

VII. Computer Games as a Narrative Medium

Discussion and Conclusions

Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand.

Chinese Proverb

As I stated in the introduction, the primary aim of the articles on which this dissertation is based was to explore how games 'tell' stories. Secondly, I wondered how the dominance of narrative theory from literary and film studies might have led to misinterpretations in the study of story-structured games. Finally, I wanted to show that the analysis of progressive games benefits from a theory that includes a diachronic aspect, as the narrative potential of these games is also influenced by changes that occurred within the genres, as well as by limitations and (past) technical affordances of the platform.

How do games tell stories?

As I explained in the introduction, not all games are story-structured or even story-based. Those that are not, the rule-based games, Juul (2005) dubbed games of emergence; those that are, games where the game script determines what happens next, he dubbed games of progression. As we saw, this division is not as clear-cut as it seems. As the gaming public demands more games with stories, rule-based games often have (extra-diegetic) stories, while games of progression also have rule-based gameplay elements. In this dissertation, I have focused on clear examples of games of progression: adventure games and their descendants. But what makes narrative in these games different from narrative in other media?

For a story-structured game to work, the balance between gameplay and narrative has to work. This means that the gamer has to be able to make choices, i.e. to exert agency. This is what makes storytelling in games different from other media. Gamers want to have the idea that their actions are meaningful and influence what happens next, even though the overall outcome of the game stays the same. Or, as James Portnow (2008) put it:

In most written works, the author has all the agency. This means the author controls exactly what happens. The author has complete autonomy over the outcome of every situation.

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In games, the agency is shared by the player and the author together. The player can't exceed the bounds of what has been created for him, but he can choose when, how, and in what context he will experience it.

Consequently, as I have shown, the way computer games 'tell' stories is different from the way books and films do. Computer games do not **tell** stories, nor do they **show** them, they create a story world in which the gamer 'lives' the story, for lack of a better term; so from the gamer's point of view it feels more like mimesis than diegesis.

Because narrative and gameplay are interconnected, narrative in computer games is affected by gameplay skills and hardware affordances. As we saw, gameplay skills are game-genre dependent. They draw on a mixture of assets the gamer either brings to the game or acquires during gameplay. Whichever may be the case, the acquisition, development, and refinement of gameplay skills is an integral part of computer games and gameplay, also in story-structured games. Within the required mixture, a particular set of gameplay skills usually stands out, defining the genre. For adventure games, these are cerebral skills¹. But to successfully play an adventure game you also need navigational skills to find your way through the game world, as well as kinaesthetic skills to move your avatar and perform other avatar actions (unlocking closed doors, picking up objects, as well as jumping over chasms or avoiding projectiles). Gameplay skills directly affect the gamer's progress in the game's story. Without the necessary initial skills, she cannot play the game and when a gamer does not improve her skills during gameplay, she will not advance in the game and therefore not achieve narrative closure. This is what makes games both so frustrating and appealing at the same time. In a story-structured computer game, one cannot skip to the last pages, nor can one skip to the last part of the film. A gamer will always have to use her gameplay skills to overcome the in-game obstacles, be they cerebral, navigational or kinaesthetic. The fact that, on average, only 5 to 10 percent of gamers finish a game (Dumitrescu, 2010; Hinkle, 2010) graphically highlights this. Fortunately, for games of progression with strong storylines the percentages are higher: approximately 30 percent for *GRAND THEFT AUTO IV* (2008) and 40+ percent for *ASSASSIN'S CREED II* (2009) (ibid.). This suggests that narrative closure is a strong incentive that motivates gamers to play on.

As I showed in Chapters IV and V, part of both the cerebral as well as the navigational gameplay skills is being able to 'read' the visual grammar of the game. When creating a game, a designer has to find the right balance between what is needed to

¹ Therefore, present-day adaptations of the genre such as *PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE CURIOUS VILLAGE* (2008) are also called puzzle games.

address the gameplay skills of the specific genre and platform, and what is needed to 'translate' the story onto screen. As with film, in games a visual grammar has come into being which addresses the audio-visual needs per genre. But this visual grammar is not meant as a gameplay obstacle. On the contrary, it is meant as a visual aide, for example highlighting important game props in adventure games or using mini-maps in open world games to show what is in off-screen space. However, as I pointed out in Chapter IV, what was meant as an aide can also become a hindrance. As with other gameplay skills, mastering the visual grammar of a particular genre takes some time. Consequently, when it changes (usually because of new hardware developments), for instance from 2D in *GABRIEL KNIGHT SINS OF THE FATHERS* (GK1, 1993) to 3D in *GABRIEL KNIGHT BLOOD OF THE SACRED BLOOD OF THE DAMNED* (GK3, 1999), the gamer has to adapt to the new situation, which usually means 'unlearning' the previously ingrained grammar. This means that in the intervening time period gameplay and story progress will be affected as the gamer can no longer depend on previously learned skills and has as yet not mastered the new skills required.

But as we also saw in Chapters IV and V, games are more than their audio-visual representation. Navigating the gamespace and interacting with it also means that the gamer has to have certain kinaesthetic gameplay skills, which are not only genre and platform dependent but also depend on the company that created the game as well as the game engine they used. Part of improving one's kinaesthetic game skills is learning which buttons or button combinations do what. Consequently, playing a specific game on a particular platform means that the gamer not only improves her visual grammar, but that she also develops a sort of kinetic grammar, most notably in fast paced games which would otherwise become impossible to play. But where the visual grammar of a game basically stays the same, button assignment does not; for instance in *ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD* (2010) the button that 'enhances' the avatar's actions and the one that brings up the weapons menu on the PS3 are switched on the XBox360, because the latter's controller is designed slightly differently. But even on the same platform, one cannot rely on one's kinetic grammar because button assignment in different games (from different companies) almost always differs, apart from the very basics. Therefore, limits to kinetic memory regularly become a gameplay obstacle. This is especially true in fast-paced games, because when rushed, the wrong buttons are invariably used, with disastrous consequences. Only when the gamer's kinetic memory has adjusted to the other platform or the other game, will gameplay become more successful so that the gamer not only literally can move on in the game, but can also move on in the story.

Games of progression in light of established narrative theory

As I pointed out in the introduction, computer games were appropriated by literary and film studies before game studies established itself as a separate academic field. As a result, the first years of game studies were dominated by a struggle for authority between the narratologists and the ludologists. And, although this difference was eventually laid to rest, both the earlier appropriation and the power struggle resulted in a certain suspicion of story-structured games. What followed in game studies was a downplay of the narrative aspects of computer games in preference of the game rules, and consequently of games of emergence. In the meantime, the earlier appropriation, as well as the fact that certain progression games undeniably have narrative aspects, meant that terminology and techniques from literary and film studies were still used to study computer games. As a result, the study of games of progression found itself in a kind of analytical void.

As I showed in Chapter II, the use of terms from literary and film studies meant that misunderstandings were present from the outset. Like other media, games are categorized in genres. However, the genre categorization in computer games is not based on the same concept as it is in popular fiction and in film. As we saw, formulaic fiction uses genre to categorize texts based on their content. Film producers and the film audience use the term genre similarly, i.e. to categorize films on the basis of certain expectations/conventions related to their theme or content. Game theorists, designers, developers, producers, and gamers, however, use genre to categorize games based on the gameplay skills needed and the tasks/affordances associated with them. This does not mean that a genre categorization that is based on gameplay skills does not also create certain expectations in the gaming audience; they are just different, i.e. a gamer who has mastered the gameplay skills of a particular genre not only expects to be able to play another game in the same genre, but also expects that challenges within the game become increasingly more difficult so that she will expand and refine her repertoire of skills. As I pointed out, on the one hand this makes genre in games more critical on a skills-based level, while on the other hand they are less critical in the sense that gamers can live with the fluid boundaries of the genre taxonomy. It also means that the term genre in games is not burdened with aesthetic assumptions, as it is in other media, especially film.

As games of progression from *KING'S QUEST* (1984) on gradually became an audio-visual medium, it seems appropriate that researchers turned to film studies to analyse them, especially as film studies itself had successfully broken away from literary theory to

be able to address the visual nature of film. Certainly setting, camera and framing are terms in which the visual aspects of computer games can be discussed, but as I explained in Chapters IV and V, the use of audio-visual elements in the context of computer games is again quite different from that of film. Film studies does, as yet, not have a means to analyse camera and framing when these are determined by an interactive participant. And setting and props, by necessity, have to be implemented differently in games because they are the primary means through which the gamer can exert agency. Therefore, their audio-visual design does not only have to support the narrative but, more importantly, the gameplay as well. For that reason setting in games is quite different from setting in film. And, even though both the visual grammar of computer games as well as the visual grammar of film functions as an aide to help/direct the gamer/viewer, interactivity in games demands a different approach, as my examples in Chapters V and VI clearly showed. Analysing such aspects from a film studies point of view could lead to the wrong conclusions, as my example of the use of colour showed. In games, colour is not only used to convey a certain atmosphere or to draw the gamer's eye; it is again first of all used as a visual means to help with gameplay and as such also dictated by genre affordances.

The fundamental difference between narrative in progressive computer games and narrative in other media lies, of course, in the already mentioned agency, i.e. the informed/meaningful choices that gamers can make. In progressive games like *GK1* and *GK3*, every choice leads to a different story node, departing from the linearity we know from books and films (Image VII.1).

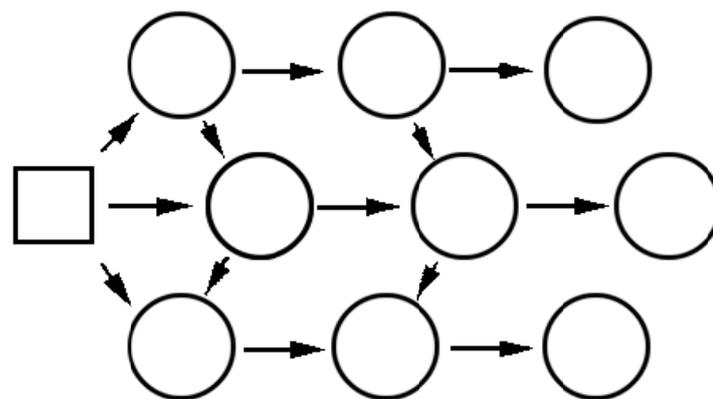


Image VII.1 Simplified story-structure of the classic adventure game.

Still, the classic adventure game is the most linear of the games of progression, because here, although different endings are possible (distinguishing good adventure games from mediocre ones) the designer always limits the number of choices per story node and/or

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includes bottle-necks where the different story-paths converge, as otherwise the story variations and dialogues would grow exponentially. This possible proliferation of choice was less of a problem in the original text adventure games (see Chapter III), especially when they were implemented on a mainframe or mini computer; but graphic adventure games, even when they were stored on CD-ROM, were subject to severe memory restrictions. The limited number of choices graphic adventure games had meant that these games could still be analysed using the classical distinction between story and discourse, which is part of the reason why narratologists were able to appropriate narrative computer games while ludologists dismissed them as too linear (i.e. not interactive enough to count as games). How much games have changed in this respect over the past twenty-five years can be seen from the game *HEAVY RAIN* (2010), discussed in Chapter V. Here the outcome of the game literally depends on a vast number of choices the gamer can make along the way, making it not only impossible to foresee whether the abducted child is eventually rescued and which of the main characters will survive, but also highly likely that replaying the game will lead to a different ending. Through repeated gameplay, it would eventually be possible to piece together all the possible story nodes, but this would still not give the number of possible discourses, as these are exponentially greater. Therefore, although one can still make the theoretical distinction between story and discourse, in practical terms it is no longer possible to analyse games this way.

This also holds true for present-day open world action adventure games like *AC BROTHERHOOD*, even though their main narrative is linear. This is not only because in open world games the gamer can choose to follow the in-game story or just roam the game world at will, but also because open world games contain several sets of side quests so that the gamer can always interrupt the narrative order of the main game to embark on one of these² (Image VII.2).

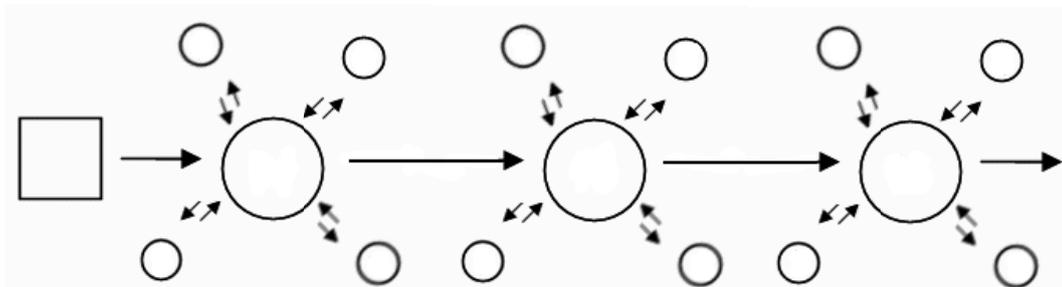


Image VII.2 Simplified story-structure of *ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD*. Note that the large circles represent the main story, the small circles are side quests, as well as self-imposed gamer objectives.

² See Appendix B *ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD* for an overview of the side quests in the game.

Side quests have their own, much smaller, mini-narratives or they are just games of emergence that, apart from an initial 'story' to set off the quest and a concluding 'story' to round things up, do not need any kind of narrative. Other types of side quests, for example most gathering/collecting quests, do not need any narrative at all.

But where the *ASSASSIN'S CREED* games still enforce the linearity of the main narrative, other open world games like *RED DEAD REDEMPTION* (2010) have a more open story structure. Of course, there still is some order in which story parts have to take place, so that one cannot move on before completing a specific game task, but in *RDR* the story nodes are presented as individual elements in a group/cluster rather than in a chain (Image VII.3).

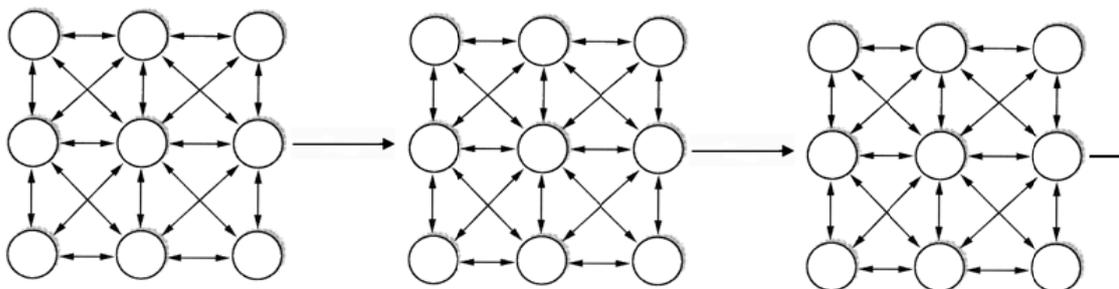


Image VII.3 Simplified story-structure of *RED DEAD REDEMPTION*. Note the circles should be numbered as each/group cluster has a logical order. However, this order is not imposed; the arrows within the group/cluster indicate that the gamer can access each story node out of sequence. Note also that for the sake of clarification side quests etc. have been left out

As the individual nodes can be accessed 'out of sequence', this can leave the gamer quite confused until she stumbles on the node that actually should have preceded it, so that she can piece the story together. Still, even in a loosely structured game like *RDR*, story coherence is implemented. This is usually achieved by converging the different story paths by means of a scripted event or cutscene, giving precedence to narrative over gameplay. And again, the balance between the two is crucial. Furthering the narrative with too many cutscenes will turn a game into some form of interactive film, while a seemingly limitless choice of gameplay-dependent nodes will not only confuse the gamer, but will also make her lose interest in what happens next, especially when the required gameplay skills seem inappropriate in the context of the story³.

Because of its loose structure, *RDR*, in the traditional sense of the term, has at least x^{n-1} possible discourses per group/cluster. Consequently, the total number of possible discourses would be $x^{n-1} + x^{p-1} + x^{o-1}$, etcetera, depending on the number of

³ As in the officially sanctioned *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING* game, see Chapter VI.

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groups/clusters⁴, once more showing that a traditional analysis based on the distinction between story and discourse is no longer tangible. From the above we can therefore conclude that the configuration of present-day story-structured games simply defies the structural description potential of established narrative theory.

The diachronic aspect

As I explained in Chapter II, certain literary and film theorists prefer a structural synchronic approach to narrative over a diachronic one. Certainly, especially when comparing games to other media, one has to be aware of medium specific concepts not only on a practical level but also theoretically (see Chapter VI). But where other media now have a more or less established format, in computer games, the technical aspect and the changes it brought to the medium over the years has to be taken into consideration; not only because technical developments in computer games occur at a high tempo, but also, and more importantly, because they affect the gamer directly. Obviously, a reader experiences an eBook differently from a printed book, but as yet, innovations in eBooks have not passed the stage of the addition of colour or the odd moving image. Therefore, the fundamental process of reading itself has not changed. The same goes for a viewer who watches a 3D film. Here again, cinematographers have so far not discovered a means by which the 3D effect can be turned into a new narrative aspect. Therefore, for film, new technologies such as CGI and 3D have only meant a renewed focus on the cinema of attractions, instead of giving us new and innovative visual narratives.

In games, this is different. First of all, new technical advancements brought about new game genres, as I showed in Chapter II. But even in an established genre, new technology brought fundamental changes in the narrative experience of the gamer such as the change from text adventure games to graphic adventure games, I discussed in Chapter III. This was not only because of the added visuals, but also because the gamer's mode of interaction (from quite extensive typed vocabulary to a severely limited predefined set of point-and-click answers) and perception (from identifying herself with the addressed 'you' to identifying herself with a predefined avatar) changed completely⁵. And in Chapter IV the impact of the diachronic change on the visual grammar of the classic adventure game showed that having internalized the genre- and hardware-specific

⁴ Not counting other gamer choices that influence the way the story is delivered/presented such as camera framing. Note that we are still talking about games of progression, i.e. games where the designer determines the order of the challenges and consequently the order of the story elements.

⁵ How different this is is pointed out to me every year by my students who have to play *ZORK* as part of my *History of Computer Games* class.

grammar of the 2D adventure affected gameplay negatively when game designers changed the genre to 3D when new technology allowed it. Finally, in Chapter V, it became clear that when comparing narratives in different media one should always analyse games in light of the time of their production and consumption, not only because of the above mentioned changes in their visual grammar but also, as the *DOOM – QUAKE* example showed, because the audio-visual narrative of the computer game is not only determined by (mostly genre) conventions but also by hardware-specific limitations and affordances.

Towards a new narratology for computer games

In light of the above, the question arises whether or not we should continue to analyse story-structured computer games from a narratologist's point of view or whether game studies should formulate its own research techniques and terminology, as it has been doing for games of emergence. In other words, are the storytelling techniques of these games sufficiently different from those of written narratives and films to warrant a different approach?

With the emergence of new media and new means of storytelling, narratologists themselves have questioned existing narrative theory, as it clearly was too much rooted in the tradition of the printed text. Even the basic concept that a narrative implies a narrator has been put aside to cope with new media constructs, including computer games. One of the more informed proposals for change, as far as computer games are concerned, was made by Marie-Laure Ryan in her book *Avatars of Story* (2006). In this book she addresses, amongst other things, narratology and interactivity and narratology and computer games. Responding to the ludologists (in this case Eskilinen, Aarseth, Frasca and Juul) who claim(ed) that games and narratives are two separate entities, she countered that "every medium capable of narrativity presents its own affordances and limitations", therefore games as well. But, as she added, games "do so in a partly different mode from novels, drama, and movies" (p. 187). Unfortunately, in her endeavour to reform narratology; Ryan does not distinguish between games of progression and games of emergence, which can be deduced from the following lines:

If designers had truly fascinating stories to tell, they would write novels and film scripts rather than games. If the rules were as productive as those of chess and Go, we would not need the narrative. But the stereotyped story can be redeemed by interesting player action, while a game without originality on the level of rules can be improved by narrative packaging. In the design of games, gameplay and narrative remediate each other's deficiencies. (ibid, p. 198)

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Games of emergence obviously are the least suitable examples for arguing in favour of a redefinition of narrative, as it is the category with the least narrative elements (or none). My first proposal would therefore be to leave games of emergence out of the equation, especially as these are quite adequately covered by the ludologists' take on game studies.

Another reason why Ryan's adapted narrative theory does not work for games of progression is that she still adheres to the distinction between story and discourse, which, as we have seen above, can no longer be applied to games. The more fundamental issue with story-structured games and existing narratology, however, is that the interplay between narrative and gameplay, which this dissertation has identified, has not been addressed. That is to say, none of the existing narrative theories that have been applied to computer games, not even the expanded one proposed by Ryan (which does allow for choice and interactivity), takes into account that narrative in games of progression is 'conditioned' by gameplay. Years ago, Jacob Nielsen already used this argument to distinguish adventure games from (narrative) hypertexts:

A class of computer systems that are indeed navigation based are adventure games [...] I will not classify adventure games as hypertext because they are fundamentally based on making it difficult for the user to navigate to the desired destination and they often hide the clues for the links to other locations in the information space. (Nielsen, 1995, p. 12)

Thus, while at first glance the underlying structure of both the classic adventure game and the (literary) hypertext looks very similar in that both try to limit the number of story nodes because neither the writer/designer nor the reader/gamer can cope with an exponential number of possible narratives, they are in fact very different because access to the nodes in a narrative hypertext (or any other kind of computer based text) is unrestricted and unhindered, whereas access to the story nodes in games of progression is always blocked off by gameplay challenges.

Thus, existing narrative theory (even when expanded) cannot cater for "the special qualities that are unique to digital worlds" (Holtzman, 1997, p. 15). For that reason, even though they are story-structured, we need a new theory and terminology for games of progression, one that considers gameplay skills, somewhat like the one presented by Stockburger. Stockburger's modalities of space could easily be adapted to make gameplay skills stand out more. And when the emphasis shifts to gameplay skills, the diachronic aspect of, for instance, audiovisual game space and kinaesthetic game space can also be brought to the fore. The incorporation of gameplay skills would only require some minor additions to what is already there. Similar theories could also be developed for other

narrative concepts such as time, character, and sound. When looking at character, limiting the new narrative theory to games of progression will also be more practical, as the concept functions differently in the mainly non-diegetic world of games of emergence⁶. Of course, we could use the more neutral term avatar for these games, but there are games of emergence, such as strategy games, where the gamer does take on the role of an identifiable character. And for games of progression there are several convincing arguments for making a distinction between the gamer's representation on screen, i.e. the token that moves through the game world (the avatar), and the character in the story that the gamer comes to identify with (the protagonist)⁷.

Of course, the above terms are also used in existing narrative theory, but in my opinion they are sufficiently neutral to function as elements within game theory. This is not true for the term genre, which, in my view, has too many connotations that are specific to literature and especially film studies, which have no bearing at all on games studies. Keeping the term would mean that games studies would be unnecessarily dragged down in the genre debate of the other media. Therefore, I propose replacing the term with the more neutral term type where computer games are concerned. Genre can then still be used to refer to content, where it already has a similar meaning in games of progression as it has in film and popular fiction.

In short, what game studies needs is a comprehensive, multi-layered system where specific aspects not only consist of obvious attributes, such as 2D/3D and first person/third person, but also contain attributes related to the gameplay skills needed, such as visual and audible cues and other genre-specific affordances, as well as an indication of how they are implemented in the game. Furthermore, platform information should not limit itself to only naming the possible platforms, but should also give information on the impact the platform has on the gameplay: what is the game's resolution and colour depth? What is the primary input device and how is it implemented? Answering these questions will immediately cover any diachronic changes as well.

Critical notes and suggestions for future research

The major omission in this dissertation is of course what the English would call the proof of the pudding. In the chapter on genre, I criticized the existing game categorization, as well as two of the alternative ones⁸, but I did not examine how the existing categorization

⁶ See Newman (2004).

⁷ See Klevjer (2007).

⁸ That is Elverdam and Aarseth (2007) and Djaouti et al. (2008).

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could be adapted to make the game skills needed and their affordances more explicit. The same goes for space in games. I showed how it influences the way we play a game and how it differs from the way space (setting) is used in film, but I only hinted at the way a multi-layered comprehensive description of game space would benefit the analyses of games. The major reason I could not do this was that this dissertation is based on articles, which all explore different concepts. In a comprehensive treatment, I could have explored a single concept, for example genre, in depth. This would not only mean including an alternative taxonomy, but also testing it, as I am well aware that even though I base the ideas presented in this dissertation on the analyses I did for the specific articles as well as on issues I have come across over my many years as a lecturer on hypermedia and story-structured computer games, without putting them to the test, they would just remain that: theory.

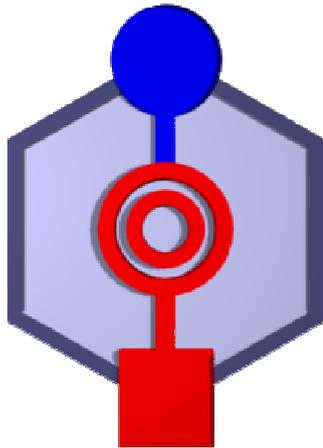
More generally, I would like to suggest that game researchers, especially those who do humanities or sociology-based research, should broaden their perspective. Many of the researchers who study games of emergence, even those who come from a humanities background, are also game designers themselves; this puts them in a unique position. Not that I think that all game researchers should become game designers as well, but I have found that some technical knowledge about the platforms games are played on, as well as insights into the process of game design, can help to understand how games function. Especially (former) narratologists would benefit from such books as the IGDA book on game writing (Bateman, 2007), as it clearly shows what can and what cannot be done with narrative in games. And every type of game research, even purely sociological research, would benefit from first analysing the games under discussion, especially the process of their specific gameplay, as I think that its impact on the gamer is still strongly underestimated, particularly in games of progression.

One aspect I would definitely like to look at and incorporate in future research is the work Chris Bateman has been doing. He and a number of well-known game writers and designers, as well as university researchers (psychologists and neurologists), have been looking specifically at what makes us play and enjoy games in order to come to a new and more user-centred game design. With his company, Hobo Ltd, Bateman has developed a player satisfaction model, called BrainHex. BrainHex is based on findings from previous gamer-models they tested, as well as neurological research. The model depicts gameplay behaviour in terms of seven key elements in the human nervous system⁹. The combination

⁹ See <http://brainhex.com> for the full specifics.

of the key elements and a ranking of their importance to the gamer give her insights into what kind of computer gamer she is. The main categories are seeker, survivor, daredevil, mastermind, conqueror, socialiser, and achiever. But as only gamers with a strong affection for a specific type of gameplay would fall into one of the main categories, the model uses subclasses and exceptions to pinpoint preferences more accurately.

My BrainHex model was that of the Mastermind-Seeker, i.e. I like to solve puzzles



Seeker
(n)

and come up with strategies to help me in my gameplay. But I also like to find strange and wonderful things in games. My strongest gameplay dislikes are overcoming seemingly impossible challenges, as well as tedious repetitive tasks. This is something I can only agree with, as these are exactly the aspects that keep me from really enjoying *RDR*, for instance having to shoot an increasingly impossible number of enemies (100+), without a logical reason for doing so. In the real world, it would be completely illogical that the Williams gang, which numbers about twenty people,

would get support from more than a hundred bandits that 'just happen to be in the neighbourhood'. Clearly the extra bandits are only there as the obligatory 'improvement' of my gameplay skills, but also frustratingly unavoidable as I want to find out what happens next in the story.

How would game research benefit from such a model, especially as it was primarily designed as a tool to investigate gameplay preferences, in order to show that the way forward in game design is to look at the gamer and what she wants: "Getting out of our collective tunnel vision with respect to both player diversity and our conceptions of what a videogame *is* or *must be* [italics in the original]" (Bateman, 2009, p. xvii)? In my opinion this is not only the way forward in game design, but also in game research, as this model addresses gameplay preferences, which include gameplay skills. The model adds what has been lacking in the description and analysis of games of progression: the wherefore and the why. As I have shown above, the main difference between books and films on the one hand and games on the other hand is agency. The gamer wants to exert agency. That is the reason she plays games. But agency in itself, of course, is not enough. Gamers play games because they are fun. However, fun is a very complex entity, as it consists of many elements. One of the more prominent ones for gamers is *fiero*, i.e. the feeling of triumph one gets when accomplishing something difficult in a game (Ekman, 2003; Bateman,

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2009). And emotions like *fiero* give a more accurate idea of the difference between games and other media:

Unlike films, games provide *fiero* directly from choices that players make themselves. Games create emotion through developing a sense of player agency rather than empathy with a character on-screen. In other words, a film never hands the audience a jet ski to save the world from nuclear doom, but a game must do so because in games *player choice matters*. [italics in the original] (Lazzaro, 2009, p. 23)

This is not to say that gamers cannot develop empathy for their game character as well¹⁰. The many threads on the *ASSASSIN'S CREED* forum have shown that the success of *ASSASSIN'S CREED II* is not only due to its compelling story, which in essence is not so different from that of the first game, but mainly because Ubisoft presented us with a believable and inspiring game hero, a type of game hero we seldom see, namely one who is not a flat or stock character, but a character who 'grows' throughout the course the game. It therefore did not come as a surprise that the gamers themselves voted Ezio the Most Compelling Character in the 2009 Machinima Inside Gaming Awards (Machinama.com, 2010). But what happens in *ACII* is that the *fiero* is both Ezio's as well as the gamer's. Therefore, I think that a new narrative theory for story-structured games should not only include gameplay skills, but also information about the gamer preferences they address.

¹⁰ See Freeman (2004).