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An Analysis Of Video Games As Entertainment

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Abstract: Entertainment industry today rules the roost. Video games are prominent entertaining medium throughout the world with a turnover of 159.3 Billion dollars. Until the advent of Video games story was the sole of all entertainment, be it newspapers, radio, television, cinema, crotons. Much of humanity's most important experience has been embodied in stories. Stories come in many kinds and are known in all cultures of the world. They includes fairy tales, fables, parables, gospels, legends, epics and sagas. The present study discusses the content and form of video games as entertaining medium which sans story.

Story and its significance as communication

Storytelling is the oldest form of teaching. It bonded the early human communities, giving children the answers to the biggest questions of creation, life, and the afterlife. Stories define us, shape us, control us, and make us. Not every human culture in the world is literate, but every single culture tells stories.

Stories create magic and a sense of wonder at the world. Stories teach us about life, about ourselves and about others. Storytelling is a unique way for kids to develop an understanding, respect and appreciation for other cultures, and can promote a positive attitude to people from different lands and religions.

"If you want your children to be smart, tell them stories. If you want them to be brilliant, tell them more stories" - Albert Einstein

Benefits of Storytelling

When you tell your first story, there is a magical moment. The children sit enthralled, mouths open, eyes wide. If that isn't enough reason, then consider that storytelling:

Inspires purposeful talking, and not just about the story — there are many games you can play.

Raises the enthusiasm for reading texts to find stories, reread them, etc.

Initiates writing because children will quickly want to write stories and tell them.

Most stories revolve around single questions that represent the core of the story. Will Harry Potter defeat Voldemort? Will Romeo and Juliet end up together? Will Frodo destroy the Ring?

While a good story will have a plot and character arc, most are driven primarily by one or the other.

There is a certain magic involved in creative storytelling. Across the millennia, there is a lineage of amazing writers that have been the keepers of our intellectual heritage in science, philosophy arts and entrepreneurship. Storytellers have followed upon the steps of natural evolution and gradually moved on to reveal the superlative powers inherent in meaningful storytelling. Stories that are not empty narratives, but serve a higher purpose of their creators to be of service to the world that surrounds them.

Deep in the heart of every conscious storyteller there is a 'mission' - to inspire and empower, question and challenge. The transformative energy communicated through strong narratives may change storytellers' role and identity into becoming great idealists, progressive visionaries, explorers of futuristic projections or persistent campaigners giving voice to the silenced, weak and suppressed. In retrospect, we may proudly exclaim that we are a race of passionate and imaginative storytellers.

Where does the inspiration that fuels storytelling come from? Can it be that some people are born storytellers with a natural talent to receive ideas and shape them into transformative narratives that resonate deeply with us?

Inspiration is the most unexpected of visitors. Conditioning the mind to a receptive and fertile state for new ideas and concepts to flood in, is the first step in the creative process of writing.

Inherent qualities such as openness, sensitivity, imagination, acute perception and a keen interest to be a curious observer are key. More than anything, writing is a process of freedom, thought and expression, and as such, it transcends space and time, in a plane where rules and stereotypes do not apply.

Great storytellers are good listeners. They sense and feel the world around them. They are keen to play with a multitude of practices to create signature concepts, expressing a vision of what a brand stands for and what ideals it aims to project. Importantly, they know the allure and power of a compelling story to inspire, shape and transform. This direct relationship and binding chemistry between storytellers and audiences is contingent upon timing, synchronicity, the fluctuations of human psychology and the public sentiment that defines each era. As humans, we are naturally deciphering the world around us through our senses, and the stories that resonate better with us are the ones where emotional intelligence shows through.

No story ever comes alive until there is a reader to love it. Either in fiction or the practical world of entrepreneurship, there is but one magic quality that makes a story transformative - It is the unbeatable power to dream. With just a little imagination, a good story can take us anywhere.

Videogame Comes out of Story

Video games are one of the most popular of types of games. Video games are games that can be played on different platforms and the video part of it can be shown on a TV, computer or even a handheld display device. The variety of video games, formats, and subject matter has grown a lot in the past few decades. The history of video games stretches from the creation of Atari to the ratings set by ESRB and each of these milestones has had a major impact on society.

The first video game was a version of tennis, called *Tennis for Two*. Later the first video game with graphics was a Tic-Tac-Toe game. Then was released a more popular game that was to set a standard for video games. It was the first arcade game and it was called *Pong*. The first two video games to be registered under the copyright laws were *Atari's Asteroids* and *Lunar Lander (Bellis)*. However, the first game for the computer was actually a game called *Space War*. Unfortunately, the computer that this game had to be played on was an IBM mainframe, which was too costly and much too large for anyone to actually own. Then finally in 1972, was the first reasonably priced, advertised video game console for the home that was called *the Odyssey*. From the time of such video game, it was tried to focus on different aspects of game to make it more attractive and among many, the aspect of storytelling was in the foremost consideration.

As from the beginning, there is much publicity nowadays about interactive electronic media as the future of storytelling. There seems to be infinite immersive and emotion-inducing potential which is only hinted at by all the

efforts to generate meaningful, artistic experiences. Because of this hype, one could easily be fooled into thinking that "for successful game designers, games are a narrative or story-telling medium", i.e. well-designed videogames must tell a story. However, this is simply not the case.

What is a well-designed game, then, if not a rich story? Well, it is an engaging, fun, immersive experience, requiring a way of solving problems which, once adopted by the player, makes the player "at home" in the game. *Tetris*, *Doom*, *Metal Gear Solid*, good fighting games - and especially the simple classics of the 80s - are fun because it is possible to figure out exactly what the game wants, deliver it, and make visible progress as a result. Each challenge in the game is only slightly different from the previous, and once the player has the format of the challenges "figured out", the game becomes easier and yet more rewarding. All those frustratingly unsuccessful attempts finally pay off, now that the gamer can deliver what the game wants of him.

One reason the gamer wants to "deliver" is that he cares about the game character. The gamer essentially *is* the character, such that the character's struggles are the gamer's struggles and the character's fears are the gamer's fears. A story is an effective device to create this level of engagement and connection. A story also transforms the spatial and symbolic puzzles which make up the gameplay (defeating a boss, navigating a series of platforms to get to the other side, dealing with hostile fighters and artillery during a bombing run, infiltrating a building with hallways full of bad guys...) into a supposedly meaningful "conflict" with an "ending" in sight.

The questions we must ask ourselves here are, "Is a story necessary to get the player to care for the character?". As you will see, a story is not necessary for a fun, immersive game. An exploration of this question should also show that, due to the nature of games, they cannot be a very successful medium for meaningful storytelling.

How a Story can be Considered Unnecessary

The challenge of a game is in its symbolic puzzles. Even the most modern of games, such as *Time Splitters*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Tekken*, *Ace Combat*, *Tomb Raider*, and their sequels, all challenge the gamer to press the right buttons at the right time in order to respond to quickly-changing situations, and to figure out what sequence of actions opens up the opportunity for progress into the next challenge. In other words, the most realistic games can be stripped of their fancy texture-mapped anti-aliased z-buffered polygons to reveal a basic core similar to the earliest games. This is demonstrated by the fact that in most 3-D shooters, a locked door cannot be opened even by the character's most powerful weapon - the gamer cannot escape the puzzle of finding the key.

The modern games I mentioned are fun at the abstract level; they are about knowing the abilities of your character and of his environment, about performing certain actions in certain places at certain times in order to make progress, about figuring out what those are. Most game characters' abilities are so limited, and most environments so non-interactive that the gamer does not see "people" in a "building", but entities in an environment, with properties and abilities different from those of real things (otherwise, Solid Snake's C4 should blast that locked door open). The story, then, plays the same role as realistic graphics and good animation: it "dresses up" the basic puzzles (and their entities and environments) to make them look like a real situation, to make the gamer think a real person might for some reason really want to do what the gamer sees the character doing.

The story also adds a sense of continuity to the series of challenges and puzzles, a “big picture” challenge that ties all of the game’s smaller parts into “infiltrating a base”, “winning a tournament”, or simply “defeating evil” and “saving the world”. However, it is the process of figuring out the relationships between the character’s actions and their effects on their environment in different circumstances (and how these could be used to perform a task) that constitutes the fun, engaging, stimulating part of a game. It is what occupies the gamer’s mind during gameplay. This is why a story is not necessary for a successful game.

Great games have been made where the action is not dressed up as part of a plot - *Pac-Man*, *Tetris*, *Mario Kart*, *Pilotwings64* and *Smash Brothers* come to mind. These games are good because the way they present challenges encourages the gamer to keep playing by presenting him with small but noticeable rewards as he learns and then masters the aspects and variables of gameplay. The player understands what the game wants and the properties of the character and environment progressively better. This enables him to solve progressively more difficult challenges by intuitively coming to better predict the consequences of his actions, according to the game’s logic and rules. As a result, these old games remain enjoyable, even today. This is the reason why *Metal Gear Solid; The VR Missions* is every bit as addictive as the other *Metal Gear Solid* games.

Incompatibility of Narrative and Interactivity

Steven Poole’s book Trigger Happy explores further the inconsequentiality of a “story” in gameplay, and that of gameplay in a game’s “story”. In his chapter on the use of stories in videogames, he makes the distinction between the synchronic and diachronic stories. The synchronic story - what happens in the game, the “story” made by the player - is “purely kinetic”, while the diachronic story - the background story, often a “proper” story - is “immutable”. Somewhere in-between are the FMV cut-scenes, which develop both the synchronic and diachronic stories, but are also immutable. Thus, any real progress in plot is always divorced from any interactive challenge. Decisions made during challenges based on timing, sequences of actions, or spatial navigation/arrangements, are not the decisions that can change the course of a story, influence relationships, or reveal something about human nature.

This is why games are not fundamentally a storytelling medium. All of the actions to which the player is restricted are kinetic. The actions the character performs while under the gamer’s control will never be meaningful in any way other than the symbolic solving of a puzzle or challenge. Any decisions involving emotions and values are made in the parts of the story that are not under the player’s control.

Why can the player not interact with the synchronic story, i.e. with the plot, in any real way? The synchronic story, the progress of the plot - changes in motivations or alliances or identities, the revealing of hidden relationships and interests, the death of a character, and the consequences of all these changes - involves variables that cannot presently be simulated by a computer. The plot will remain divorced from interactivity until computers become much more powerful, and until Artificial Intelligence allows game makers to program video game characters with real-time emotion, who can understand their objectives and motivations in an abstract way and change their plans and alliances at their own will during gameplay. This happens to a very small extent today - storylines branch given different possible results of each battle - but the branching happens at specific, unchanging points, and only leads to a few

discrete possibilities. The branching is not dynamic, in real time with near-infinite possibilities. In effect, the gamer may pick from a few possible endings, but not create his own. The gamer may play towards one or another ending only physically and spatially. He may not create a new mission that will indirectly help with a battle effort, or try to convince the villain to change sides, or do himself the actions of a character he must protect. Even if the player can envision a different outcome for a situation in a game, a different story development, the computer running the game would not be able to execute it in real time without an impossibly advanced understanding of language or of human psychology and emotions. Computers cannot write stories. This is why any decisions involving emotions and values are made in the parts of the story that are not under the player's control.

It is in the interest of a video game designer to give the player more than one chance in a game. In fact, the gamer has many tries - as many as he wishes - to attempt to go through the game in an optimal way. This is part of the fun of a videogame - doing it many times and "mastering" it - but also gets in the way of meaningful storytelling. One of the main purposes of narrative storytelling is to put the reader/listener in someone else's place, to allow someone to see the world through the eyes of a person in the past, or in a very different society, or in an imaginary society. The reader/listener comes to appreciate the struggles of the character, the fears, the injustices, and the hopes of the character. Uncertainty and risk are essential to this appreciation (especially in mystery and suspense stories). A gamer simply cannot understand the worry felt by, say, a POW escaping a prison camp, or by a fighter pilot in a war - be it over the Midway islands or the Jovian moons - or by an athlete in a martial-arts tournament, etc., because the player knows that if something goes wrong, he can hit "continue" or start again from a recent save point. If the gamer only had one chance at the task, then maybe the difficulty and fears and struggles of the game character would be communicated... but no one would pay \$60 for a game that refuses to be played after one death.

This idea, based on the "alternative world" hypothesis, is explored in Mind at Play; The Psychology of Video-Games, by Geoffrey and Elizabeth Loftus. Psychologists claim regret in real life is caused by the awareness that if only a past action had been performed slightly differently, a much better outcome would have resulted. Most people worry on a day-to-day basis about the drive to make the right choices and not to make mistakes. But in a video game, the gamer does not have to live with their mistakes. The alternative world can be realized. Mistakes can be unmade, and their consequences (often death) can be fixed. As long as this is true, the imaginary world of the videogame is too easily manipulated and exploited to resemble the real world - or even the world in a novel or movie - in any meaningful way.

Earlier I said that the character's struggles become the gamer's struggles. We now see this is not quite true. The gamer's struggle is to figure out how the character should go about solving *his* struggles in an optimal way. This figuring out often causes the character to die a reversible death, and this is an accepted part of videogaming. Therefore, the gamer often does not care about the character's life or immediate well-being. The player "cares" about the character because of all the work that has gone into mastering the controls and making progress in the game. Actions that do not compromise that progress in the long run are acceptable, no matter how painful to the character.

Conclusion

The telling of a truly insightful, meaningful story cannot be achieved by placing a gamer in control of a character and giving the gamer many attempts to do what the character would have one chance to do. Murray in Hamlet on the Holodeck, as well as Poole, Loftus, and Loftus, all briefly touch on this fundamental incompatibility between interactivity and narrative, but assume some way will be found around it, and go on to talk about the future of interactive storytelling. What they refuse to say outright is that the experiences provided by an interactive event will never be as insightful as the experiences portrayed in great literature. Interactive experiences may be immersive, exciting, educational, artfully made, and even potentially very emotional. But the insights acquired are about manipulating the environment and developing timing (although part of the pleasure of gameplay can be aesthetic, as in the beautiful environments of *Tomb Raider 2*, *Ace Combat 4* or *Metal Gear Solid 2*, to name a few examples). These spatial and kinetic insights will not reveal anything profound about the human condition. A cut-scene, or the diachronic story, might. But as we have seen, they are not interactive, and cannot be interactive until computers learn to write stories.

Some well-designed games tell a story, not as their ultimate objective but as a device to engage the player. And this story's progress, plot-wise, must be separate from the game's interactive experiences, because those interactive experiences are spatial and kinetic. This is why games should not aspire to tell us great, insightful, meaningful stories. But, of course, they should keep telling simple stories, because I would rather be saving the world than just navigating around collections of polygons inside a computer's imagination.

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