VIDEO GAME NARRATIVES: BEYOND THE GAME-PLAY

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Abstract. Contemporary video games such as Mass Effect or Assassin’s Creed emerge as a new form of media and depart from traditional games purely seen as problem-solving exercises. They are enjoyed by a broader audience, similar to those of TV and cinema. At the same time, they are significantly different from TV and cinema, since they place the user at the centre of interaction and content creation. This paper discusses the role of narratives in these new epic games as the main driver behind their appeal and commercial success.

Keywords. Video games; narratives; storytelling; interactive media.

1. Introduction

Visual arts are judged and consumed in ways that are not always based on their purely visual value. In building design, architects defer to a concept as an idea-driving vehicle that defines architecture and justifies final outcomes. Industrial design products are often judged on how they feel or the status they project. Conceptual art is heavily vested in the message it manifests through an associated idea.

Narrative is another important layer that reaches beyond literary works and significantly defines visual and interactive arts. While this has been evident for years with design, photography, and motion pictures, it is currently starting to make a strong impact on video games. With the continuous expansion of video game culture and the ways gaming integrates itself into everyday life, from entertainment and education to science and employee motivation, there is an emerging debate about the nature of this new interactive and, as many see it, artistic medium. This broadening of video game reach and appeal also transforms the nature of gaming itself, from linear
gameplay and problem solving to social activism and storytelling. Applications of gaming, so-called gamification, need to incorporate a broad range of devices such as user input, social networks (interconnectivity), and narratives to effectively address these new needs.

While these new video game frontiers may seem like uncharted waters, they parallel the role architecture played in society in the past, where it not only fulfilled compositional or functional needs but most importantly served as the great mass communicator of social values, histories, and ideas. It extended the reading of the tectonic and spatial qualities of the built environment from the purely visual and aesthetic into the realm of the semantic and cultural. In that role, architecture registered the past in petrified urban volumes of monuments and building facades as collective memories (Rossi, 1982).

While architecture no longer serves as, or aspires to be, a unified social and cultural medium, the accumulated space-making knowledge does translate into other forms of immersive experiences, specifically video games. The cinematic and narrative space created in the past by architects, and later adapted to performative arts and cinema, is now being rediscovered through immersive and interactive video games. This visceral interconnection between architecture and video games is best delineated by Will Wright, the creator of SimCity and Sims games:

> a more appropriate source of inspiration we have found is things like architecture, and product design, because those are inherently more interactive design fields. SimCity was actually originally inspired by Chris Alexander, and going back and looking at design in general I’ve found a lot of inspiration from Charles and Ray Eames, Jay Forrester, Jane Jacobs, all the people who are sort of spanning the division between design, theorist, and a specific field – you know, urban design, architecture or whatever. I find that triangle really interesting to draw inspiration from.²

The relatively established mind-set that video games are based not on content, but on problems to solve,³ sees gaming in its traditional sense without the modulation resulting from the introduction of the “video” quantifier. This mind-set fails to see three-dimensional immersive video games as environments that people inhabit spatially and emotionally, and which they consider as direct and continuous extensions of their offline lives. Three-dimensional immersive video games are no longer games in the same category as chess, board games, or even early video games like Pong.⁴ There is a different sensory engagement in playing a chess or Pong game than in more contemporary games like Myst or Mass Effect. The sense of inhabiting the

Much as film departed from still photography, *Mass Effect* and *Assassin’s Creed* emerge as a new form of media and depart from games purely seen as problem-solving exercises. They are enjoyed by a broader audience, similar to those of TV, cinema and architecture. At the same time, they are significantly different from TV and cinema, since they place the user at the centre of interaction and content creation.

![Figure 1. Main character, Desmond Miles navigates virtual urban environments](image)

### 2. The Increased Complexity of Video Games

Video game narratives are becoming increasingly complex and engaging. In the near future, they will compete favourably with other already established genres such as books and movies. The *Assassin’s Creed* series combines good quality graphics with historically situated narrative—not much different than historical fiction novels, such as *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. The game is based on historical events and conflicts, starting in the Third Crusade with the medieval Knights Templar (fig. 1), then moving to the Italian Renaissance in Venice (*Assassin’s Creed II*), to reemerge during the American Revolution (*Assassin’s Creed III*). The visual aspects attract players to the story in a way a book would not be able to. *Assassin’s Creed III* brings the eighteenth-century world to life in a dramatic and deeply satisfying way. Players on their quests meet historical figures including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington. They become part of historical events as their character moves along the game plot. Although the game is not strictly accurate in its depiction of the American Revolution, the gameplay is deeply satisfying, highly engaging, and almost addictive in its appeal.
Another similar example, the *Mass Effect* trilogy has been highly valued for its engaging cinematic narrative, and it is seen by many as one of the most effective alternatives to traditional motion-picture arts. The critical difference, and the upgrade from a traditional narrative, lies in the players’ ability to direct their experience. The decisions made by the main character in the first two games of the series determine the outcome in the third. This is unique to gaming, making the narrative highly engaging and reflecting the consequences of players’ past actions. Virtual characters have to live with their past decisions.

The differences are also significant. Since game-based narratives allow for multithread scenarios providing individualized stories, with prolonged series there may also be a narrowing range of possible outcomes converging on a single or reduced set of solutions. This was keenly visible with the ending of *Mass Effect,* which left players with only three choices. Many players were looking for a more meaningful or “real” conclusion, as expressed in one of the online forums: “It’s not about a happy ending; it’s about an ending that makes sense.” Perhaps this video game trilogy departed too much from its gaming roots and followed the mainstream approach of the Hollywood genre defined by the *Matrix* or *Harry Potter* movies.

3. New Focus on Gameplay

The narrative qualities of video games are visible in the mechanics of the gameplay. The use of cinematic techniques in the introduction, setting the game context, and in the transitions between levels reinforces the use and the role of storytelling. While the introduction is often necessary to place the player immediately into the action and events (e.g., the original *Star Wars* opening sequence), cinematic pieces are often introduced into the gameplay to make level switching and loading seamless and less interrupted.

Successful video games position themselves on the border between mission-oriented, problem-solving games and storyline-based games. This is present in the *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series, where players need to complete the majority of the storyline missions to progress through the game and to unlock various content and parts of the city. However, there is not a particular time frame that drives the progression of the game. Players can complete tasks and missions at their own pace. When not fulfilling storyline missions, players can roam freely and engage in other side activities. Side missions, also called sub-missions or odd jobs, depart from the main storyline and involve participating in street races, car thefts, and assassinations. They can keep the player occupied for a long time without the need to continue with the main narrative. In this aspect, *Grand Theft Auto* and *Assas-
sin’s Creed function to some extent like sandbox games such as Minecraft that present the players with no specific goals to accomplish, allowing them freedom in choosing how to engage with the virtual world. This combination of gameplay, narrative, and an open world provides a very potent framework for current video games, and in many ways reflects actual lives with a similar combination of direction, story, and freedom to make choices.

This inhabiting of the virtual space associated with sandbox games is reminiscent of the ways people function within real urban environments. When playing and engaging in virtual environments, players adopt similar behaviours as when they visit new and unknown cities as tourists. They wander around looking for clues and in search of meaningful moments to frame their experiences.

4. Contextualizing Narratives: Feeling, Not Only Knowing

For years we valued literature for contextualizing narratives in historical and cultural settings. Hemingway’s depiction of human struggle in the framework of the Spanish Civil War is just one of many examples. We looked into literature to bring us the realities of the past and to educate us. Naturally, films followed the same pattern. Particularly, early twentieth-century movies, with their extensive and expensive sets, large number of actors, and epic stories, resemble the current genre of epic video games.

![Mirror’s Edge game with its spectacular urban landscapes](image)

While epic video games (fig. 2) continue the scale and magnitude of past productions in other media such as architecture, literature, panorama paintings, and later cinematography, they have been evolving into more simulative environments. They directly reference the era of grandiose world expositions (fig. 3) or epic movies characteristic of the early twentieth-century cinematography. However, epic gaming worlds not only look grandiose but
also feel and behave like the worlds they simulate. In games such as World of Tanks (WOT), individual tanks (players) possess properties that closely correspond to historical military vehicles in their performance parameters. Learning about the successes of the Battle of Kursk or Stalingrad acquires a new relevance once the player experiences the differences in virtual combat between heavily armoured and precise shooting German vehicles such as the Tiger or the Ferdinand, which excelled in distance combat, and less precise but more mobile Soviet vehicles such as the T-34, which had short barrels and inflicted high damage but were effective only in close battles due to the aiming precision and perhaps the training of tankers. These virtual realities provide firsthand experience in understanding both logically and viscerally the nature of these historical facts and topics. They provide a very potent narrative reality that is comprehended in highly intuitive and visceral ways.

![Figure 3. World’s Fair: Columbian Exposition in Chicago, 1893](image)

5. Are Video Games a Uniquely Problem-Solving Medium?

When we try to make sense of what we read or watch, we do go through a form of problem solving. Memento is a movie each individual viewer must try to make sense of. It is not a problem-solving exercise in the narrow definition of the term; however, it does provide multiple lines of reasoning and possible scenarios.

If you consider David Lynch’s comments on Mulholland Drive, you could consider watching a movie and making sense out of what we see a form of problem solving. The clues¹¹ that directors put in their movies are there both to comfort us and to challenge our understanding of reality, thus holding on to our attention. The fact that the human brain always tries to
make sense out of the surrounding chaos of nature makes movies, or any narratives, which play with this Pavlovian reflex an interesting genre. *Muholland Drive* is not an isolated example; *Memento* and, to some extent, Hitchcock’s movies such as *Psycho* have a similar approach. Similarly, books like Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *The Name of the Rose* are literary examples of problem solving focused around unlocking a puzzle. Even if the narrative is linear and non-interactive, what happens in a viewer’s or reader’s head is purely problem solving—running various scenarios and trying to make sense of what we see or read.

The viewer experience was further reflected by one of *Muholland Drive*’s lead actors, Justin Theroux, who stated that “the whole turns out to be more mystifying than the parts.” The actors projected this sense of confusion into the movie scenes and made it more authentic.

![Figure 4. Choose-your-own-adventure possibility tree for The Mystery of Chimney Rock](image)

### 6. Engaging the Audience

Is the ability to explore parallel worlds and life scenarios unique to video games? The choose-your-own-story possibilities tree (fig. 4) looks very much like a typical game tree. The difference lies with a number of competing variables and with what defines a win state. In video games, you would not choose whether or not to enter a house out of simple curiosity; rather, your actions are driven by the overall objective and a score count. In games, you may have a dilemma of whether to choose a strong and slow, or weaker but faster character. The choices are usually about competing benefits that are closely balanced to provide a high number of possible scenarios. The right choice is determined locally, based on the types of other players in-
involved and missions undertaken. Values are more contextualized and as such less predictable than in other narrative media. In literature and film narratives, the choices and dilemmas characters face are usually global and commonly shared by a broad audience. This broad appeal is necessary, since these media do not provide viewer-specific narratives.

7. Goals versus the Win State

While most games have an objective, this does not constitute a problem-solving proposition in the same sense as with games that have a win state. Building a castle or Star Trek’s Enterprise in Minecraft may be a suitable goal, but it is not in any way better than accomplishing another virtual structure. Even having an end goal that is a win state in many cases may feel like a default solution—the “unbearable lightness of playing.” In Assassin’s Creed, a heavily narrative video game, while all the missions build up toward an ultimate endgame, there is no inverse time mechanism that would compel players to achieve the goal in the shortest, best way possible, with the exception of timed side missions. At any time, a player can wander around and explore historic settings without penalty. There are mechanics in place to encourage a player to progress within the game and narrative, including the need to achieve certain missions to unlock new parts of the kingdom.

8. Games without a Goal

While a rough definition of video games as problem-solving activities is established in the literature and in discussion blogs, there are major limitations to this approach. This definition has been challenged by the increased popularity of sandbox games such as Minecraft, particularly in its less competitive “creative mode,” where players not only do not have to fight for survival but also do not need to have a clear objective. Although building a world can be a suitable goal, it is not a game, in the same sense that building with Lego blocks is not. In both examples there is no single condition or even class of conditions that could be defined as the “win state.” Any outcome is equally good.

9. The Need for the Narrative

The idea of virtuality as an extension of physicality, not only as a spatial construct but also as a chronological scale, is probably best foreseen by Adolfo Bioy Casares (1940) in his seminal The Invention of Morel. The story revolves around multisensory immersive projections (environments), not unlike proto video games, which ultimately outcompete the physical reality,
at least in the actions of the main protagonist. The book provides an uncanny and poignant, yet plausible, scenario of future virtual environments where virtuality is framed by an infinitely perpetual narrative-without-a-narrative: like a pure form of gameplay without the storyline, without the deeper purpose, without the meaning.

The pure gameplay (without an active narrative) resembles the circular projection recording provided by Morel’s invention. It results in the endless repetition of the gameplay mechanics leading into the self-referential environment. In this scenario, a narrative becomes the only device enabling an entrance to and escape from this encapsulated virtual world. While the dialectic nature of *The Invention of Morel* fits well into the current debate about the relationship between virtual and physical realities, it also underlines the role of the narrative as a bridging structure between both realities. In a similar way, narratives in contemporary video games provide a natural transition framework into virtual worlds through emotional engagement and personal identification.

10. Final Thoughts

Interactivity in games breaks the monodirectional mode of traditional media—including architecture—where a creative centre and the audience have strictly defined roles with no ability for information exchange, narrative feedback loops, or crowdsourcing. The limitation of traditional mass media such as radio and television was recognized early by Bertolt Brecht, who pointed out that “radio is one-sided when it should be two-. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication.”13 While radio and television have evolved little to satisfy Brecht’s aspirations, video games and electronic technology in general provide an effective apparatus to move media from distribution and sharing out to communication, collaboration, and collective authorship. Video games’ potent immersive nature and ability to engage users in the content creation naturally moves video games to new territories of narrative arts that cannot be fulfilled as effectively by other established media. While this seems to be evident, there are still semantic questions of whether these new narrative games are an extension of current game arts or a genetic transposition between multiple lineages and genres forming a new, perhaps unified creative medium.

The discussion of whether video games require narrative becomes irrelevant, since the evolution of media arts, literature, theatre, and film unavoidably intersects with the emergence of video games as a new immersive and fully interactive form of art. Perhaps these interactive, narrative-based, and
user-driven environments should be called something else, but certainly they are a genetically derived offspring of video games and media arts. Pervasive Media Studio’s proclamation that “video games are the new cinema”\textsuperscript{14} seems increasingly accurate. While contemporary narrative-based video games are significantly defined by other narrative media, including architecture, the prospect of the unified narrative medium encompassing architecture, cinematography, and interactive arts emerges on the horizon.

Finally, it is also important to consider the feedback mechanism enabled by current video game developments toward other disciplines: how interactive, immersive, and narrative-based virtual environments redefine the physical world and people’s expectation towards architecture and cities.

References
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Endnotes
http://agreedie.com/features/gaming/251-mass-effect-3-ending-explained
11. Contained within the original DVD release is a card titled “David Lynch's 10 Clues to Unlocking This Thriller.” The clues are: (1) Pay particular attention in the beginning of the film: At least two clues are revealed before the credits. (…) (3) Can you hear the title of the film that Adam Kesher is auditioning actresses for? Is it mentioned again?
14. Pervasive Media Studio: www.pmstudio.co.uk/collaborator/simon