

A thousand lives: telling stories with computer games

Miguel Sicart

Center for Computer Games Research

IT University of Copenhagen

miguel@itu.dk

www.miguelsicart.net

Abstract

Computer games are becoming the default entertainment medium of the XXI century. Fueled by an expanding market which is close to the gross income of Hollywood blockbusters, and ubiquitous in our technological world, via the mobile phone, the game console, or the PC, computer games are also reshaping the ways we understand the old art of narration.

In this paper I will present an approach to possible techniques for telling stories with computer games. While this is a field that has a long and rather controversial story in the field of computer game studies, it is not my intention to write a manifest for the narrativity of games. The goal of this paper is to introduce a number of issues that have to be taken into consideration in the process of developing a narrative game. This paper will present some of the central discussions on the narrativity of games and how it relates with their ontology, but focused on introducing and suggesting practical approaches for actual game development.

Keywords

Computer game design, narrative, player experience

Introduction

In one of the most popular Playstation 2 commercials, a number of people were presented to the audience telling their stories of galactic conquest, hero fights, and other dreams of power and epic struggles¹. The commercials were a part of a campaign called “Double Life”, and they drew upon the experiences of power with no consequences that the Playstation, the first home console system targeted to adults, would provide. The Playstation promised worlds of fun beyond the childish tyranny of other game systems, a universe where adults could find their entertainment together with other adults.

These commercials show the transition of computer games from a mere toy targeted at children to the dominant position in the entertainment landscape they hold nowadays. Computer games are a major economic and aesthetic force in our cultural world, knowing no cultural barriers. But to achieve this status, computer games have suffered an evolution, from the initial *Space War!* (Russell & Graetz: 1961) to today’s *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard: 2004), an evolution that in many senses can be understood as a coming together of the relevance of previous dominant media, such as television and cinema, and the particular characteristics, with the particular technological requirements of computers. It is in the confluence of the aesthetics of media and the technology of computing that we find the most interesting aspects of computer games as cultural objects.

In this paper I will focus on the narrative aspects of computer games, their relation with the technological layer of computers, and how to develop games that tell stories. Narrative games have been the center of a very relevant discussion for the field of computer games; a discussion focused on the tensions between ludology, or the study of games as games, and narratology, or the study of games with the tools provided by the narrative theories used in literature of film studies². It is not my intention to engage in that discussion, which is most like terminated (Frasca: 2003), but to use some of its findings to explain what are the main characteristics of

¹ One of the ads can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Bqq38WZctA&eurl=http%3A%2F%2Fanalogik%2Ecom%2Farticle%5Fps2%5Fd1%2Easp> (accessed 26/06/07).

² See Eskelinen: 2001 for a complete (ludological) perspective on the debate.

narrative games that have to be taken into consideration when designing and developing a concept that requires, to some extent, the presence of narrative elements.

This paper is, then, a practical approach to the development of narrative games. I will start by laying out the basic principles of game design as related to the technological layer of computer games, and how those condition what we can and cannot do with games from a narrative standpoint. That first chapter will be of interest for game theorists as well as game designers. Once the limits of games as storytelling devices are settled, I will focus on the three main aspects of narrative in games from a development perspective: the gameworld, the players actions, and the psychology of characters, both player characters and non-player characters. All arguments will be illustrated with cases from commercially available, popular computer games. I will close the paper with a short summery of elements that can be taken into consideration when designing narrative games.

This is not a game: the ontology of computer games

If you want to tell a story, don't make a computer game. If you want to tell the equivalent of the great american novel, or the modernist revolt against time and characters, or even if you are interested in the more postmodern narratives of DeLillo, Pynchon or Lewis Carroll, don't make computer games: they will not fit your needs. Games are not tools for telling stories; they are not the promised land of interactive fiction (even though they share many traits with interactive fiction), nor they are the ultimate evolution of hypertext narratives. Do (some) games tell stories? Yes. Are they good at it? Some, but for other reasons than those that drive writers or filmmakers to their media of choice.

Two questions are now central: why aren't computer games fit for narratives in the classic sense, and why should we then care about narrative games? To answer the first, I suggest a trip to the battlefield of game studies and how the academic debate on the narrativeness of games could be a pitfall for this paper's goals.

Game studies is the academic field that studies computer games from a multidisciplinary perspective (humanistic, social sciences, hci & usability, and computer science), explaining computer games as relevant cultural artifacts that play a significant role in our media landscape. In its contemporary origins, game studies is very much a field created by academics with a background in literature and film studies that, fueled by an interest in games as a new cultural platform, used the methods and concepts from their disciplines of origin to understand computer games. There are obvious parallels between games and other media, specially cinema, and there are a number of narrative games that had an enormous relevance in the development of the game industry³. All these reasons made narrative scholars focus on computer games, and incidentally created an important debate in the field that was for a long time central in any discussion on the study of computer games.

The two poles of this tension were the narratologists, who stated that games could be thoroughly understood by the application of modified narratology concepts and frameworks; and ludologists, who stated that computer games had specific ontological traits that had to be taken into consideration primarily when trying to understand computer games. The debate is somewhat slower now, since there are a number of articles and books that provide satisfactory solutions⁴. The arguments against computer games as primarily narrative tools I will now present draw very much on these works, but my intention is not to engage in the ludology vs. narratology debate. The goal of this paper is to present clear arguments as for why computer games are not fit for conventional accounts of the concept of narrative, and how should games then be used to tell stories. It can be said that this paper is in the field of ludology. So be it.

There are several interesting definitions of computer games that show why it is quite complicated to create classic narratives⁵. For this paper, I will focus on the definition of games provided by Jesper Juul (2005). According to Juul, "a game is a

³ Like *Myst* (Cyan: 1993) or the Lucasarts graphic adventures (*The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games: 1990); *Maniac Mansion* (Lucasfilm Games: 1987), or *Loom* (Lucasfilm Games: 1990).

⁴ REFERENCES

⁵ For classic narratives, I am referring to narratives in film or literature, including the postmodernist and deconstructivist approaches.

rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable” (Juul 2005, p. 30). And video games are “games played using computer power, where the computer upholds the rules of the game and the game is played using a video display” (*ibid*, p. 1).

A computer game can be defined, following Juul, as a system of unambiguous rules, wrapped by a fictional world, or, in other words, as rules played in a simulated environment. But the gameworld should be analyzed without the presence of the rule system. As Juul clearly states (Juul 2005, p. 145), rules and fiction bear an asymmetrical relationship, by which it is possible to analyze the rules of a game without taking into account the fictional world, but doing the opposite only brings a distorted vision of what the game is. This theoretical approach is at the core of Juul’s understanding of games as half real phenomena (real rules, fictional worlds).

The reality of rules is linked to their formal, independent existence. We can describe, analyze, change, and contemplate the rules of a game without actually experiencing the game. On the other hand, the world created by the game only exists when the game is played. In computer games, as Juul (2005 p. 163) points out, the rules of a computer game are often embedded in the (usually representational⁶) gameworld, and the player experiences the rules by testing the boundaries and possibilities of the world. There is a certain intertwining of the rules and the fictional world in computer games, and it works as a defining element of digital and non-digital games.

The virtual environments are affected by the rules that govern the game, as well as by the simulation rules that shape that world. For instance, in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (RockStar North 2004), if at the beginning of the game the player wants to explore the “locked” areas of the world, she will be able to get the right tools, in this case an airplane, and fly to those areas. Nevertheless, there is a game rule that states that before accessing those areas, the player has to complete a

⁶ Representational as opposed to symbolic or abstract game environments, like those of *Rez* (SEGA 2001) or *Super Bust-a-Move* (Acclaim 2000).

number of missions. This rule is enforced by the use of an in-game fighter jet that, out of nowhere, hunts down the player if she goes to those temporarily forbidden zones. The player could theoretically explore those areas of the world, but there is a game rule that does not allow her to do so. The fictional world is, then, limited by a game rule, showing the intertwining of rules and fictional worlds.

The worlds a game creates are fictional, that is, incomplete and possible worlds where the gameplay takes place. By incomplete, Juul means that the fictional worlds created by games do not provide all the information about those worlds (Juul 2005, p. 111). For example, if we limit ourselves to the information of the game, there is little to know about the world of *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 1997), besides what we need to know in order to play.

Computer games' rules tailor their worlds according to the needs of the game challenges and intentions. As said before, a computer game need not simulate the complexity of the world. A game is constructed as a ludic object and experience through rules. It is possible to describe a game formally just by describing its rules, but it is not possible to do the same only attending to how the world is configured. But if we pay attention to both instances, then we see that the shortcomings, or incompleteness of the game world is largely determined by the rules of the game. This implies that the formal structure of the world is to some extent accountable for the end result of the fictional world.

While rules are unambiguous and impossible to be discussed (much more because they are refereed and controlled by a machine), the game world is permanently evaluated and interpreted by the player. The gameworld, on the other hand, can also modify gameplay. That is, the rules are localized in a space that can also dictate rules. The gameworld has certain properties over the way the game is experienced because it is the representation of the rules as well as their container. The gameworld is the immediately accessible system of rules information for the player. Rules are experienced *through* the gameworld. Players of audiodames hear sounds that are a part of a gameworld in which there are possible interactions that can take place within the realm of sounds. It is a non-visual gameworld, but yet a

world where the rules of the game take place and allow for meaningful gameplay, or interaction with the gameworld.

In other words: games are not fictions, but they have fictional elements. Games are systems of rules designed to encourage a number of interactions by rewarding the correct results and punishing the wrong approaches. These rules take place in a gameworld that affects the system of rules by coherently limiting the players' capacities. These gameworld limitations are often a part of the fictional layer of computer games.

For developing a computer game, the fictional layer is not needed. From a pure formalist perspective, a game is just a set of rules and the instructions to overcome the artificial challenges they pose. The gameworld, the fiction, contributes to the understanding of those rules, and determines some limitations. Let's take a look at a classic example: *Shadow of the Colossus* (Sony: 2006).

From a purely formal perspective, *SotC* is a game in which the player has to climb a moving structure, finding the appropriate paths, jumping from platform to platform, in order to perform a specific action for a preset number of times. The player also has to find these structures. If the player performs the specific action in the limited number of structures available, the player wins. If the player falls from the structures, she will lose energy and will have to climb again. There is no time limit. In essence, this is *SotC* as a system of rules and interaction possibilities. There is nothing more, and nothing less to the game than this.

Yet, presented with this description, nobody sane would find this game interesting. Also, there are some fundamental elements that need to be explained: the moving structure, the specific action. So let's wrap the system with a fiction, a narrative: the player is a lonely warrior that wants to resurrect a girl. To do so, he has to defeat a number of colossi that are scattered in a vast, empty landscape. To kill the colossi, the player has to climb on top of them, and then stab them in specific places for a number of times until they are finally defeated.

Suddenly, introducing the fictional layer, the game becomes interesting. The underlying abstract system of rules is explained by means of a fiction, so the player

understands how to interact with the gameworld and the game rules precisely via the fiction.

Is then *SotC* a story, a narrative? The answer is no. The world, and the colossi, are merely an interface with the game system, a way of making players understand the game rules and the game mechanics faster, and engage them with the gameworld. In other words, it is a way of convincing the player that her actions within that system of constraints and goals are the most relevant actions possible.

Games, then, are not suited to tell stories because their fictional element, their gameworld, has to be understood as an interface between the game system, which is abstract and thus both difficult to understand and difficult to attach emotionally to, and the player. So this is why games are not good for telling stories: because stories, in good games, are just the envelope of the game system, and operates as the mentioned interface.

So why should we care about narrative games? First of all, because this is what the industry demands: better stories through games. There is a tendency in the game industry to think of games as the next storytelling device, and thus there is a strong interest in developing games with strong narratives. But also, and more relevant: no matter how good the basic game mechanics and rules are, players always need a sense of purpose, that can much better be provided with a fictional, optative layer. Narratives and fictions are a tool for players to understand the complexity of the game system, and how to approach it.

In the following chapters I will present a number of development considerations that can be used to approach the narrativity of games in ways where the fictional element is enhanced but not in collision with the systemic nature of rules, goals and mechanics of games.

Designing the World

The gameworld of the Japanese hit *Katamari Damacy* (Namco 2004) is full with objects placed at random places: watermelons in the middle of the road, enormous elephants roaming the city, and even giant octopuses in the middle of the open seas. And this gameworld is so because of the narrative element: in the game, the players control the prince

of the universe, the minuscule son of the King of the Universe, who is in task of gathering loose elements with a huge ball in order to place stars back again in the sky (the stars were destroyed by the King of the Universe, in a drunk, unfortunate event).

With this initial narrative setup, the fact that the world is populated by an enormous number of strange objects is not strange - in fact, it is enormously coherent with the narrative world, and thus the player is able of easily interpreting the actions that are relevant for the gameplay, taking the right choices to win the game. The fiction, then, has cued the player into what is relevant and what is not relevant to do in this world.

Another example can be taken from *Ico* (Sony: 2001): the goal of this game is to help the boy-with-horns Ico and his ghostly friend Yorda out of a haunted castle. The game consists basically on a series of rooms, each of which is a specific kind of puzzle that the player has to solve. The world is designed to enhance the performative capacities (Tronstad: 2001, 2003) of the player - the castle, with its well-placed broken stairwells and levers and bridges, is intended to build an obstacle race camouflaged by the fictional layer.

A game, according to game designer legend Sid Meier (quoted in Rollings and Adams: 2003), is a series of interesting choices, meaning that players have to be presented with equally relevant, different and meaningful choices that affect their gameplay and their relation to the gameworld. Every choice has to be presented to the player as something crucial for the future development of the game. If the choices presented are trivial, players will lose attention and disengage from the experience of the game. But how to make the choices seem non-trivial? By designing a gameworld.

A gameworld can be defined as the fictional container where the system is embedded, and where the player's actions make sense. A gameworld is World of Warcraft's Azeroth, but also San Andreas in the last installment of *Grand Theft Auto*, and the empty spaces of *Shadow of the Colossus*: all are spaces where gameplay is enhanced by creating artificial constraints justified by the fiction, and upheld by the rules, like in the aforementioned case of the jet fighter in *GTA: San Andreas*.

Gameworlds have two fundamental building blocks, following Aarseth (2005): fictional and simulational elements. Fictional elements are those that are there to provide a setting and a consistency to the gameworld, but are not tied to the game system and therefore have only

fictional existence. Aarseth example, the texture of a door in *Half-Life 2*'s environment, shows how fiction operates in the gameworld. On the other hand, any simulational element in a gameworld is that which has a certain role in the game system, being that a trigger that the player can interact with (like the bridges in *Ico*), or elements that are subject to the general rules of the game system regardless player interaction (any object in the gameworld that can be affected by gravity).

In this sense, what a designer has to take into account if she wants to develop a narrative game is the balance between the fictional and the simulational elements, and specially how it is only by using the simulational layers that a story can be conveyed. Games are interactive, and thus the fictional elements cannot be of any use for telling a story. The castle in *Ico* does not require all the beautiful textures, light effects, and decoration props. But it does need the levers, the broken bridges, and, specially, it needs the structure of chained rooms, since it is crucial for the gameplay.

The role of the game designer, then, is to create a world in which the simulation is geared to cuing the player to believe that the narrative is enacted freely by her by means of the simulational layer. The *Grand Theft Auto* series is particularly good at doing this: the player is presented with a free-roaming space where she can do many more things than following the main story line. But there are some elements of that world that are closed unless she makes the story progress.

Gameworlds act as tools that allow for the implicit understanding of rules and goals of the game, and they do so by alternating the presentation of simulational and fictional elements that direct players towards the right types of gameplay and interaction. But yet, these are only the building elements of the gameworld. For a narrative game to be successful, these fictional and simulational elements need to be coupled with a story - and what is the role of a story in the design of a game?

Telling Tales: Stories and Games

One of the fundamental elements of the *Resident Evil* (Konami: 1996 - 2005) series of game is its nonsensical sense of progression: to open a random door in a police station, the player has to, for instance, climb to the clock tower to set the bell to ring so that the dam

breaks, revealing the secret tomb where the key to the police station door can be found. *RE* is not only a masterpiece in the survival horror genre - it is also the first case of pataphysical game I can remember.

Yet, for players this kind of narrative makes total sense. While the gameworld is constructed in a moderately coherent way, the fiction of the *RE* series is built on the most bizarre connections that the player has to make in order to progress. And this is precisely the key to understanding why this narrative sequence works, not only in the *RE* series, but also in most computer games today: players understand that their role in the gameworld is to fulfill the narrative within the coherent boundaries of the gameworld, and according to the strict rules of the game system. As long as the rules of the game system are not broken and their application to the gameworld is coherent, players will follow any possible progression of the story in order to make sense of the fragmented narrative that they are immersed in.

Jesper Juul (2002) has suggested a distinction between games of progression and games of emergence that is of relevance when understanding the ways games tell stories. Games of progression typically require a more or less coherent sequence of events to be fulfilled for the story to progress. It is the classic mode of adventure games, and it is also the classic way game designers think about telling stories with games: constraining the player to do a number of actions within the gameworld so that the story, predetermined beforehand, can be unfold, with the player in the center of the stage.

Games of emergence, on the other hand, are games in which a number of rules in coordination create complex behavioral patterns. For instance, in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, the player can steal a taxi, begin taxi missions that are not a part of the main narrative, and in a certain moment, crash the car and then the innocent non-player characters can start shooting at the player because they "felt" threatened. There are a number of basic rules in this situation: players can hijack taxis, taxis can be used to earn money by fulfilling specific routes, there is a physics model that determines the crash conditions in case of reckless driving, and non player characters will retaliate if they feel threatened. A number of rules create an emergent, complex behavior pattern.

Emergence is somehow the holy grail of computer game storytelling: procedurally generated storytelling based on a number of behavioral models built in in the objects and characters that the player meets in the gameworld, which also keeps record of the players'

actions. In the avant-garde interactive fiction *Façade* (Mateas & Stern: 2005), players are faced with the break-up of a couple, and the way the story unfolds depends on how the player reacts to the game system, which will also adapt to the players' input in a dynamic way. Similarly, in *Book and Volume* (Nick Monfort: 2006), the tone and the story change depending on the user input, configuring two modalities of something close to procedurally generated narrative.

But these are two exceptions that cannot be considered significant in the large perspective of computer games, not even looking at the independent games industry, in which a game like *The Shivan* (Gilbert: 2006), focused on a rabbi's crisis of faith, still uses old progression game techniques blended with emergent elements. Nowadays, two seem to be the dominant narrative strategies in computer games: the aforementioned emergent sandbox world of *Grand Theft Auto*, where the player is faced with a story line that she does not need to follow in order to enjoy the pleasures of the gameworld; and a more limiting variation, present in adventure games like *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream: 2005), in which players are faced with a number of different, but limited options that configure different paths that make the story progress. These "nodes" need not be solved in a specific, predetermined way, but they need to be completed for the story to be told.

Nevertheless, the raise of Massive Multiplayer Gameworlds like *Everquest* (Sony: 1999) or *World of Warcraft*, seems to point at a change in the trends: these games played by large numbers of players simultaneously online show the limits of conventional storytelling applied to computer games. A story is a close framework that is typically predetermined by an author and closed to interaction. Thus, it is quite complicated to adapt it to a medium of performative nature, like computer games. Either we have a story with an authoritative figure that predetermines the outcome of every challenge, or we have a more open structure in which players perform actions that configure dynamically a story.

In my experience, the fascination of a game like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is not the relatively closed story that I have to follow, but the fact that the story takes place in an enormous environment where all other kinds of things may be happening. For a game designer, the challenge of narrative games is to provide the illusion of free will to the player, a world where each and every player is a hero that will complete her call and so, her story. As humans, we are very good at creating narratives to explain the world - we only need some

basic hints, and we build a story. Online players excel at creating fan fiction that tells their stories in the virtual worlds they inhabit - for a single player narrative game designer, the challenge is to create the basic cues that will make players see a story, and become its heroes. There has to be, then, a sense of closure, evil enemies, a build-up on the tension or a threat to the player's powers in the gameworld. Then, without a leading narrative, the players will configure their experience as a narrative one, building the story of the game without the permanent, patronizing guide of the designer.

In other words, to tell a story with a computer game, the best is not to tell it, but to plot it.

Anna Karenina is dead: continue?

Would it be interesting to create a game in which the player plays Anna Karenina, and thus has to commit suicide in the last scene of the game? Would it be interesting to play a game in which the player controls Madame Bovary and all her psychological traits? Or, better phrased: how can we make a game have interesting psychological characters?

Of course, playing Anna Karenina would turn out to be a rather boring experience, for the player could only recreate what happens in Tolstoy's novel until her inevitable end. Anna is a character of great psychological depth, and so is Madame Bovary, but all this psychological depth disappears if we consider it in the light of interactive games. Yet, facing the narrative of games, developing interesting psychologies is crucial for giving the player a sense of meaning in the world that can lead to better storytelling through less story-driven gameplay.

In literature and cinema we have a long tradition of using the right traits of the media to create the illusion of deep psychology, the representation of the complexities of the human mind, but, do we have similar complex characters in computer games? Without a doubt, the troubled main characters of *Fahrenheit*, or the anonymous archetypes of *Shadow of the Colossus* do use in their benefit some of the old techniques of psychological characterization, adapted to computer games performative gameplay. But these are new iterations of old ways of drawing fictional character personalities. What would be a character that is unique to computer games?

One of the most memorable moments in *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami: 1998) was the fight with the boss called Psycho Mantis, a character that boasted his skills in reading the player's minds, being able to tell how long time she had been playing this game, which other games she had played with her Playstation, and, most importantly, he could tell what movements the player did right before they took place, and thus counteract them. Did Psycho Mantis actually have magic powers? Did he read the player's mind? What this character actually did was to access the memory data stored in the memory card of the player's Playstation, and also read the input from the controller port one, delaying it enough to seem like he could read the player's mind. The trick to defeat Psycho Mantis? To unplug the controller from port one and plug it in port two. Only then Psycho Mantis would complain that he could not read the player's thoughts anymore, and thus could be easily defeated.

Another memorable character in the *Metal Gear* series (this time in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*) was The Sorrow, a character that could only be fought in the limbo between life and death, and who threw at the player an army of dead: all those enemies that the player had killed earlier in the game⁷. The Sorrow evaluated the player performance in the game, and took the implicit rules of the game and made them obvious: failure in stealth would imply a tougher battle against this boss.

These two characters are the pinnacles of psychological simulation of characters in computer games⁸, and they are so because they have understood the technical and narrative possibilities of computer games as systems, and have used those techniques, that rhetoric to computer games character creation. As mentioned in the previous section, computer games are systems of rules that operate embedded in a gameworld. That gameworld is of fictional and simulational nature, being only the simulational the layer that is interesting for creating narratives in computer games, since players can only relate and interact with whatever is simulated in the game in purposeful modes (Aarseth: 2005). In conventional, classical narratives, psychology was mainly performed by means of description of mindsets of behaviors, closely tied to the rhetoric of the medium (language or the moving image). But in

⁷ *Metal Gear Solid* is a stealth game that can allegedly be won without resorting to violence, except in the cases of boss characters. The less enemies the player kills, the better her stealth and understanding of the underlying game mechanics is.

⁸ And it is not a coincidence that both have in common a game design legend, Hideo Kojima.

the case of computer games, description falls into the fictional, and thus loses phenomenological relevance for the player, who, in her interaction with the game system, will perceive as relevant only that which is closely related with the game system.

By breaking the conventional “fourth wall” and making Psycho Mantis capable of controlling the offline world, Kojima introduced a new approach to creating psychology in computer games: an implementation of the character by means of the simulation, in this case closely tied to the technological layer of computer games. Similarly to what Cervantes did when making Don Quijote read the first part of his adventures in the second part, or even closer to the typographical and philosophical games of Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Gentleman Tristram Shandy*, *Metal Gear Solid* has shown the way of implementing deep psychology in a new genre (in this case in a new medium) by means of deleting the boundaries, more than exploring them.

This is not to say that to create interesting psychological characters the designer has to break the boundaries of the game immersion. In *Fahrenheit*, the characters’ mood was “playable”, directly affected by the players’ actions. In this way, players could understand the effect of the gameplay in the choices taken for playing the game, and thus get a deeper involvement with the characters by mean of a playable psychology. Similarly, in *Fable* (Lionhead: 2005), the players’ actions changed the way non-player characters behaved towards the players, thus creating the impression of an evolving psychology of the player character and the non-player characters by means of a simple calculation of outcomes of the in-game actions, a very simple ethical evaluator.

In order to create relevant psychology for characters in computer games, the key is to embed the psychological traits that the developer considers fundamental for the progression of the game not in conventional modes of narration or description, but tied and operative within the system of rules of the game. Psychology in computer games cannot be considered a matter of personality, but a game mechanic - only then we can have deep, round characters not in the way they are presented to us, but in the way we experience them, because computer games are, above everything, ludic experiences.

Conclusions

This paper started with a reference to the Playstation 2 advertisement campaign called “Double Life”, in which a number of “players” explained in a more or less narrative way the experiences that they had endured while playing with this console. But while these players seem to be telling their story, what they are actually focusing is on their experience of games. They were not told “you are the commander of armies”: they *were* commanders of armies, and there lies the uniqueness of computer games.

The idea of creating narrative games, or purely narrative games, while noble and well-intended, is ill-fated. Computer games are very good at many things, none of which is telling a story. Games are fantastic simulation machines that can be used to partially select and model reality with clear rules that will afford a number of behaviors from the player. In other words, games are excellent at creating models for interaction, or ludic experiences.

But there is a certain interest in the game industry and in the academic world of making games the next narrative medium. And it is very difficult to stop determined academics or game developers. In this paper I have tried to introduce a number of theoretical concepts that can be used as development methods for creating narrative computer games.

A narrative computer game must, first of all, focus on the coherence and balance of its game mechanics and systems of rules. Once that is in place, the designers need to create a gameworld that acts as a fictional interface to the game system. Much like a conventional desktop operates as a metaphor for interacting with the underlying complexity of the computer system, the fictional gameworld mediates the player interaction with the system of rules via the game mechanics embedded in the world.

A game can also tell a story, and create complex psychologies, but only if those are related with the game as system, preserving the performativity of the players’ actions and experience of the gameworld, and the connection between characters and the game system. A character, much like a story, is only the thread that puts together in a recognizable way the actions the player takes. It is very difficult to convince the player that pushing the “a” button in the controller is extremely relevant, unless she is tricked to believe that she is doing so as a fundamental part of creating the story of the game by means of interacting with a deep character.

In this paper I have attempted a critique of computer games as narrative media by means of presenting precisely how to create narrative games. While telling stories with computer games may not be the most successful approach to these medium, there is still potential in that approach. Our cultural history is made of stories - and, as children of this story based culture, we have a repertoire (Iser: 1978, 2000) that allows us to understand different modalities of narratives. Computer games are both a continuation of that tradition, as we can still understand their procedures as narrative, and a radical departure from conventional narratives, since their simulational, performative nature forces game designers to think in different ways than what writers and filmmakers do. Computer games are not for telling stories: computer games are a thousand lives ready to be lived.

References: Games

- Acclaim (2000), *Super Bust-a-Move*
Blizzard (2004), *World of Warcraft*
Cyan (1993), *Myst*
Gilbert, Dave (2006), *The Shivah*
Konami (1998), *Metal Gear Solid*
Konami (2004), *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*
Lionhead (2005), *Fable*
Lucasfilm Games (1987), *Maniac Mansion*
Lucasfilm Games (1990), *Loom*
Lucasfilm Games (1990), *The Secret of Monkey Island*
Mateas, Michael & Andrew Stern (2005), *Façade*
Monfort, Nick (2006), *Book and Volume*
Namco (2004), *Katamari Damacy*
Nintendo (1997), *Super Mario 64*
Quantic Dream (2005), *Fahrenheit*
Rockstar North (2004), *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*
Russel, Steve & Martin Graetz (1961), *Space War!*
Sega (2001), *Rez*
Sony (1999), *Everquest*
Sony (2001), *Ico*
Sony (2006), *Shadow of the Colossus*

References: Literature

- Aarseth, Espen (2005), "Doors and Perception: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games", *Proceedings of the DAC Conference 2005*, IT University of Copenhagen: Copenhagen, pages 59 - 62
- Eskelinen, Markku (2001), "The Gaming Situation", *Gamestudies.org*, Volume 1, Issue 1, July 2001 (<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>, accessed 20/6/2007)
- Frasca, Gonzalo (2003), "Ludologists love stories too: notes from a debate that never took place", in *DIGRA 2003 Conference Proceedings*, University of Utrecht: Utrecht (http://ludology.org/articles/Frasca_LevelUp2003.pdf, accessed 20/6/2007)
- Iser, Wolfgang (1978). *The Act of Reading. A Theory of the Aesthetic Response*. London: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Iser, Wolfgang (2000). *The Range of Interpretation, The Wellek Library Series*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Juul, Jesper (2002) "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression." In *Computer Game and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*, edited by Frans Mäyrä, 323-29. Tampere: Tampere University Press
- Juul, Jesper (2005), *Half-Real*, MIT Press: Massachusetts
- Rollings, A. and Ernest Adams (2003) *On Game Design*. Indianapolis: New Riders.
- Rouse, Richard (2000). *Game Design. Theory and Practice*, Wordware Game Developer's Library. Plano, Texas: Wordware Publishing.
- Tronstad, Ragnhild (2001). "Semiotic and Nonsemiotic Mud Performance." In *Cosign 2001 Conference Proceedings*, edited by Frank Nack, 79-83.
- Tronstad, Ragnhild (2003). "Defining a Tubmud Ludology." *Dichtung-Digital*, no. 4 (2003).