

III. Here Be Dragons: the (pre)history of the adventure game

*The past is like a broken mirror, as you piece it together you cut yourself.
Your image keeps shifting and you change with it.*

MAX PAYNE 2: THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE

At the end of the Middle Ages, Europe's thousand year sleep – or perhaps thousand year germination – between antiquity and the Renaissance, wondrous things were happening. High culture, long dormant, began to stir again. The spirit of adventure grew once more in the human breast. Great cathedrals rose, the spirit captured in stone, embodiments of the human quest for understanding. But there were other cathedrals, cathedrals of the mind, that also embodied that quest for the unknown. They were maps, like the fantastic, and often fanciful, Mappa Mundi – the map of everything, of the known world, whose edges both beckoned us towards the unknown, and cautioned us with their marginalia – “Here be dragons.” (Bradbury & Seymour, 1997, p. 1357)¹

At the start of the twenty-first century, the exploration of our own planet has been more or less completed². When we want to experience the thrill, enchantment and dangers of past voyages of discovery we now have to rely on books, films and theme parks. Or we play a game on our computer, preferably an adventure game, as the experience these games create is very close to what the original adventurers must have felt. In games of this genre, especially the older type adventure games, the gamer also enters an unknown labyrinthine space which she has to map step by step, unaware of the dragons that might be lurking in its dark recesses. The main difference to the original Mappa Mundi is that this adventure world has been created in the mind of a modern griot, a master storyteller who pilots the gamer through this immersive world where reality gradually disappears with every step she takes. The similarity between exploring the virtual space of a computer game and exploring physical space on voyages of discovery is discussed by Fuller and

¹ Although the phrase ‘Here be Dragons’ is often used to denote dangerous and unexplored territories, as far as is known only the Lenox Globe (ca. 1503-07) uses the Latin phrase *Hic Svnt Dracones* on the eastern coast of Asia (Livingston, 2002). There is no surviving Mappa Mundi that carries the text; the authors therefore make a common mistake. The more common Latin phrase used on maps was *Hic Svnt Leones* (also used by Guglielmo da Bakersville in Umberto Eco's *Il Nome della Rosa*). In *PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL* Barbarossa says to Jack “You're off the edge of the map, mate. Here there be monsters!” (1:48:17). It is unknown when the English version was introduced and popularized. The phrase is also used in computer games, for instance, in *GRAND THEFT AUTO: CHINATOWN WARS* (2009); when the gamer takes a boat ride to any corner of the map the message ‘Here be Dragons’ appears.

² An earlier Dutch version of this chapter was published in a special Games issue of the *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis (TMG)* (2004, pp. 77-99). This chapter is based on the revised English edition (Veugen, 2006), which in essence was very close to the original. The text in this chapter has been expanded to better fit in with the rest of the dissertation.

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Jenkins, who found that both 16th and 17th century travel accounts and certain types of computer games deal similarly with exploration, colonization, and charting:

What we want to get at is not these alluring narratives of Princess Toadstool, Pocahontas, and Virginia Dare (or of Mario, Luigi, and John Smith) but another shared concern in our material that seems to underlie these more memorable fictions in a constitutive way. Both terms of our title [Nintendo® and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue] evoke explorations and colonizations of space: the physical space navigated, mapped, and mastered by European voyagers and travelers in the 16th and 17th centuries and the fictional, digitally projected space traversed, mapped, and mastered by players of Nintendo® video games. Simply put, we want to argue that the movement in space that the rescue plot seems to motivate is itself the point, the topic, and the goal and that this shift in emphasis from narrativity to geography produces features that make Nintendo® and New World narratives in some ways strikingly similar to each other and different from many other kinds of texts. (Fuller & Jenkins, 1994, p. 57)

I will discuss the spatial aspects of adventure games and other games of progression more fully in Chapter IV. The necessity of physically charting the virtual explorations of early adventure games will become clear below.

In game literature the adventure game is often overlooked, and for a number of reasons. Firstly, this type of game originated on mainframe computers and hence did not find its way into the living room until the arrival of the home computer (like the Apple II)³ in the early eighties. Secondly, as the original adventure games were text based they were not suitable for gaming Arcades⁴. Thirdly, in the West adventure games, for a long time, were only played on home computers, unlike Japan, where console based adventure games, such as *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA* (1986) and *FINAL FANTASY* (1987), were hugely popular⁵. Finally, in the heated debate between the narratologists and the ludologists (see Introduction) adventure games were not seen as 'real' computer games by some game researchers like Jesper Juul (2001)⁶.

³ In the Netherlands computers like the famous Commodore64, the Atari ST, the BBC microcomputer, the Amiga and the ZX Spectrum were referred to as home computers (as in the United States and Great Britain). The term microcomputer was used for both home computers as well as personal computers.

⁴ The first commercial adventure game that found its way to the Arcade was *DRAGON'S LAIR* by Cinematronic in 1983. This was after the success of adventure games on the home computer.

⁵ Strictly speaking *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA* games are action adventure games and the *FINAL FANTASY* games are single player role-playing games. But as we will see later on, these types both derive from the adventure game.

⁶ On the subject of time in games he uses interactive narratives (adventure games) to illustrate their fundamental difference with 'normal' computer games: "In an 'interactive story' game where the user watches video clips and occasionally makes choices story time, narrative time, and reading/viewing time will move apart, but when the user can act, they must necessarily implode [...] This means that *you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time*" [Italics in the original] (Juul, 2001). Later, for instance in his book *Half-Real* (2005), he does count adventure games as games; in fact, he sees them as the genre that is the most clear-cut example of a game of progression, as we saw in the previous chapter.

In this chapter, I would like to shed more light on the origins of the games of progression: the adventure game. I will dwell at length on the two cultural phenomena that preceded them i.e. the stories by J.R.R. Tolkien and the role-playing game *DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS*. I will limit myself to the history of adventure games that were produced for home and personal computers⁷. I will end this chapter with a discussion of the fascination with the Middle Ages that is often found in adventure games and their modern day successors, the highly popular (massively multiplayer online) role-playing games like *NEVERWINTER NIGHTS*, *EVERQUEST* and *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*⁸.

The wherefore and the why of adventure games

Although there is a clear difference between the early adventure games that were text-only, both in input as well as in output, and the more modern graphic adventure games, both have a strong story element. Being able to participate in a compelling story is one of the key attractions of the traditional adventure game, as observed in this entry in *Wikipedia*:

Un jeu d'aventure, du point de vue du joueur, est une oeuvre de fiction interactive, soit bien plus qu'un jeu vidéo. Cette phrase donne l'essence de tout ce qu'il y a à dire sur les aventures. Tout d'abord, une fiction. Comme un film, un roman ou une bande dessinée, une aventure raconte une histoire. Interactive, car contrairement à un film, un roman ou une bande dessinée où l'on reste prisonnier de la linéarité de l'intrigue, on interagit dans un jeu d'aventures avec l'environnement. Du fait de son caractère narratif, le jeu d'aventure se rapproche de ce qui fait la substance même des œuvres d'art.⁹

Another is being able to move freely through the diegetic world of the game, in search of clues, objects, and information that help the gamer to advance both in the world and in the story¹⁰. Another requirement is a sense of agency; the gamer must have the idea that her actions influence/change the story. Summing up, the key aspects of a good adventure game are a gripping non-linear story, which makes it hard to turn away from the computer, because you want to know what happens next; a diegetic world that compels the gamer to explore it in search of anything that can help to eventually gain closure; and

⁷ Console based adventure games are already well covered, see, for instance, Steven Kent (2001) and DeMaria & Wilson (2002 & 2004).

⁸ Real Time Strategy games (RTS) which became popular at the end of the nineteen-nineties also often use mediaeval (fantasy) settings. In the course of the chapter, it will become clear that this fascination originates from the same sources as those of the adventure game.

⁹ Definition 'Jeu d'aventure' Wikipedia; http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeu_d%27aventure (2004).

¹⁰ Of course, the diegetic world of the game is not limitless. However, good writing and design can make the boundaries of the game world part of the story. See Chapter IV, where I explain how boundaries are imposed in the 2D game *GABRIEL KNIGHT SINDS OF THE FATHERS* (1993) and the 3D game *GABRIEL KNIGHT BLOOD OF THE SACRED, BLOOD OF THE DAMMED* (1999).

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the gamer must get the feeling that it is her own actions and choices that got her there, which gives her a sense of achievement. That is what the aficionados of the genre, the true adventure gamers, expect. And that is what makes certain adventure games stand out, even though they are games of progression where the designer controls the sequence of events. Admittedly the gamer has to go through a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game (and gain story closure), but in the truly great adventure games the order in which she completes the set is logically interwoven with the story. Furthermore, such games give the gamer enough room to manoeuvre so that it does not feel that choices are forced (because the story has to stay in sequence). Only then does the real world blur away and the game world takes over:

From my arrival at the Robner mansion, I am a character whose actions affect the world I enter. I arrest a suspect only to find that the grand jury isn't convinced by my evidence. I follow a suspect too obviously, and he just retires to his room. My questions can lead to a second murder - and my carelessness to my own. But there is a unique solution. And to find it, I must often start the case over, re-experience it from different perspectives. The average complete investigation lasts 20 hours; I have spent many more exploring the program's intricate universe. (Rothstein, 1983)

Apart from the traditional adventure games, there are also Role-Playing Games (RPG's), adventures in which the gamer is part of a group that has to bring the adventure to a satisfactory conclusion. In offline role-playing games the gamer is either the leader of the group (e.g. Robin Hood), or she first chooses from a set of playable characters (e.g. Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli). In online adventure and role-playing games such as Multi User Dungeons (MUD's)¹¹ and Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Games (MMRPG's) the gamer usually creates her own avatar. In these games, there are also missions to complete and problems to solve, but the main emphasis is on character development and on keeping the illusion of the fantasy world in tact, not on an overall narrative¹².

With the arrival of Lara Croft in the game *TOMB RAIDER* (1996) a new subclass of the adventure game became extremely popular: the action adventure game, as we saw in the previous chapter¹³. In this subclass, agility of the avatar (and dexterity of the gamer) is a key ingredient; the gamer cannot end the game without this ability. A variation on the

¹¹ This is the original term. When a new type of multi-user game developed, the multi user community, the term was changed into Multi-User Domain. For games the original term is still preferred.

¹² As we saw in the previous chapter, for Juul these are games of emergence because they are rule-based.

¹³ *TOMB RAIDER* became the epitome of the action adventure game but was not the first action adventure to emerge. The subclass was first introduced on the game console with the *LEGEND OF ZELDA* series by Shigeru Miyamoto (first instalment 1986) and on the home computer with the game *PRINCE OF PERSIA* (1989).

action adventure game is the *stealth game*, first used in *THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT* (1998) but epitomized on the personal computer by *TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL* (2002).



Image III.1 *THE LORD OF THE RINGS, THE RETURN OF THE KING* (Electronic Arts, 2003)

Although many of these modern games seem far removed from the first adventure games, the key elements of the game type can still be distinguished. These elements originated outside the world of the computer game in the fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien and the role-playing game *DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS*¹⁴.

Tolkien and the origin of the fantasy genre

Tolkien's influence on popular culture cannot be overestimated. It can be witnessed in every popular medium: (comic) books, television, films, musicals, and computer games. Or as one of the best known fantasy writers of the twentieth century, Terry Pratchett, put it: "Tolkien influenced everyone that came after. He set his stamp on the [fantasy] genre so heavily that there is an echo of it even now" (2001). Because of this influence, most people assume that Tolkien was the first person to write fantasy and that he thus invented the genre. This is not so. In the Victorian era, under the influence of industrialization, economic expansion and colonization, which turned Great Britain into an empire, we see a renewed interest of the British in their past, especially in the Middle Ages. This can be seen in the revival of the Gothic style, especially in the buildings funded by the new industrial capitalists. It can also be seen in the works of the then innovative Pre-

¹⁴ Due to the blockbuster film adaptations by Peter Jackson, Tolkien's work has again become very popular. Consequently, new game adaptations both of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) and *The Hobbit* (1937) have been released. (Most of these games base on the films, but some also base on the original books, see Chapter VI). We should probably say that this is yet another resurgence of the Tolkien hype, as every new generation seems to have rediscovered and reinterpreted his works in a new cultural context, and sometimes even in a new medium. Still, it is also somewhat ironic that the work that was one of the major influences on the origins of the game genre has found its way back to the genre after so many years. However, it should be noted that some of the earliest adventure games were also adaptations of Tolkien's books, though usually very free adaptations.

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Raphaelite Brotherhood. Now that Science seemed to have undermined the old religious ideals, the Pre-Raphaelites were looking for new values. And they found them, amongst others, in British myths and legends, especially in Arthurian legend (Hacking, 1999).

One member of the Pre-Raphaelite movement was the multi-talented William Morris. Outside England Morris is mostly known as a graphic artist and (textile) designer and as the founder of the *Arts and Crafts* movement. However, William Morris is also the real creator of the *fantasy genre*. Like the other Pre-Raphaelites, Morris was interested in the literature, myths and legends of the Middle Ages. But Morris took this interest one step further. Together with Eirikr Magnússon he translated Old Norse poems, of which the *Volsunga Saga* proved to be especially influential on his own literary works. Morris was Tolkien's direct precursor in that both recognized that Old Norse and other Older Germanic literary works were the real cultural heritage of Western Europe (Morris, Introduction, 1870). The *Volsunga Saga* became the source for Morris's own poem *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1877) and his novel *A Tale of the House of the Wolfings and all the Kindreds of the Mark* (1890). These more historical writings were the overture for the fantasy stories Morris would later write, like *The Wood beyond the World* (1894) and *The Well at World's End* (1896).

Tolkien's premises, however, were different. Like Morris, Tolkien was disappointed that England lacked her own homogenous cultural heritage. Even as a child he was taken by Germanic myths and legends like the story of Sigurd¹⁵. Morris's translation of the *Volsunga Saga* and *Tale of the House of the Wolfings* were also amongst Tolkien's favourite works (Carpenter, 1977, p. 99). Tolkien had hoped that Morris's translations of the Old North poems and sagas would replace the Greek and Roman mythology that had eradicated England's literary heritage after the Norman invasion. He was therefore quite disappointed when this did not happen, remarking: "How far off and remote sound now the words of William Morris! The Tale of Troy has been falling into oblivion since that time with surprising rapidity. But the Völsungs have not taken its place" (Tolkien, 2009, p. 13). Unlike Morris, who only wanted to reintroduce the old Northern European stories into the cultural awareness of the English public, Tolkien thus wanted more: he wanted to reinstate them into England's cultural heritage:

¹⁵ Tolkien's mother used to read him bedtime stories, one of which was 'The Story of Sigurd', which featured in *The Red Fairy Book* by Andrew Lang. Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien's biographer writes: "It was the best story that he had ever read." (Carpenter, 1977, p. 39). And Tolkien himself noted "I had very little desire to look for buried treasure ... Red Indians were better ... But the land of Merlin and Arthur was better than these, and best of all the nameless North of Sigurd of the Völsungs, and the prince of all dragons" (Tolkien, 1983, pp. 134-135).

I had in mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy story [...] which I could dedicate simply: to England; to my country.¹⁶

As a philologist Tolkien not only knew mediaeval works of literature intimately, he also studied Germanic language history¹⁷. Using this background he hypothesized that given that every Germanic language has a linguistically related word for *dwarf*¹⁸ they would not only share a common Indo-European base¹⁹, but would also have the same basic concept of what a dwarf is²⁰. He furthermore hypothesized that, as it is possible to determine the original Indo-European form of a word, it must also be possible to determine the original 'Indo-European' story from modern day myths, legends, sagas, fairy-tales and folk tales (Shippey, 2000, p. xv). Strictly speaking, therefore, Tolkien's stories are not original (see Chapter VI for further details). In *The Silmarilion* (published posthumously in 1977) and *The Lord of the Rings*, however, Tolkien's mastery weaves these original elements into stories of epic grandeur that have a mythical presence of their own. Or as his biographer Humphrey Carpenter (2001) put it:

He [Tolkien] said that he wanted to create a mythology for England. I don't think he did exactly that, but I think that he rediscovered kinds of narrative with the power of the saga and the adventure story which had been lost from twentieth century English fiction.

Tolkien's influence on popular culture also extends to the newest medium of the twentieth century: the computer game. Here his works proved to be indispensable, as game-designer Ian Livingstone (2001) noted:

Then suddenly comes Tolkien. You got this world of condense gloom and danger and doom, all this disgusting creatures that he created out of his imagination. [...] he made us see a much darker, stronger, richly imagined world of fantasy, which had never been done before.

Especially the authors and designers of the first generation of adventure and role-playing games are indebted to Tolkien. One of these is Richard Garriott, designer of the legendary *ULTIMA* series (first game 1981)²¹:

¹⁶ Excerpt from a letter Tolkien wrote to Milton Waltman late in 1951 (Carpenter, 2000, p. 144).

¹⁷ His first job was working as an etymologist for the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁸ Cf. German *zwerg*; Dutch *dwerf*; Norwegian *dverg*; Swedish *dvärg*; Danish *dværg*.

¹⁹ The Anglo Saxon (Old English) word is *dweorg* and the Old Norse *dvergr*. The Indo-European word is *dhwerg*²² has.

²⁰ Which obviously is not the meaning the word has today, Gimli is Tolkien's interpretation of the Indo-European concept.

²¹ The first *ULTIMA* game was published in 1981 by California Pacific Computer. Nine single player games followed. The first online version aptly entitled *ULTIMA ONLINE* was published in 1997. In 2002, Electronic Arts released the final instalment of the series *ULTIMA ONLINE: LORD BLACKTHORN'S REVENGE*.

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“Three important events happened in 1974,” says Richard Garriott. “First, my sister-in-law gave me a copy of *Lord of the Rings*. Second, I discovered *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*. And third, I became acquainted with my first computer. In combination, these three events began a love affair with the computer that has continued to this day.” (DeMaria & Wilson, 2002, p. 118)

But Tolkien’s contribution to the computer game did not end here. His inspiration not only gave rise to a new imaginative game world, complete with exciting new characters, it also brought us — be it at first limited — games with stories²².

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS; on tin soldiers and a cultural phenomenon

A friendly unicorn named Alabern lives in the woods near your town. With a touch of its horn, Alabern heals wounded people who come to it for help. Now a woodcutter has come to town with terrible news. Evil goblins have captured the unicorn and taken it away... (*Adventure Game Book: Adventure 1: Rescue the Unicorn* 2000, p. 2)

This is one of the many stories with which an adventure in the game *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* (*D&D*) starts. *D&D* is a role-playing game²³ coming to life in the imagination of its players. Where historic re-enactments and *Life Action RPG's* (*LARP'S*) take the players en masse outside, *D&D* players usually gather in students’ dens and similar places. The participants consist of a Dungeon Master, the person who knows the game’s secrets and controls the gameplay, and a group of players. Although it is not obligatory for the players to participate in costume, they have to play ‘in character’ i.e. they have to leave their daily self behind and take on the identity and role of their character. The characters in a traditional *D&D* game represent a particular race, for instance human, elf, or dwarf. Next the player can choose from a set of ‘roles’ or ‘occupations’: cleric, wizard, thief, fighter, etcetera. The combination of race and role determines the initial strength and abilities of the character. The combined weaknesses and strengths of the group determine whether they will succeed in solving the adventure’s problems and overcome its dangers. Fate (dice) helps determine the outcome. In the course of the adventure (and the ones following) the players, who usually take their character from one game to the next, will gain new skills and abilities, but some of them may also lose their virtual life. Some Dungeon Masters create their own adventures, but they can also be bought as complete

²² As we saw in the previous chapter, until then games were usually dexterity based. If there was a ‘story’, it was not part of the game itself but extra-diegetic.

²³ “a game in which players take on the roles of imaginary characters who engage in adventures, typically in a particular fantasy setting overseen by a referee”, Oxford English Dictionary, online edition. Retrieved January 15, 2011.

sets or just as adventure books. The distinguishing trait of *D&D* is that the players can only succeed as a group. Only through cooperation can the group overcome the game's obstacles (locked doors, hidden passageways, monsters, evil wizards, etcetera). The now extremely popular online (*Massively Multiplayer*) *Role-Playing Games* like *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* are basically modern computerized versions of *D&D*. Some aspects of trading card games like *MAGIC: THE GATHERING* also originate from the tabletop game.



Image III.2 Photo of *D&D* gameplay

D&D itself originated from the *wargaming* phenomenon, the (re-)enactment of (famous historic) battles using tin soldiers and a model of a specific battlefield. At first, this was solely done by the military, but it soon became a popular pastime of the middle classes. A well-known wargamer was the English science fiction writer H.G. Wells, author of *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and *The Time Machine* (1895). Wells was so taken by wargaming that he even published a book of rules: *Little Wars* (1913, see the news illustration on the next page)²⁴. In the nineteenth and the twentieth century, the popularity of wargaming kept growing and societies were set up all over the world. One of these was the *International Federation of Wargamers (IFW)* which started circa 1963 in the United States. One of the founders was E. Gary Gygax, whose interest in the Middle Ages soon led to the creation of a subsidiary society: the *Castle and Crusade Society* (Sones, 2001). Gygax created battles based on the mediaeval art of war and mediaeval weaponry. To give the game a new impulse Gygax, inspired by Tolkien, Fritz Lieber, and Robert E. Howard,

²⁴ The complete title is *Little Wars: a game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books*. The original cover of the book can be found at <http://zeitcom.com/majgen/98lwars.html>. Online versions can be found amongst others at Project Gutenberg and at http://www.miniaturewargaming.com/2004/06/hg_wells_little.html.

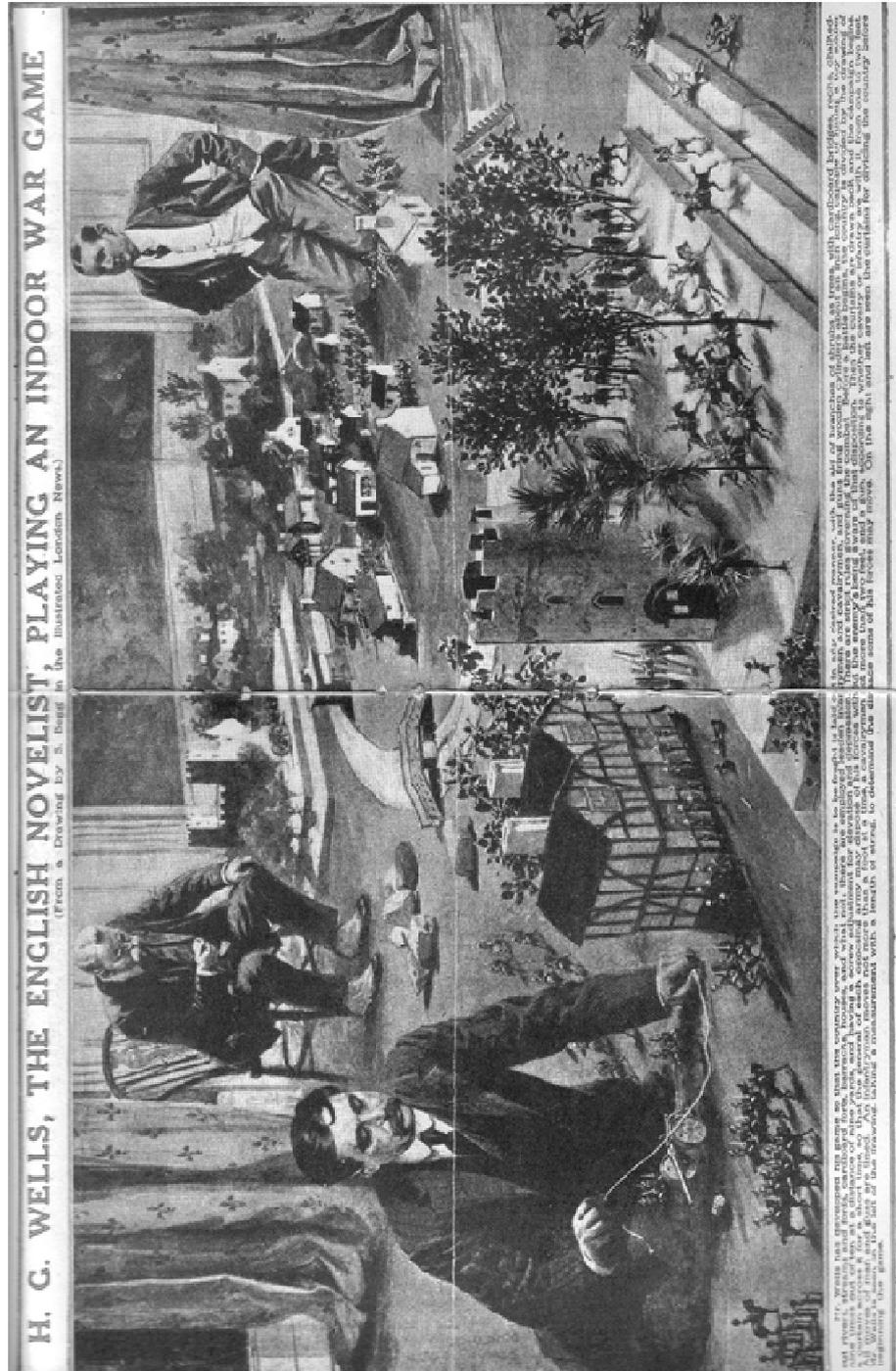


Image III.3 Clipping from an unknown newspaper source. The full caption reads: H.G. WELLS, THE ENGLISH NOVELIST PLAYING AN INDOOR WARGAME (From a Drawing by S. Begg in the Illustrated London News). The caption below reads: Mr. Wells has developed his game so that the country over which the campaign is to be fought is laid out in any desired manner, with the aid of branches of shrubs as trees, with cardboard bridges, rocks, chalked-out rivers, streams and fords, cardboard forts, barracks, houses, and what not; there are employed leaden infantrymen and cavalrymen, and guns firing wooden cylinders about an inch long, capable of hitting a toy soldier nine times out of ten at a distance of nine yards, and having a screw adjustment for elevation and depression. There are strict rules governing the combat. Before the battle begins, the country is divided by the drawing of a curtain across it for a short time, so that the general of each opposing army may dispose of his forces without the enemy's being aware of that disposition. Then the curtains are drawn back and the campaign begins. All moves of men and guns are timed. An infantryman moves not more than a foot at a time, a cavalryman not more than two feet, and a gun, according to whether cavalry or infantry are with it, from one to two feet. Mr. Wells is seen on the left of the drawing, taking a measurement with a length of string, to determine the distance some of his forces may move. On the right and left are seen the curtains for dividing the country before beginning the game.

added fantasy elements like wizards and hobbits²⁵. These changes saved the society, as the new game, the rules of which were officially published as *Chainmail: Rules for Mediaeval Miniatures* in 1971, was an instant success. But the game remained a wargame i.e. based on a campaign and not on role-playing. Then in 1971, Gygax met Dave Arneson. Using Gygax' rules Arneson had written a scenario in which a group of adventurers has to break into a castle. This is the first scenario in which the adventure itself and the individual characters are more important than the campaign. From that moment on Gygax and Arneson collaborated and new scenarios were written in which exploring dungeons in a fantasy world and character development became the definitive game elements. As it became increasingly difficult to recreate these fantasy worlds in miniature, the game world was soon transposed to paper and *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* was born²⁶:

Because of its immense popularity and cult status *D&D* featured in books, television series, and films²⁷. As would later happen with the representation of computer games, the depiction of *D&D* was predominantly negative, usually expressing the concern of over-anxious parents, as in Rona Jaffe's book *Mazes and Monsters* (1981) and the 1982 television-film of the same name, featuring Tom Hanks as the main character Robbie Wheeling. Because Robbie plays *D&D* obsessively, his parents have sent him to another school where they hope he will again devote his time to his lessons. At this school, he soon befriends other students who are also fans of the game. To make their gameplay more realistic the group decides to move the game to some subterranean caves nearby. There Robby loses contact with reality and becomes psychotic. Consequently, his mind stays permanently in the mediaeval fantasy world of the game. *Mazes and Monsters* was clearly based on the first public scandal involving *D&D* which took place in 1979 when the student James Dallas Egbert III disappeared. William Dear, a private detective who was in charge of the investigation, concluded that Egbert had vanished during a *D&D* game and that he probably was no longer alive. However, what really happened was that Egbert had fled his house after a botched up suicide attempt and when he reappeared a month later his family decided that the real reasons for his disappearance (homosexuality, a drug habit and mental stress) were best kept quiet. Thus, *D&D*'s bad influence was reaffirmed, and as

²⁵ That Gygax was inspired by Tolkien can be seen from the first adapted rules which featured hobbits. However, due to legal action by Tolkien's heirs the rules had to be changed. Consequently, Gygax underplayed Tolkien's influence from then on. See DeVarque (2004) for a list of literary sources of *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*.

²⁶ The game was not officially called *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* until 1974. For more information on *D&D* see, amongst others, <http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/whatisdnd>.

²⁷ I am not referring to the (rather bad) feature films of the same title, as these have no relation to the game, but to films in which the game is played.

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Dear stuck to his own version, which he also presented in his book *Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III* (1984), public opinion never changed. As a result, an anti *D&D* campaign swept the news and media. As in other moral panics, no one bothered to find out what had really happened. And although fans of the game protested, the uninformed public saw their worse suspicions confirmed²⁸.

ADVENTURE and ZORK, the birth of text adventures

Tolkien's books inspired *D&D*, and both influenced the first adventure game, called *THE COLOSSAL CAVE ADVENTURE* (1972/75-76, also called *ADVENT* or (more popularly) *ADVENTURE*)²⁹. Will Crowther, who designed the game, was a computer programmer at Bolt Beranek and Newman. In his leisure time, Crowther and his wife Pat were enthusiastic speleologists. Crowther used his computer skills to transform data from their caving expeditions into plotted line-drawn maps. Then around 1972 Crowther and his wife separated. Because the cave expeditions had been their mutual hobby, Crowther stopped exploring. His major regret in doing so was that he now would be unable to convey his love for caving to his daughters. This, however, gave him the idea to use his maps to make a computer game:

"Also the caving had stopped, because that had become awkward, so I decided I would fool around and write a program that was a re-creation in fantasy of my caving, and also would be a game for the kids, and perhaps some aspects of the Dungeons and Dragons that I had been playing".
(Crowther cited by Richard Adams)

The game did not only have to be fun to play, but should also be easy to use for novice computer users. Crowther therefore designed a 'translation program' so that commands could be given using natural language³⁰. Thus, the user did not have to learn a set of commands first. The reason the game only consisted of text was that it was played on a central multi-user computer, as personal computers at the time did not exist. On these computers, computer time is divided amongst the users logged in and the processes that are already running. Real time input and commands therefore have to be short. Output did not appear on-screen as screens were expensive and rare (especially for private use), so it was usually printed³¹.

²⁸ *D&D* and its players are no longer seen in this way. Nowadays it is considered cool if one plays the game. Well known *D&D* players include Vin Diesel and Mike Myers.

²⁹ *ADVENTURE*'S complete history can be found at Richard Adams's website <http://www.rickadams.org>. On computer games containing *ADVENTURE*-like elements but preceding the game itself see Nelson (1994).

³⁰ The term natural language should be seen in the light of the time. Crowther's translation initially worked with two words only, in the form action – object, e.g. 'take key'.

³¹ At home Crowther did not have a screen but used an ASR33 teletype to connect to the PDP-10 at his workplace.

The original *ADVENTURE* focused on caving. The game-cave had many similarities with the original Mammoth Cave of Crowther's explorations and the descriptions in the game were lifelike. *ADVENTURE*'s game cave was quite complex so that mapping took some time. However, the game only had five treasures, and there was no scoring system or progress indicator. All the dangers and enemies were natural (e.g. snakes) and part of the vocabulary was taken from geology (e.g. the term room)³². Crowther's daughters liked the game very much and it soon found its way to friends and associates. In the end, the game could be found on every campus computer in America, including the computer of the Artificial Intelligence lab at Stanford University, where Don Woods worked in 1976. He also loved the game but he wanted to expand it, so with Crowther's permission, and greatly influenced by *The Hobbit* (dwarves, dragon, volcano) and *The Lord of the Rings* (the passage through the mines of Moria), Woods made a new version. This new version had fifteen treasures, progress was recorded (maximum 350 points), and the number of rooms was increased by adding fictional rooms with fantasy elements and names (such as the *Troll Bridge*). Caving was no longer the focal point, but solving puzzles and riddles (cf. Gollum in *The Hobbit*), finding treasure and trying to get maximum points; elements that came to define the adventure game.

ADVENTURE's gameplay is mostly set below ground³³. The game starts with these, seemingly innocent, words:

At End of Road

You are standing at the end of the road before a small brick building. Around you is a forest. A small stream flows out of the building and down a gully.

The original version did not have instructions or a *backstory*, common to later and present-day games³⁴. As the original game was about cave exploration this information was not strictly necessary. Predictably, the gamer takes on the role of a caver, and common sense dictates that she should first of all look around for objects necessary to go underground like a lamp or other portable light source. By walking around (using commands like north, south, east, west, up and down³⁵) she will eventually find a locked grate, the entrance to the cave. Exploring the small brick building at the beginning

³² In American geology all subterranean open areas, be it caves or other formations are called rooms. Therefore, all areas, even in the open air, are still called rooms in adventure games.

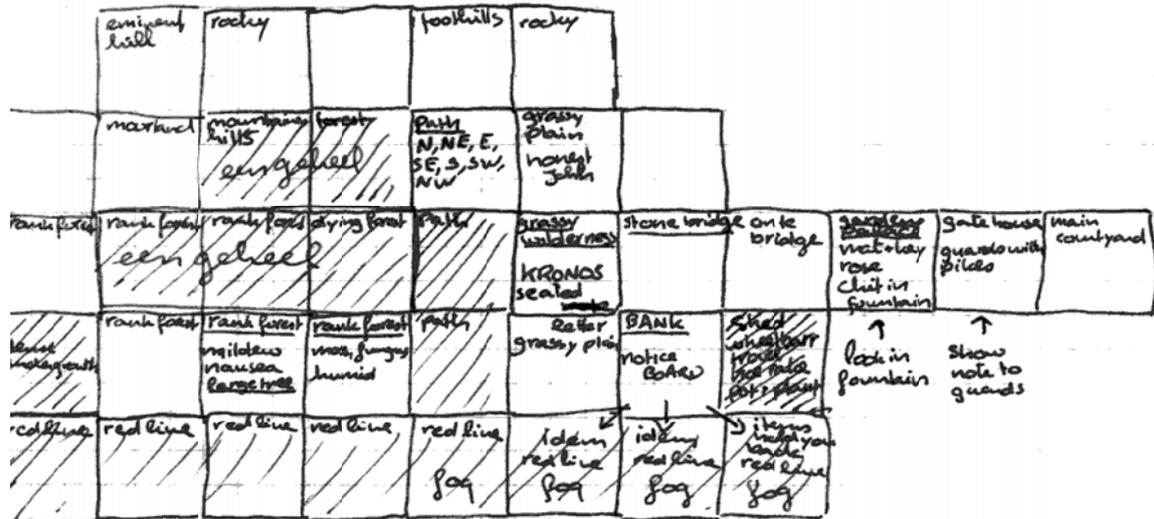
³³ Playable versions of the game can be found at http://www.rickadams.org/adventure/e_downloads.html (none for Windows XP or later versions of Windows)). Woods and others have made several adaptations, some of which can also be found here. A version very similar to Woods adaptation can also be played online: <http://jerz.setonhill.edu/if/gallery/adventure/index.html>.

³⁴ This was also due to the limitations on in- and output. In later versions, in-game instructions were included.

³⁵ Which can be abbreviated to n, s, e, w, u, d, to save on typing.

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of the game, would have provided the set of matching keys. As the game only uses text, it soon becomes clear that drawing a map is absolutely necessary to avoid getting lost (see Image III.4). This is why avid adventure gamers still have scraps of squared paper with maps of games they once played³⁶. Note that this automatically simulates the original cave exploration, as well as the charting of unknown territory by explorers (cf. citation Fuller & Jenkins, p. 82 above).



large tree has small wooden door
in west side

Image III.4 Example of a small part of an adventure gamer's map

Because of Woods' additions, solving the game's puzzles became a lot trickier. Most of the problems were still quite logical, for example that a cage is needed to transport the bird. However, why the bird should be afraid of the rod remains a mystery. Perhaps the most essential command was *save*, not only because the gamer then did not have to start at the beginning every time she played the game, but also because, like later adventure games, *ADVENTURE* contains many (fatal) surprises. For instance, in *ADVENTURE*, as in later games, the number of items in the inventory is limited. This means that the gamer sometimes has to, temporarily, put items down. This is usually done by the command *drop*. Drop, of course, literally means that an item plunges a certain height, so it should not come as a surprise that the command *drop vase* leaves the gamer with the broken pieces of a valuable Ming vase. These kinds of in-game jokes together with the problems and puzzles to be solved and the drawing of a map have all become a set part of text adventure games.

³⁶ Making a map of *ADVENTURE* is quite tricky as the game contains several levels and employs secret passages and magic words like *xyzy* that transport the game character to a different room.

One of the first highlights, and like *ADVENTURE* a legend amongst text adventure games, are the *ZORK*-series of games (original game 1977-1979). At first *ZORK* was an experiment consisting of only four rooms, but in the course of a few years the game grew to more than a hundred rooms. Like *ADVENTURE*, *ZORK* was played on a central computer, but now most gamers could log on using a simple terminal (with a screen) so the game could use more elaborate texts. *ZORK*'s creation was directly linked to *ADVENTURE*, as one of its designers, Tim Anderson, recalls:

In early 1977, *Adventure* swept the Arpanet³⁷. [...] When *Adventure* arrived at MIT, the reaction was typical: after everybody spent a lot of time doing nothing but solving the game (it's estimated that *Adventure* set the entire computer industry back two weeks), the true lunatics began to think about how they could do it better. (Anderson T. , 1985)

ZORK's growth was rhizome-like. Whenever anyone felt like it, another part was programmed and added. More than once the addition of a new element, like explosives, triggered 'problems' in other areas of the game. Now wherever the gamer used explosives, even when standing in the middle of a lovely green pasture, the game would always respond that she had been flattened by twenty thousand tons of solid stone blocks. This meant that new lines of code had to be added to straighten things out. This effectively meant that the game became a battle of minds between the gamers (who always found new, innovative and unexpected ways to use objects or solve problems creatively)³⁸ and the programmers (who usually fixed the code). In *ZORK*'s development *D&D* (rules for fighting) and *The Lord of the Rings* (amongst others the Palantirs) again played a part (ibid.). The only real thing that was holding *ZORK* back was that the game could only be played on large computers. But more and more people now owned a home computer so the designers decided to make a version that would run on these small machines (Image III.5). However, as the game would not fit on a home computer, it had to be split into three parts³⁹.

³⁷ Arpanet is the precursor of the Internet. Originally, only computers at the department of defence, as well as laboratories and universities linked with the department were part of Arpanet.

³⁸ Finding alternative ways of solving an in-game puzzle or problem is still very much a part of (action/stealth) adventure games.

³⁹ The most elaborate home computer at the time could only hold 16K i.e. 16,000 text characters (for both the game as well as the data). The original *ZORK* game consisted of 1 MB (1.024.000) of code. The first three games *ZORK I*, *ZORK II* en *ZORK III* can be downloaded from the site <http://www.csd.uwo.ca/Infocom/>.



Image III.5 Back cover of the packaging for *ZORK I* (Infocom, First version 1980, this DOS version 1982). Note that the game is called interactive fiction “It’s like waking up in a story! Load Infocom’s interactive fiction...”.

Although *ZORK* was not the first adventure game to appear after *ADVENTURE*, and although the first three *ZORK* games were not the best text adventures ever written, *ZORK* was the first commercially successful adventure game. One could even say that *ZORK* started the adventure game industry⁴⁰. *ZORK*’s packaging included a manual, an illustrated

⁴⁰ The micro computer industry at the time consisted of very diverse machines from different producers (Apple, Tandy, Atari, Acorn, Sinclair, IBM etc.). Not all of them used the same micro computer chip, in fact most used different chips. Therefore, several versions of a program had to be made, according to the machine it had to run on. For text adventures, this was usually easier than for games using graphics, as graphic conventions were even less standardized. One of the reasons *ZORK* became a commercial success was because versions for all the popular home computers were made.

history book of the Great Underground Empire (including a list of kings) disguised as a library book, a map with marginalia (which according to the packaging “was not sold at any gas station known to Mankind.”) and a coin. And it was sold through regular channels⁴¹.

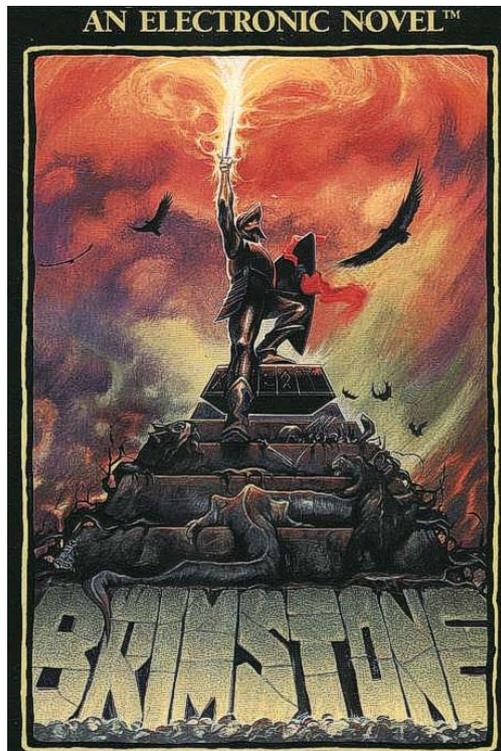


Image III.6 Front cover of the Electronic Novel *BRIMSTONE* (Brøderbund Software, Inc., 1985)

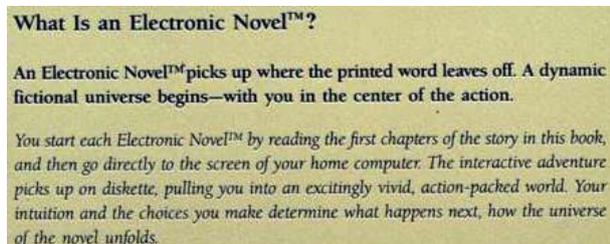


Image III.7 Part of the back cover of *BRIMSTONE*

The text reads:
What is an Electronic Novel™?

An Electronic Novel™ picks up where the printed word leaves off. A dynamic fictional universe begins — with you in the center of the action.

You start each Electronic Novel™ by reading the first chapters of the story in this book, and then go directly to the screen of your home computer. The interactive adventure picks up on diskette, pulling you into an excitingly vivid, action-packed world. Your intuition and the choices you make determine what happens next, how the universe of the novel unfolds.

Because mapping was not always easy and because some of the puzzles were quite challenging, a new kind of service soon took shape: *Movement Assistance Planners* (M.A.P.S.) and *Hierarchical Information for Novice Treasure Seekers* (H.I.N.T.S.) [sic] were sent to users on request. Those fortunate to have access to Usenet⁴² (usually students and university personnel) or a computer Bulletin Board (BBS) helped each other with hints and tips when lost in the game or when a problem proved too difficult. Others had to buy special booklets with maps, hints, and solutions that became more and more available with the increasing popularity of the games. Computer magazines were another useful source. These contained information on the hard- and software for a particular type of

⁴¹ Home computers did not use cartridges to distribute games (as did game consoles). As disk drives at the time were too expensive most home computers used cassette recorders. Because of this, home computer users could also write and record their own programs and games, which pushed the growth of the industry as well.

⁴² Usenet at the time was what one might call a university version of Arpanet. Using a service called Usenet News (a ‘virtual notice board’) users could exchange messages. To keep things organized the ‘News’ was divided into categories called newsgroups.

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computer, including information on games. They usually also contained listings of complete (text adventure) games and other programs, to type in and run on the home computer. In the early home computer days, books full of game code could also be bought. As we saw in the previous chapter, to distinguish them from arcade style games, text adventure games were promoted as interactive fiction (Image III.5) or electronic novels (Image III.6 and Image III.7), because this gave the prospective gamer a better idea of what to expect: "And we called it interactive fiction, not text adventures. ... And, you know, part of that is being a little bit grand about the medium and its possibilities, but part of that was, I think it was a more accurate term" (Martinez, 2010). Text adventure games were even discussed in the *New York Times Book Review*:

Infocom has been a major pioneer in such games, which have been called "participatory novels," "interactive fiction" and "participa-stories."

Their success should come as no surprise. For their worlds also happen to be the worlds of popular fiction - the detective story, science fiction, adventure and fantasy. These genres define worlds with their own logic; they pose lucid questions and possess clear narrative structures, easily adaptable to a computer. In 1927, for example, the Russian formalist critic Vladimir Propp mapped out rules governing the structure of Russian fairy tales in his "Morphology of the Folktale"; in 1965, they were programmed into a computer.

Infocom makes use of such forms, which have traditionally had archetypal power, and tempers them with irreverent wit. In *Zork*, the adventurer passes through a kingdom of magical treasures and threatening chambers in almost Odyssean fashion. (Rothstein, 1983)

They were also discussed in the *New York Times* Art section:

[T]he oldest and best computer game of all - not only in my opinion but also judged by the measure of the time it's been around - requires no hand-eye coordination to play it, and, at least in its purest form, consists entirely of words. Indeed, it is in several respects a literary computer game, and instead of distracting the mind from books it actually encourages reading.

To play *Adventure* is to act out one of the oldest and most universal dramas of all, encompassing all stories from the legends of the Holy Grail to "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" - the tale of the hero who goes forth into the unknown, struggles with whatever he finds there and discovers something of value, then returns with it to wherever he started out from. Better yet, in *Adventure* the hero is the player himself. So your involvement is immediate and complete.

Literature lives, and who knows if its future doesn't lie in some compromise with computers? (Lehmann-Haupt, 1986)

The transition from text to graphics, Sierra On-line and KING'S QUEST.

With the arrival of the home computer, text adventure games were not only ported to the home environment, the new computers also made simple graphic enhancements possible. Depending on the type of computer, graphics in two, four, eight or even sixteen colours could be achieved. In the beginning, it was not possible to show text and graphics at the same time, as the machines used different *modes* to represent the one or the other. In early games, like the *THE HOBBIT* (1982), the interactive text game mode was interrupted from time to time to draw a non-interactive image of the room the gamer had entered. Because these images only functioned as enhancements to add atmosphere and because they were literally few and far between because of the technical limitations, these adventures were still true text adventures.



Image III.8 *THE HOBBIT* ZX Spectrum version (Melbourne House, 1982)⁴³.

The first adventure game that featured text and graphics on the same screen was the game *MYSTERY HOUSE* (released in 1980)⁴⁴, a combination of the board game *CLUEDO* and Agatha Christie's detective *Ten Little Indians (And Then There Where None)*. *MYSTERY HOUSE* takes place in an old Victorian mansion. The gamer and seven other people (npc's) are in the house looking for treasure. It soon becomes clear that the others are murdered one by one. Obviously, the gamer's objective is to find the murderer before she herself becomes the final victim. The game (including the graphics) was designed by Roberta Williams soon after she discovered *THE COLOSSAL CAVE ADVENTURE*:

"He [her husband Ken] got it, eh, his first Apple computer back in 1979, 1980, and eh brought home a little game called Colossal Cave, a little, eh, text adventure game. And I started playing it. And this sort of gave me the

⁴³ Depending on the home computer the game was played on, the gamer could input a limited number of commands below the graphic (but in the same graphic mode, so with large pixel letters as shown in the image). On the BBC Microcomputer, one could not input text, so the screen returned back to text mode after the graphic.

⁴⁴ Interestingly on the boxed version of the game the complete title is *HI-RES ADVENTURE #1: MYSTERY HOUSE*, officially calling it an adventure game and not a work of interactive fiction.

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idea that, you know, I could try doing this." (Roberta Williams interview, *THE ROBERTA WILLIAMS ANTHOLOGY*, 1979)

"I was inspired to design my first game because I had played a text-only adventure game called *Colossal Cave* and loved it. And – I had also played a couple of Scott Adams' text-only adventure games from a now-defunct company called *Adventure International*. I had loved the category of adventure game, and thought that I could do it – albeit with my own ideas and embellishments". (Roberta Williams interview, Wright & Marold, 2000)

As there were neither scanners nor graphic tablets at the time, Roberta used a kind of pantograph to translate the drawings for *MYSTERY HOUSE* into the computer. Her husband Ken wrote the code. To draw attention to their game they put an advertisement in the 1980 May issue of *Micro Magazine*. Response was phenomenal and they ended up selling eighty thousand copies of the game.

"The truth of *Mystery House* is that it was the first computer game with graphics. Nobody ever realizes that, that all computer games up until that time were all text. And it was the first computer game with graphics. It didn't have any animation; it didn't have any sound; it didn't have any colour; it was black-and-white; but it did have graphics." (Roberta Williams, interview *THE ROBERTA WILLIAMS ANTHOLOGY*, 1979)

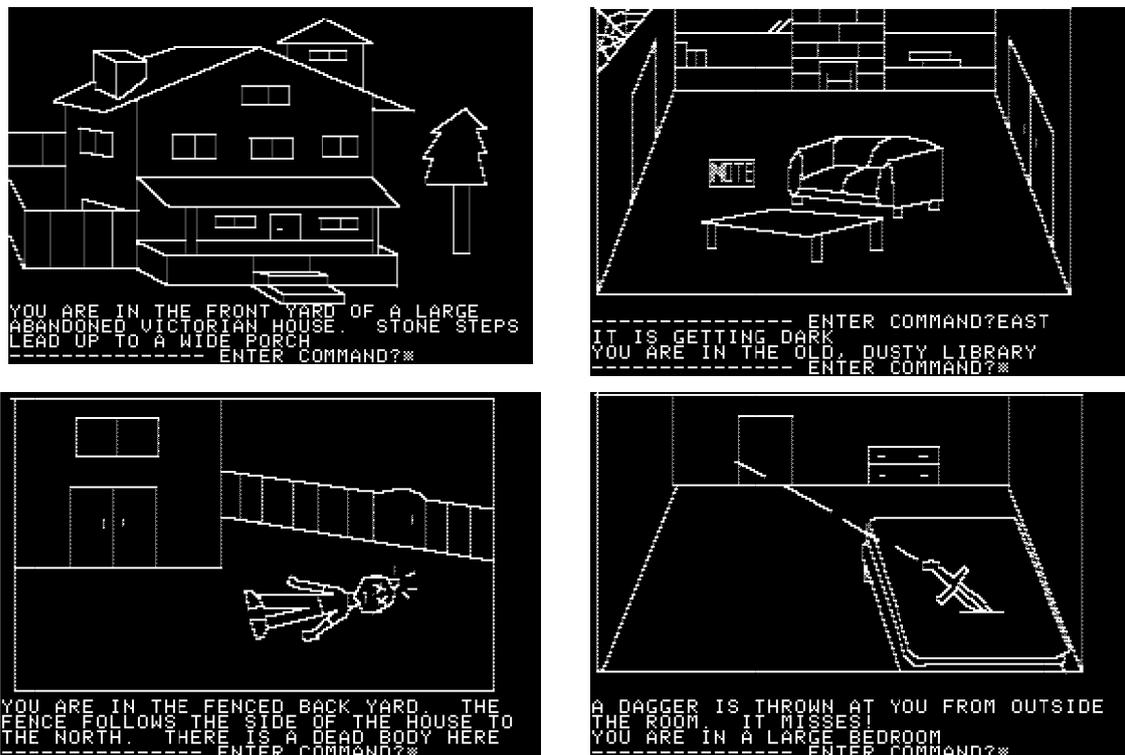


Image III.9 Screenshots *MYSTERY HOUSE* (Online-Systems, 1979)

After *MYSTERY HOUSE* Roberta and Ken created several other games, amongst others a second adventure game called the *WIZARD AND THE PRINCESS* (1980). These games were

published using the name of Ken's firm On-Line Systems, but when the couple moved to the Sierra Mountains they changed the name of the game company to Sierra On-line⁴⁵.

Although *MYSTERY HOUSE* combined text and drawings, the graphics were not interactive, even though they did change when opening doors or moving from room to room. *VALHALLA* (1983), released for the ZX Spectrum, was the first adventure game to offer 'interactive' animations.

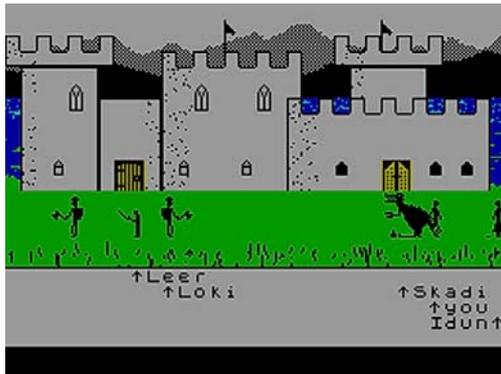
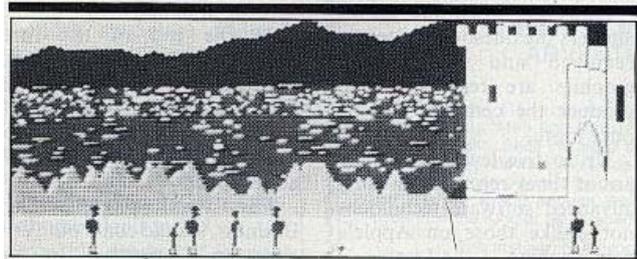


Image III.10 Screenshot *VALHALLA*,
(Legend, 1983)



VALHALLA, for the 48K Spectrum, looks like becoming a worthy successor to Melbourne House's *The Hobbit*. The object of *Valhalla* is to find *Grimnir*, the helmet. But, first, you must locate five other special objects. Set in the world of the Norse gods, *Valhalla* uses a split screen to show both text and graphics. Unusually, however, the graphics are not static — you can move around the screen, as can the other characters. *Valhalla*, which comes complete with a player manual, costs £14.95 and is available from Legend, Freepost, 1 Milton Road, Cambridge CB4 1UY.

Image III.11 Add for *VALHALLA* from *Micro Adventurer*
November 1983 p. 7

VALHALLA uses split screen technology showing the graphics in the upper part of the screen and a text command box in the lower part. The graphics are animated and the gamer can see her character move as a result of typing valid commands⁴⁶.

Despite the fact that *VALHALLA* was the earlier game, *KING'S QUEST* (1984) is usually seen as the first graphic adventure game using animation and third person point of view. *KING'S QUEST* was especially designed by Roberta Williams⁴⁷ for the IBM PCjr on the request

⁴⁵ In 1997 Sierra Online Inc. (who at the time had been taken over by CUC International) published a compilation of games created by Roberta Williams: *THE ROBERTA WILLIAMS ANTHOLOGY*. Apart from *MYSTERY HOUSE* and *THE WIZARD AND THE PRINCESS*, the anthology also includes the first seven *KING'S QUEST* games, the two *LAURA BOW* games (*THE COLONEL'S BEQUEST* and *THE DAGGER OF AMON RA*), *MISSION: ASTEROID*, *TIME ZONE*, *THE DARK CRYSTAL* and *MIXED-UP MOTHER GOOSE*. The anthology also includes interviews with Roberta and Ken Williams.

⁴⁶ The upward pointing arrows and text in the text window are used to clarify who is who. More info on *Valhalla*, including early advertisements and magazine references can be found at the World of Spectrum: <http://www.worldofspectrum.org/infoseekid.cgi?id=0007152>. The game can also be downloaded her. It can be played using a ZX Spectrum emulator.

⁴⁷ When the game was a commercial success and new releases were planned, it was renamed *KING'S QUEST I: QUEST FOR THE CROWN*. Roberta Williams also designed and published the first game with a female heroine: *KING'S QUEST IV: THE PERILS OF ROSELLA* [sic] in 1988. Because of the Lara Croft phenomenon this is now often overlooked. As with the introduction of *TOMB RAIDER* (eight years later in 1996) there was some concern whether male gamers would buy a game with a female heroine, see Kessel and Jenkins (1998, pp. 9-10).

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of IBM, to show off the machine's graphic capabilities, most notably the use of 16 colours (DeMaria & Wilson, 2002). Screen resolution, however, was low⁴⁸.

"They said, 'We want something like The Wizard and the Princess, but we want to push the machine's capabilities,'" remembers Roberta. "I had always wanted to do animation in my games, and have more colors. Up to then the adventure games had been first-person perspective. I had the idea to do something different. So I said, 'I want to create a world with a little guy running around and you control him.' But if you had a little guy running around, you had to give a sense of dimensionality in the picture. He has to go behind things like trees and rocks and stuff." (ibid., p. 138)

In *KING'S QUEST* the gamer takes on the role of Sir Graham, a knight⁴⁹. The avatar is moved through the game using a joystick or the arrow keys on the keyboard. In the original game, commands still had to be typed, for example `talk to gnome`. And, although the 'rooms' Sir Graham walks through could now be used as a visual aid, the game's manual still advised the gamer to draw a map just as in the original text adventure games⁵⁰. The manual also featured a backstory revealing what happened before the beginning of the actual game. The *KING'S QUEST* series (eight games of which the last appeared in 1998)⁵¹ transported the gamer to a world full of kings, princesses, elves, and dwarves, with puzzles that were based on fairy tales. In keeping with the theme and setting, the backstory started with the well-known words "*A long, long time ago*". As the first games of the series were also aimed at younger gamers, this was a good idea because prior knowledge about the original fairy tales did help to solve the puzzles. Moreover, recognizing the fairy-tales also added to the fun, although for non-Americans this task was harder, as some fairy tales were different from the European version and some were not known at all. Though the game still used typed input commands, adventure games now definitely embarked on the road to animated stories. The change from a first person to a third person point of view, however, did change the gamer's perception. Where before the

⁴⁸ The game's maximum screen resolution was 640x350 pixels (320x200 pixels being more common at the time). Low screen resolution produces the distinguishing appearance of pixel art graphics (bitmaps), clearly showing rough edges in any oblique line. The limitation on the number of possible colours, in turn (in the early days no more than four), meant that these edges could not be smoothed by creating progressive transitions between one colour and another (anti-aliasing). (Technical specifications for most of the games mentioned in this dissertation were taken from *Mobygames.com* and the original info on the games' boxes and in the accompanying booklets).

⁴⁹ Interestingly, the box of the PCjr game shows a knight in full armour brandishing his sword. In the actual game (as can be seen in the screenshots) Graham looks more like Robin Hood.

⁵⁰ Drawing maps still makes sense as they are not only used for directions but also to record where items, helpers, opponents, and secret passages can be found.

⁵¹ The *KING'S QUEST* games are still very popular. Some fans of the series have rewritten the two earliest games so that they now feature VGA graphics, mouse navigation and spoken dialogue (similar to later instalments of the series). These can be downloaded for free from the site <http://www.agdinteractive.com/games/kq1/>. In 2006, Sierra released the *KING'S QUEST COLLECTION* containing the first seven games; adapting the earliest games so that they could be played on Windows XP.

gamer felt personally involved (as text adventure games invariably addressed the gamer as 'you'), the game experience was now mediated through an avatar, a game character with whom the gamer had to identify. And where before one had to imagine the dark and sinister places described in the game, graphics envisioned by the game's designer(s) now mediated the game world. Despite the risk of alienating the first generation of adventure gamers, the game type thus reinvented itself so that it appealed to a new generation of gamers who had grown up with comic books and television.

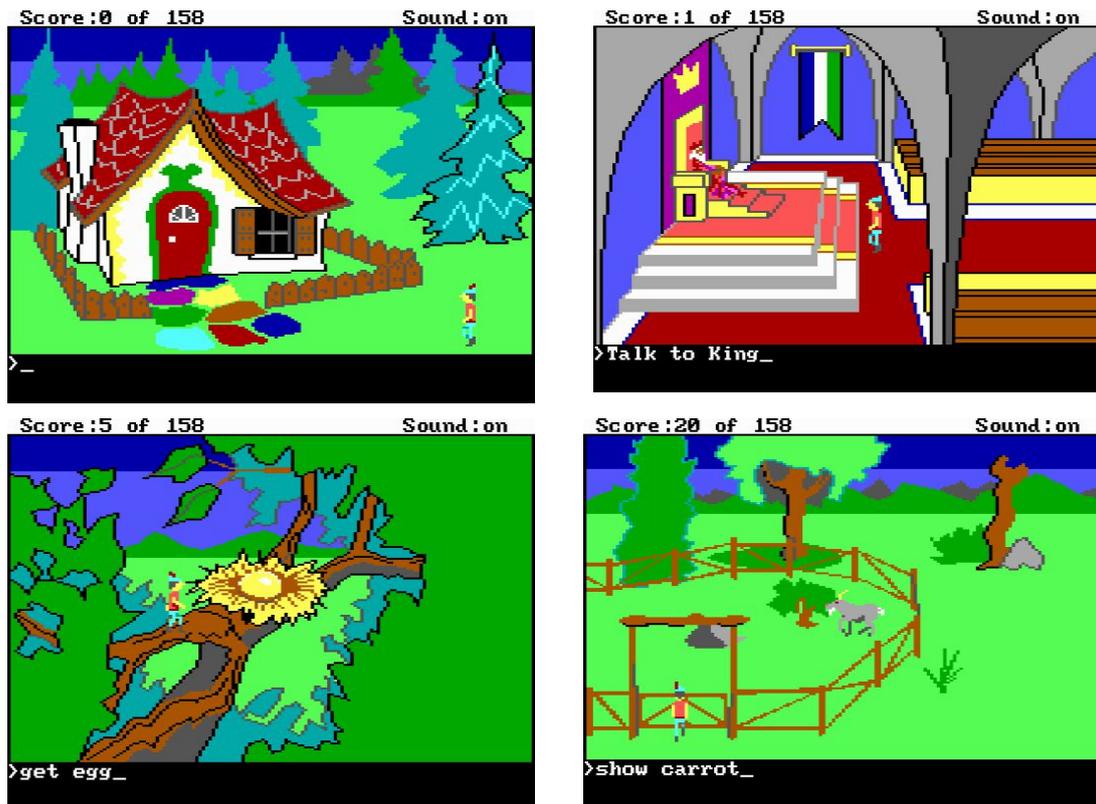


Image III.12 Screenshots *KING'S QUEST* (Sierra-Online, 1984)

The history of the adventure game did not end here, however. In the years that followed, new hardware developments pushed the game type forward. The popularity of console games meant that command-line input eventually disappeared so that all adventures became point-and-click. The first game to use this technique was *MANIAC MANSION* (1987). Now actions like `push`, `pull`, `give`, `open`, `close`, `use`, `unlock`, etcetera, were shown on the screen (see Image III.13) so that the gamer could select them using her mouse or keyboard⁵². This avoided typing errors and having to work out which commands worked and which did not. This did, however, take away some of

⁵² *Maniac Mansion* did not have 'commands' to talk or ask questions. In later point-and-click adventures conversations and interrogations were made possible by offering multiple choice sentences, questions and/or answers.

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the fun as, apart from solving puzzles, figuring out a game's vocabulary was very much part of the enjoyment. Because the commands were now prescribed it also meant a certain loss of interactivity because the 'natural' language interpreters that the command-line adventures used had become very sophisticated, which made interacting with the game characters almost like having a dialogue. Consequently, the prescribed commands of the point-and-click adventures made the new games feel more like interactive comic books than interactive stories. Point-and-click adventures dominated the market from 1987 until 1995.



Image III.13 Screenshot *MANIAC MANSION* (LucasFilm Games, 1987)

New graphic hardware also meant a more natural colour palette and a higher resolution⁵³. With the invention of the sound card and the cd-rom, game music became very sophisticated⁵⁴ and game dialogue became audible. Game companies even employed well-known film stars to record this dialogue. Consequently, graphic adventure games now more and more resembled animated films. The cd-rom's capacity also meant that certain images and scenes could be pre-recorded, making the graphics even more stunning, as in the famous game *MYST* (1993). *MYST*, subtitled "The surrealistic adventure that will become your world", not only amazed with its very beautiful graphics (with a very high resolution for that time); *MYST* also re-introduced the first person perspective so that, just as in the earlier text adventures, it was the gamer in persona who had to find her way through a labyrinthine world. This and its non-violent content made the game the computer hit of

⁵³ On the use of colour in games see Chapter V.

⁵⁴ Nowadays many countries including the Netherlands have yearly concerts of game music performed by symphony orchestras.

1994 and the following years. In 1998, *MYST* even became the best grossing game ever⁵⁵. For the computer game industry *MYST* was also a turning point. The hyper realistic images not only became the new industry standard (not only for adventure games); the game's demographics (which included large groups of women and senior citizens) showed the industry that computer games were not only played by ten to fifteen year old boys.

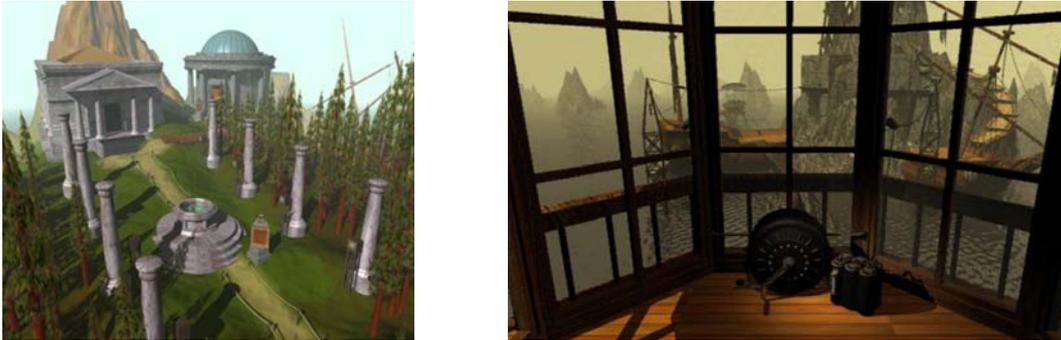


Image III.14 Screenshots *MYST* (Brøderbund, 1993)

The next technical advancement came in 1994-1995 when game companies released the first adventure games in *full motion video* (FMV), effectively turning them into interactive films. Edge magazine refers to this period as “that fleeting time during the mid-’90s when the game industry briefly flirted with FMV-flavoured collaborations with Hollywood” (Edge, 2009, p. 2). But as it later turned out, this was not a match made in heaven: “Many of the productions turned out during that period proved to be disasters – Night Trap, Snow Job and Harvester among the main offenders” (ibid.).



Image III.15 Shooting FMV material



Image III.16 Screenshot: At the Münchener Zoo⁵⁶
GABRIEL KNIGHT II THE BEAST WITHIN (Sierra Online Inc., 1995)

⁵⁵ According to PCData (now NDP Market Tracking). Of course, since then several other games have held this position.

⁵⁶ The small dagger in the image is the regular mouse pointer in the game. The dagger is part of Gabriel's Schattenjäger (Shadow Hunter) inheritance, together with the Schattenjäger medallion. What the image shows is not Gabriel trying to harm the wolf, but clicking on the tag in order to read it. See Chapter IV for more information on the *GABRIEL KNIGHT* games.

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One of the main reasons most FMV games flopped might be that the technique was not suitable for the medium, as it required that all the video footage had to be pre-recorded. This not only meant that the number of cd-roms increased dramatically (games of six or eight cd-roms were quite common). It also meant that interaction became severely limited: if it was not taped, it could not be played (see Image III.15 and Image III.16). Nevertheless, some of the games from this period, such as *GABRIEL KNIGHT: THE BEAST WITHIN* (1995) and *UNDER A KILLING MOON* (1994), were still able to deliver compelling and interesting stories with complex and sophisticated puzzles.

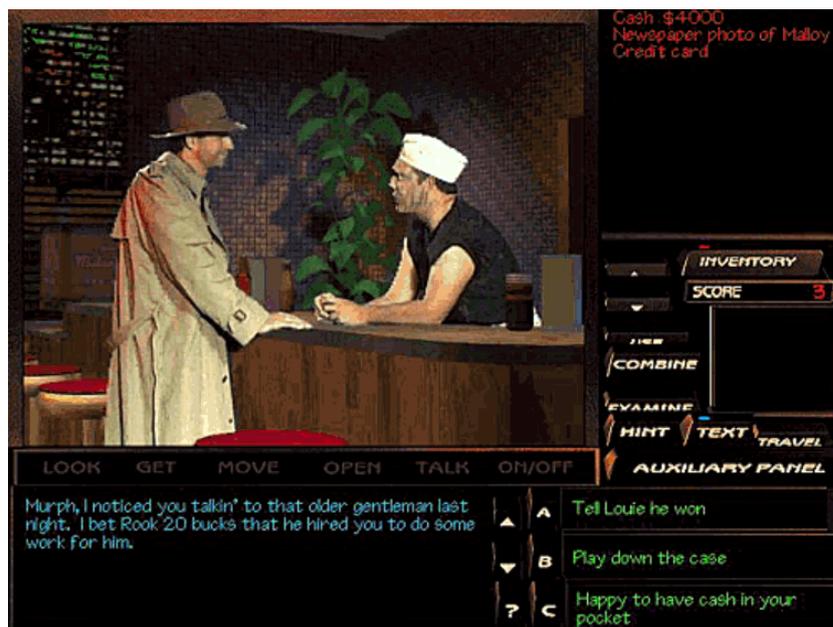


Image III.17 Screenshot *UNDER A KILLING MOON* (Access Software, 1994)

Jensen, although she herself did really enjoy *MAKING THE BEAST WITHIN*, concedes that FMV was not the way to go:

“Narrative was key,” she proposes. “It was dark, sexy and transcended the medium. Also, the live actors brought a lot to it; they didn’t treat it like a videogame. I actually love working with actors and personally believe they’re preferable to 3D models. But the medium of film simply wasn’t interactive enough for most games.” (Edge, 2009, p. 2)

The use of full motion video is not the only reason we see games from this period as interactive films. The content-genres used, for instance detective and court drama, were directly copied from popular TV-series and films of the time. This is perhaps the reason why certain gamers still like games that are produced this way. For the real adventure gamer, however, the technique is too restrictive. Therefore, eventually, adventure game designers started to make three-dimensional games, where the main body of the game

was rendered *real time* but some parts consisted of pre-recorded cutscenes (made famous by games like *DOOM* (1993))⁵⁷.

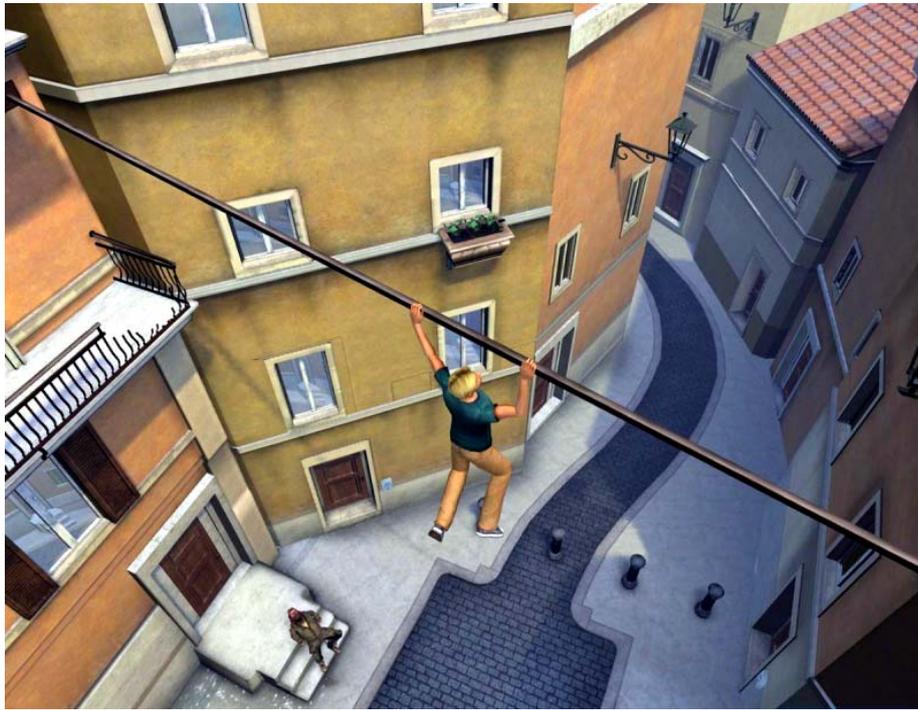


Image III.18 Screenshot *BROKEN SWORD: THE ANGEL OF DEATH* (Revolution Software Ltd., 2006)

The drawback of generating graphics 'on the fly' is that these kinds of games require hardware that is more sophisticated. Rendering in real time, on the other hand, reinstates the gamer's freedom to wander at will, which re-established the original feel of the old adventure games⁵⁸. Modern computers are ever better equipped to deal with real time rendering; this means that in-game graphics have become ever more detailed and sophisticated. Modern consoles like the Xbox360 and the PS3 achieve very realistic real time visuals where nothing has to be pre-recorded⁵⁹. For future games of progression this means that they can once again focus on intricate interactive stories, as was the case with the original text adventure games.

⁵⁷ Although belonging to a different game type i.e. the First Person Shooter, *DOOM* clearly harks back to the early adventure games, as the gamer still has to master a labyrinth. However, there are no puzzles to solve and the stories (initially) were not as elaborate. Finding and picking up useful items was still important, but killing your enemies and survival became the key issues, as I explained in the previous chapter.

⁵⁸ Most 3D games also use pre-rendered graphics; these usually are intros (to tell the backstory) and cutscenes that bridge interactive game play (often also used to advance the game's story). As these pre-rendered scenes were made on state of the art computers they tended to be extremely realistic.

⁵⁹ Present-day computer games often use in-engine cutscenes, which are not only cheaper to produce but which can also preserve continuity in the visuals so that e.g. any physical changes the avatar has undergone are also visible in the cutscene. See also Chapter V.

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Longing for the Middle Ages

Around the time *ADVENTURE* was created, Umberto Eco noticed that the second half of the twentieth century showed a visible longing for the Middle Ages, especially in popular culture:

We are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination. (Eco, 1973, p. 63)

But what were these Middle Ages which the designers and gamers, amongst others, longed for? As Eco shows, the Middle Ages they envisioned were certainly not an accurate depiction (even if this was possible) but a modern construct especially the one portrayed by the mass media. In England this started in the 19th century with Walter Scott and William Morris, with the Pre-Raphaelites and with the Gothic style. In the 20th century Tolkien and C.S. Lewis continued this tradition, not only in their academic work (Lewis's field was mediaeval literature, Tolkien's mediaeval poetry), but also and more predominantly by their works of popular fiction. Or as Norman F. Cantor put it: "In terms of shaping the Middle Ages in the popular culture of the twentieth century, Tolkien and Lewis have had an incalculable effect" (1991, p. 208). Still, the mediaeval world Tolkien gives us in *The Lord of the Rings* is in some ways remarkably accurate. We owe this to Tolkien's vast knowledge of and love for this time. For those of us with knowledge of Anglo Saxon and Old Norse poetry and prose it is quite clear that he had the desire "to write a modern work in the same [mediaeval] tradition" as he put it himself (West, 1975, p. 78)⁶⁰. This makes *The Lord of the Rings* a modern reconstruction of a fragment of mediaeval culture" (Cantor, 1991, p. 227). Tolkien even incorporated parts of original mediaeval works, such as *Beowulf* (the entrance scene at Meduseld) and the poem *The Wanderer* (cited by Aragorn). Another way in which Tolkien refers to life in the Middle Ages is the way in which the party leaving Rivendell is composed. Although the participants all represent a different 'race' (man, elf, dwarf, hobbit, wizard) they clearly also represent the major classes found in mediaeval times: the nobles (Aragorn, Boromir, Legolas and Gimli), whose task it is to rule and to defend the land and its inhabitants; the farmers (the hobbits), who till the land and produce the food; and the clergy (Gandalf, in a sense), who are responsible for the supernatural. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this class

⁶⁰ Actually this well known and often cited utterance of Tolkien was made to an audience at Oxford who had come to hear Tolkien lecture on philology but instead Tolkien recited one of his own poems. The incidence was recorded by Eugène Vinaver (founder of the Arthurian society (Oxford, 1928), which was later renamed Society for the Study of the Medieval Languages and Literatures) (West, 1975, p. 89).

distinction is not only obvious from the characters' actions; it can also be 'heard' in their speech. Of course, there are also differences within a class (Frodo stems from a higher social order than Merry and Pippin) but the characters still fit the class they belong to. This distinction in separate classes and races was adopted in *D&D*, not only because of the influence of *The Lord of the Rings*, but also because it already existed in the Gigax' Castle and Crusade Society's wargames. The *D&D* classes were later ported to modern (Massively Multiplayer) Role-Playing Games. A gamer of the mediaeval fantasy MMRPG *EVERQUEST* (1999-present) is therefore still essentially moving in a society based on mediaeval classes. The mediaeval world they inhabit, however, is clearly a romanticized version of the Middle Ages, undoubtedly influenced by the mediated versions that 19th century artists and 20th century comic books, films and television series gave us.

There are games that try to give a more accurate depiction of the Middle Ages, but these are usually educational. An exception is the game *MICHAEL CRICHTON TIMELINE* (2000), which was promoted with the slogan: "the Future of Adventure is a journey into the past...".



Image III.19 In *TIMELINE* the landscape, buildings and interiors are based on archeological evidence (Eidos Interactive, 2000)

The game is an adaptation of the book of the same title and relates the fictional story of a team of archaeologists who go back to the Middle Ages. The book's story is grounded on real archaeological finds and recent research. In the game, however, the designers had to find a balance between the "historical accuracy and the artistic vision needed to meet the

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requirements.”⁶¹ (see Image III.19). The game, and the 2003 film, is therefore a poor reflection on the original book. But technical concessions are not the only reason the game failed. Just as with the Castle and Crusade Society, a realistic depiction of the Middle Ages does not offer enough excitement and interaction for the gaming generation.



Image III.20 In the fictional Middle Ages, there always is a tournament. So in a game set in the Middle Ages you would want to participate. Fortunately, one of the archaeologists in *TIMELINE* has to train to be a knight. (Eidos Interactive, 2000)

This becomes obvious when we look at the very successful game *ASSASSIN'S CREED* (2007). It, too, takes place in the Middle Ages, in the Holy Land at the time of the first crusade in 1191 to be precise. Similar to *TIMELINE*, the reconstructions of the main cities Acre, Damascus and Jerusalem (see Image III.21) are based on archaeological evidence and historical maps⁶² and the designers worked closely with archaeologists and historians⁶³. The historical characters to be assassinated were involved in the crusades (and did in fact die in 1191), but their part in the game is mostly fictional (Raymond, 2007). The same is true for the overall story. The assassins, their leader, and their stronghold do have some similarities with what is known about them⁶⁴. But they only form the background and settings for an action-packed game where successful completion is mainly dependent on gameplay dexterity, which the gamer often has to display in battles with overwhelming numbers of enemies.

⁶¹ Taken from the game manual.

⁶² “We contacted a Historian early in the conception phase of development to help us build a foundation of research. We have used the web, documentaries, old medieval encyclopaedias, paintings, and novels. The historian helped us with some harder to find information such as original city plans of Jerusalem, Damascus, and Acre that date back to the 3rd crusade. There is one book called ‘The Third Crusade 1191: Richard the Lionheart, Saladin and the battle for Jerusalem’ that has been especially helpful because it covers the year in which our game takes place” (Seif El-Nasr et al., 2008, p. 14)

⁶³ Information obtained from the original website and promotional material at the time of the launch of the game.

⁶⁴ See Seif El-Nasr et al. (2008).



Image III.21 The city of Jerusalem in *ASSASSIN'S CREED* (Ubisoft, 2007)

For the discerning gamer the mediaeval atmosphere that is created does, however, add to the feeling of immersion. What is there makes the game more credible, just as Tolkien's depiction of Middle Earth was believable because it based on historical facts.



Image III.22 screenshot from *THE LORD OF THE RINGS, THE RETURN OF THE KING* (Electronic Arts, 2003)

However, this longing for the Middle Ages is not only found in computer games. In his book *Strange Landscapes* (1995, pp. 7-36) Christopher Frayling notes, as Umberto Eco

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did before, that this renewed interest in the Middle Ages can also be found in (popular) literature, art, comic books, film and music (especially Heavy Metal). The computer game industry just followed suit, giving us its own interpreted and mediated version, which in turn influenced and influences new interpretations of the Middle Ages in other media. This is, for instance, apparent when one compares pre-home computer television series from the 1970s set in mediaeval times, such as the Dutch series *FLORIS* (1969) and the British series *ARTHUR OF THE BRITONS* (1972-1973) with their 21st Century counterparts such as the BBC series *ROBIN HOOD* (2006-2009) and *MERLIN* (2008-present). The earlier series combined fiction and education so that they revolved around believable mediaeval storylines and settings. In the new series historic accuracy has been replaced by pure fantasy, not only in the storyline but even more so in the *mise en scène*.

Concluding remarks

The adventure game is the archetypical game of progression; it is the oldest genre in the group and the one that originated it. All other games of progression, action adventure games, stealth games, single player role-playing games, and first person shooters⁶⁵ derive from the adventure game. And the adventure genre itself stems from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and the role-playing game *DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS*. Throughout the history of the genre the adventure game has undergone several changes, most of them in relation to technological advancements. Some of these changes were certainly also commercially driven, but most also tried to find new ways of telling stories in an interactive way. The original first person point of view text adventure games, were, at the time, even called interactive stories or interactive fiction, even when the term adventure game had eventually become familiar. This was not solely a marketing strategy; at the time, it was a better way to explain what to expect (what game skills were needed). When the adventure game moved to the home computer, graphics were added and eventually (also under the influence of the keyboardless home console), the genre reached its pivotal stage: the 2D point-and-click third person point of view game, where progress was

⁶⁵ Not all FPS and RPG games fall into the category of games of progression. Whether they do or not depends on how story-structured the games are. In the previous chapter, I showed how the FPS came into being and how the first game *WOLFENSTEIN 3D* (1992) mixed elements of the action and the adventure genre, while adding new unique features. This game, one could argue, is more about game rules than about story. But other games in the genre, such as *HALF LIFE* (1998), are story-structured. In the RPG genre, all the single player games, such as most of the *FINAL FANTASY* series (1987-present), are story-structured, while all (online) multiplayer RPG's have to be rule-based because it is very hard to maintain a story when more than one interactive character could influence it. The same goes for the multi-player variants of such games as *ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD* (2010) or *RED DEAD REDEMPTION* (2010) (that is why, in a single player RPG, the gamer plays all the parts by switching game character).

measured in score-points, the classic adventure game. These were the golden years, roughly between 1984 and 1995, the decade of the great adventure companies like LucasArt and Sierra Online. But changes were at hand. By the end of the decade *MYST* (1993), with its stunning graphics and a return to first person point of view, still offered the adventure experience, but gave it a new twist⁶⁶. This non-violent game with its almost philosophical narrative attracted a new demographic and became the best selling game of its day. However, other types of games vied for supremacy after 1995: *TOMB RAIDER* (1996) put the action adventure at the top of the charts, while *DOOM* (1993) had ensured the future of the First Person Shooter a few years earlier. And with the arrival of *THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT* (1998) the stealth adventure game added yet another (sub)genre to the taxonomy. In a bid to retain its status, the adventure game went Hollywood with full motion video, in an attempt to merge game and film in interactive cinema. But the gamble proved futile as only a few games that used this technique were successful. Consequently, as I will show in the next chapter, this forced many adventure developers to go for the next technique that had proved to be successful in other genres: 3D. This strategy, in hindsight, not only proved to be too little too late, in the eyes of some designers, like Jane Jensen, the genre did not even benefit from the technique. Still, to truly understand the genre, insight in its history (preferably by playing the games themselves) is necessary because it shows why we still do certain things in a certain way when playing games of progression, which I will elaborate on in Chapters IV and V.

Looking at the prehistory of the adventure game, we saw that the Middle Ages formed an important source of information and inspiration, both for Morris's stories as well as for Tolkien's masterpiece. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* offered us a reconstructed version of mediaeval society, based on his vast knowledge of Anglo Saxon and Old Norse writings. However, most modern gamers are not interested in a historically accurate depiction. They prefer fantasy. Just as the generations before, they have reinterpreted Tolkien's work to suit their own time. This can be seen in the latest *Lord of the Rings* games⁶⁷, i.e. those that are based on Peter Jackson's film version (e.g. *THE LORD OF THE RINGS, THE TWO TOWERS* (2002) and *THE LORD OF THE RINGS, THE RETURN OF THE KING* (2003)). However, these games do not focus on the story but on the action. Just as my generation hacked and slashed away on the playground imitating popular TV-series of our time, modern day gamers hack

⁶⁶ *RETURN TO ZORK* (1993), released in the same year, was the first point-and-click version of *ZORK*. The game retained the first person point of view of the earlier games (in fact all *ZORK* games remained first person, except for the latest game *LEGENDS OF ZORK* (2009) which is an online role-playing game).

⁶⁷ See Chapter VI.

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and slash through hordes of virtual Orcs, embodied by their heroes Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli.

Still, the adventure game genre is not dead. As I explained in the previous chapter, the genre enjoys a renewed interest on new platforms where not only old games are adapted to the new hardware, but where even new adventure games are produced. However, this development has not happened in the way that Steven Poole (2000) imaged, when he predicted a future where the restrictive choices of the point-and-click interface would be replaced by voice controlled gaming. On the new platforms, we still point and click, but now we can use a stylus or our fingers, or we can just move to interact with the game⁶⁸. However, like the adventure game itself, the fans have also changed; some have turned to puzzle versions of the genre, while others moved with the genre's descendants, the action adventure game, and the stealth adventure game. This is because they still want to have an immersive narrative, but one in which they take a more active part. They want to experience the stories themselves, not hear them told second hand:

‘But I suppose it’s often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that is not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind’. (Tolkien, 1954b, p. 285)

⁶⁸ Using the Wii-mote controller or the Sony Playstation move controller or just by moving in front of the Microsoft Kinect camera lenses.