launched several attacks on the academic community, many of which, ironically, are framed in the kind of aggressive terminology the researchers are themselves concerned about. For example, Green argues,

⁸ But for a group of academics to draw sweeping conclusions about an industry they are so obviously clueless about, based on a ludicrous, half-assed experiment that sounds like something out of a Simpsons episode, adds absolutely nothing to the discussion. (136)


⁹ While it could be argued that Green's "from the hip" response itself adds little to the dialogue, it does serve to highlight one of the more surprising aspects of the computer games debate. As Green asserts, it is apparent that many of the scholars conducting research into computer games seem to know very little about the subject they are studying, a situation analogous to television researchers watching only cinematic films. Indeed, given the descriptions some researchers give of particular games, it is doubtful that they have actually played the game themselves, raising questions about the extent to which they are authorities in the area. This paper is, at least in part, aimed at rectifying this situation, by providing some broad commentary on the specific characteristics of the game medium. For the sake of convenience, I will be focussing mainly on games available on home consoles such as the [Sony Playstation](#), and will restrict my argument to single-player games.

¹⁰ Computer games are clearly a distinct form of media; while many are played through established technology like televisions and computers, there would seem to be something intrinsically different about their mode of address. This is primarily a function of their interactivity; unlike most forms of media, computer games respond to direct input from their audience. However, at the same time, games also display characteristics that are, at least superficially, similar to existing media forms. While games are often categorised according to the type of action required of the player (eg shooting, driving, puzzle-solving etc), they can also readily be categorised into the same genres used for other entertainment media such as films and video cassettes. Games can be based on sports, action, drama, comedy and even music, although admittedly the broad category of "simulation" game has no direct counterpart in film and video, except, perhaps philosophically, for documentary.

¹¹ Film and television genres are traditionally defined in terms of a set of key textual characteristics, with iconography, setting and narrative being perhaps the most obvious. Applying these notions to computer games it soon becomes clear why the generic classifications used for other media have been so easily adapted to the new medium. For example, the iconography of an action film like [Face Off](#) (explosions, guns, corpses etc) can all be found in an action game such as [Syphon Filter](#). Similarly, the settings of horror films like [I Know What You Did Last Summer](#) (old houses, dark alleys etc) are all faithfully reproduced in horror games like [Resident Evil](#). These correlations are true of most filmic genres and computer games, to such an extent that there is a growing trend in crossover production of "game of the film" (eg. Tomorrow Never Dies, Die Hard, Independence Day) and "film of the game" ([Pokémon](#), Mortal Kombat) texts.



¹² When we turn our attention to narrative, however, the situation becomes somewhat more complex. Like films and television programs, games usually have definite beginning and end points, but what happens between these points seems, at least superficially, to be dramatically different. Regardless of their genre, films and television programs are self-propelling entities; the actions of the characters drive the narrative forward toward some kind of resolution. In the case of a television series, this resolution might only be partial, but at the end of the program's duration there is still some kind of finality to the narrative process, albeit temporary. Games, on the other hand, are designed for extended and often repeated playing, and as such necessarily resist narrative closure, and therefore have to provide pleasure for the player in other ways.

¹³  In some cases, games adopt a strategy that is similar in many ways to episodic television; the game is divided into several "sub-games", with overall narrative resolution only being achieved through the successful completion of the sub-games. A good example of this is Dreamworks' [Medal of Honor](#), a first-person action game set in World War Two. In order to complete the game, players must successfully carry out a series of missions, which are themselves divided into several tasks. In keeping



with the action orientation of the genre, these tasks usually involve destroying some piece of military equipment, and players are rewarded

based upon their proficiency in carrying them out.

14 What is especially interesting about games like Medal of Honor is their ability to create an illusion of narrative freedom; players can effectively dictate the course the narrative takes depending on how they perform certain tasks. Resident Evil and its sequels take this concept one step further, creating a virtual gaming environment in which the player is seemingly free to go wherever they want. However, while the players are free to dictate the narrative flow at the level of what I have termed the sub-game, completion of the overall game (and therefore narrative closure) requires the player to follow a rigidly pre-established path through the game's levels. Players could in theory spend days wandering the desolate landscape of Resident Evil 2, but they just wouldn't get anywhere.

15 Other genres of game present different problems in terms of narrative progression, and indeed some would argue that certain games progress without possessing a narrative at all. Racing games are the most obvious example of this; driving around the same track for up to 80 laps does not constitute a narrative as it is traditionally conceptualised. However, racing games are increasingly adopting narrative conventions in order to deepen the gaming experience. [Formula One 99](#), for example, allows the player to take the place of any of the drivers from the 1999 Formula One season, accruing points depending on finishing position in the same way as the real championship. In this context, each race operates as a sub-game, and the successful completion of each race allows the game as a whole to be completed.



16 A slightly different take on the idea of a racing narrative is taken by [Gran Turismo](#), a game that quickly became the most successful title from Sony's Polyphony Digital. Over the traditional racing format, Polyphony superimposed a narrative based on the game's own fictional economy. Players begin the game with enough credits to purchase a low-performance vehicle, which can then be upgraded as players win races and earn enough credits to afford the necessary parts. In this way, Gran Turismo generates a narrative that is described by the player's quest to constantly purchase faster and better cars, a narrative which, given the game's 400-car

menu, can take months to reach its conclusion.

17 One aspect of computer game narratives that has surprisingly received little attention to this point is the introductory video: the short animated sequence used to set the scene for the game that follows. Typically, these sequences are created entirely from computer generated images, and in terms of genre, perform a similar function to film trailers. As well as introducing the main characters, introductory videos inform the player about the type of game they're about to play, whether it be a racing game like Gran Turismo or a sports simulation like Cricket 2000.

18 More importantly, introductory videos also work to discursively position the player within the narrative, providing them with information about the subject



positions they are permitted to assume. For fighting-based action games like [Tekken and its sequels](#), the introductory video provides information about all the characters in the game, telling the player that they can assume any one of the multiple identities the game offers. Other games, like Medal of Honor, are much more restrictive in terms of their subject possibilities, allowing the player to adopt only one role in the single-player version. In fact, the introductory video for Medal of Honor explicitly positions the player in a very narrowly-defined role, using a first person voice over to instruct the player that they will be acting as a particular American soldier, "Jimmy Patterson".



However, even games that offer very limited latitude in terms of subject positioning can still be open to radical interpretation. The very interactivity that differentiates games from other forms of audio-visual media means that players can actively "read against" the narrative provided for them, driving the game toward new (but still inherently limited) conclusions. For example, players of Medal of Honor can attempt to achieve the game's goals through stealth rather than violence, a tactic which, interestingly, always results in a lower score. Similarly, players of some racing games can usurp the game's internal logic, substituting the goal of a race win with one of vehicular destruction. The key here is that pleasure seems to be derived through a complex relationship between the player-driven narrative and the narrative imposed by the game engine.

This notion of the "resistant" reading of game narratives serves to demonstrate that the relationship between the player and game text is more complex than it at first appears; certainly it is more complex than simple media effects studies imply. What is needed now is a more rigorous investigation of both the textual characteristics of the game medium, and of how players interact with those characteristics. It is only after such an investigation has been carried out that a more constructive dialogue on the socio-cultural implications of game playing can be begun.

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