Computer Games as Immersive Literature

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Computer games are still mostly excluded from literary studies. This is strange, considering many computer games contain high levels of narrative, and those that do not may still be 'read'. Engaging with computer games as a literary form enables one to investigate not only the game as a text, but also its many possible performances through a gamer's interactions with it. The game exerts some control over the player, and the player exerts some control over the outcome of the game. In this way, games operate as a highly sophisticated form of interactive fiction, whereby they engage alternate agencies within their readers (players).

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Computer games have, thus far, fallen outside the consideration as literature in most circles. This is demonstrated by how few courses on computer games are taught by various literature departments around the world.[1] It is manifest in the division between shops which sell novels and shops which sell games, although both novels and games could be considered a form of escapism from real life. On the other side of the divide, Grant Tavinor and Gonzalo Franca (among other theorists), approach games through 'games studies'. This illustrates a desire to retain some form of 'scientific' hold over the realm of computers, separating it from

the analytic mode of literary and cultural studies. This gate-keeping often occurs even when the theorists use aesthetics as the investigative hook into the arguments. However, it is important to recognise that computer games can be read and understood as falling into some sort of category of literature even if that category is uncomfortable and, as yet, ill-defined. Computer games do not rely solely on written text as a medium, if they contain text at all. This, combined with the high levels of interactivity inherent in games means that they need to be approached as something new; any attempt to read them as a traditional form of literature is bound to struggle if the conventional forms of criticism are applied. I would suggest that it is possible to read games as a new form of literature, in which the interaction is an important element. It is impossible to read a game as a poem or even as a novel, even though games may have narrative elements. Games, as their own form of media and cultural capital, should be assessed based on their own aesthetics. Across four games I have played seriously, *Torchlight* (Runic Games), *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios), *Portal* (Valve) and *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room), I have encountered a variety of game genres and differing levels of the importance of narrative to the game; however, I consider that they are a form of literature in how they communicate, and in how they engage the gamer in the process of the story.

Some games fall more easily into a literary reading than others, for example, adventure games, which are fairly similar to medieval quest narratives, or action games which are similar to epics (Küklich 2013, 115). It is relatively simple to conclude that quest games containing narrative elements could be read as literature, but it is more difficult to "argue that Tetris is an interactive poem", which I suppose may be its equivalent (Küklich 2013, 115). This dilemma underpins one of the great problems that theorists have when approaching games. It is easy enough to analyze and read games which contain some form of narrative as if they were a form of literature, but less easy to approach puzzle games or strategy games in this manner. I intend to read the puzzle game, *Portal*, and the

strategy game, *Age of Empires*, on an equal level as I read *Torchlight* and *Dear Esther*, even though the latter two have significantly higher levels of narrative included in their make-up. To exclude texts from "literature" based on a lack of storyline is prejudicial against non-narrative literary forms, for example, some poetry. As Jonas Carlquist suggests, "[if] computer games are to be seen as narratives they must follow some sort of narrative structure, but not necessarily the same one as other narrative genres" (Carlquist 2002, 9). I would argue that all games have an underlying story, which can be uncovered by the question "what is the game about?", where the answer would encode the point of playing, and often the objective, which would form part of the new media form of narrative.

Literature, Ludology and Narratology

Amongst game theorists, there are two schools of thought, namely the narratologists, who value the storyline approach to games (making it considerably easier to read games as a bleeding-edge form of literature), and the ludologists who insist that games are about interactive play, primarily about winning, which leaves little place for narrative (Carlquist 2002, 14). Bride Mallon and Brian Webb state that much of the early research into computer games "drew heavily on narrative theory", initially treating games as a type of interactive fiction, but "unease over the usefulness of applying traditional narrative analysis to games" eventually set in (Mallon & Webb 2005, 1). While narratologists and ludologists agree "that the main function of computer games is game playing" they differ on whether the game should go hand in hand with storytelling (Carlquist 2002, 17). Jesper Juul, one of the key theorists of ludology, uses the model of narrative which separates "the fabula and the sjuzet, or if you will, the story and the discourse" (Juul 1998). He argues that while the traditional narrative form may make use of a-chronological events which can be reconstructed into the story, this is not a process which can be applied to games, as the actions of the gamer reduce the time disparity between the story and the discourse into an interactive present, from

which there can be no flashbacks (Juul 1998). This is a very limiting view of games, and I would argue that the inclusion of games as a form of literature would enrich both games and literature.

The infighting between theorists over the purpose and suitability of narratives in games is a short-sighted battle, as to ignore either element entirely would be to deny how games actually work. I choose to believe that both narrative and interaction are important and balance is needed for the game to be 'good'. My universal inclusion makes allowance for games as a new form of literature in order to not simply exclude texts which seem unfamiliar to expectations – a process which could lead to a theorist attempting to ban the work of Ezra Pound, as it does not fit into the same idea of poetry as was written by Shakespeare. I would prefer to treat games which contain high levels of narrative as either an evolutionary step or a revolutionary departure along the course of narrative, but all games, narrative or not should be counted as literary (Mallon and Webb 2005, 1). Greg Costikyan states that "to think of games as 'a storytelling medium' leads to futile attempts to straightjacket games", in which the anxiety to focus on narrative often occurs at the expense of game-play (Costikyan 2000, 7). This is forgetting the key to the game; what the player gains from the game is not necessarily the story it tells, but the "modes of thought and ways of attacking problems, and a sense of satisfaction at mastery" (Costikyan 2000, 7). In other words, it is not worth limiting games by shoe-horning them into alignment with narrative theory; the process of interaction is all-important to their nature as games. Placing focus on both game and gamer in this interaction is vital.

Games as interactive fiction

The interest then becomes divided; on the one hand, there is an interest in the game itself as a literary text, but on the other, there is an interest in the reading which is conducted of the game – how it is played. This is due to the interactivity of games; "[while] this problem is certainly encountered when reading a printed text, within the computer game it becomes

almost impossible to differentiate between manipulations of the objective text and its subjective actualisation", that is, how the game is structured and how it is played (Küklich 2013, 108). The game itself could be read, but it is more interesting and valuable to engage in how it is played by a gamer: with the variety of options imposed by the interactivity, it is not only the game as text which is interesting, but the game as it is performed. Games invite their players to participate; the process is not just about playing, "it is also about being a hero, solving a plot or participating in a drama" (Carlquist 2002, 17). It is this aspect which makes games noteworthy and so worthy of investigation in this time, as seems so often said, after the novel.

Part of the challenge when addressing computer games as forms of literary texts is that they are seldom linear. This is not necessarily an exclusionary factor; novels such as Conrad's *Secret Agent* or Nabokov's *Pale Fire* have perplexing non-linear plots. Indeed, "[f]ew films or novels are absolutely linear; most make use of some forms of backstory that is revealed gradually as we move through the narrative action" (Jenkins 2014, 126). As Henry Jenkins (a narratologist) continues, this model outlines narrative comprehension as "an active process by which viewers assemble and make hypotheses about likely narrative developments on the basis of information drawn from textual cues and clues" (Jenkins 2014, 126). In other words, all narrative forms (and I would say all forms) of literature require some reader participation in order to work. The difference between static literary forms and games, according to Jenkins is that "players are forced to *act*" upon their hypotheses or mental maps, to "test them against the game world itself", whereas readers of static literary forms do not need to assume agency for the text to be propelled forwards (Jenkins 2014, 126). In other words, computer games tend towards the direction of 'interactive fiction', combining the ideas of games and narratives.

As Juul states, the combination of games and narratives into 'interactive fiction' sounds extremely attractive, and "it is usually described as the

best of both worlds" (Juul 1998). However, in reality, the printed forms of interactive fiction usually fall outside the bounds of what is considered good literature ('choose your own adventure' novels and similar). Juul sees interactive fiction as "the rhetoric for a Utopia" (read 'unattainable'), which bears "promise of a new and more intellectual/cultural kind of computer game" (Juul 1998). He has an overwhelmingly negative view of what interactive fiction achieves, when compared to what it sets out to achieve (Juul 1998). I would question the validity of this approach; it is a formal experiment, and should not be judged by the same yardstick used for regular fictions, particularly in light of its difference to the normal forms. Juul's objections to narrative in games is based in the idea that the interactivity in the game is bound to be limited by a storyline to which the player's options must be limited; gamers themselves preferred, according to Mallon and Webb's study, "well-crafted product to disguise the pre-programmed nature of the narrative, to facilitate their ability to suspend disbelief" (Mallon and Webb 2005, 10). In other words, gamers do not necessarily prefer games which are free from narratives or contain them, but prefer to be able to maintain their belief in the world of the game without obvious or jarring signals alerting them to the medium.

Most games have an underlying story which appears on the blurb on the back of the case; even games without stories have a goal or aim which can be related in the form of a directed path, like a narrative (Jenkins 2014, 119). Jenkins states that the "experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story" as the gamer is immersed in the reality of a world created on the screen in front of his eyes (Jenkins 2014, 120). It is more useful then, to think of games less as traditional narratives, but rather as "spaces ripe with narrative possibility", in which the story can exceed the text into the performance of the text, similar to the staging of a play (Jenkins 2014, 119). In other words, even if a game engages in some form of storytelling, it is unlikely to mimic any other form of storytelling, due to the vast difference in storytelling media (Jenkins 2014, 120). That said, the storyline remains important; even

though it is more likely to be the "exciting game play than the compelling storyline" which holds the gamers' attention, the play is the action, rather than the reason for the action, and "the reason for the action is more important than the action itself" (Carlquist 2002, 34). In other words, there must be a reason that the bad guys rush out to attack the character in any given game; without that sort of basis, the game would seem incredibly random and, likely would be rendered unplayable.

There are some games which certainly have a tighter focus on narrative due to their genre. Adventure games have a quest-driven storyline, where the characters "struggle to explore, map, and master contested spaces" in an attempt to reach a particular goal, which is often initially unknown (Jenkins 2014, 122). Many of these games draw inspiration or details from the "much older tradition of spatial stories, which have often taken the form of hero's odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives", written by authors such as Tolkien, Verne and Homer (Jenkins 2014, 122). Jenkins states that game designers are most likely to draw story elements from film or literary genres "which are most invested in world-making and spatial storytelling" (Jenkins 2014, 122). These games, through their graphical construction, are often able to provide a more compelling and immersive representation of the space through which the narration moves (Jenkins 2014, 122). In these games, the story grows as the character moves around the map, propelled by his quests. The map space of the game allows for the interactive story to come into being.

Gaming as Reading

The narrative of the game is part of an interaction between the text and the gamer. The game can be mastered through learning all the rules and codes of the given game, but doing so may break the game's spell: the gamer may become disillusioned by knowing how to beat the game, but may still enjoy playing it "by taking refuge in the willing suspense of disbelief" (Küklich 2013, 126). The performative aspect of reading the text occurs as "the player learns to decipher the signs on the interface as

manifestations of the rules determined by the game's code" (Küklich 2013, 126). Kücklich states that this could be regarded as "a reversal of the reading direction", as it is only through engaging with the text (playing the game) that the gamer is able to identify and interpret the grammar (rules) which work in the given world (Küklich 2013, 126).

Addressing this process as a new form of reading would place games into a difficult relationship with past works of literature, though I would argue, no more difficult than the relationship between modernism or post-modernism and their preceding periods. In other words, considering games as subversive texts – and texts requiring subversive reading strategies – would place them on a continuum of literature begun by such works as *Ulysses*. Games could be seen as an evolution of various forms of literature in the face of the media age, alongside the hypertext format, in which the electronic text is a branching text, based on hyperlinking one word into another story branch; such a form has "generally been linked with the postmodern" by the critics (Juul 1998). Computer games also contain signs which draw attention to their identity as games, much as metafictional signals point out to the reader the nature of the text as a book (a common feature in postmodern literature, drawing attention to the text as artifice). In literature, a famous example of a metafictional 'tell' is the characters of *Don Quixote* having read the first volume of that novel by the start of the second. In games, these hints or signals can disrupt the suspension of disbelief, but often exist to alert the gamer of the manipulations they can enact on the text (Küklich 2013, 110).

Similar effects can be found in printed literature as well, particularly texts such as *Pale Fire* by Nabokov, in which the reader is pretty much *prevented* from a linear reading of the text. Such literature, and I would include computer games in this category, has been termed 'ergodic literature' from "ergon" meaning "work", and "odos" meaning "path", where the reader (gamer) is required to participate, putting in "non-trivial effort" in order to traverse the text (Küklich 2013, 113). This places computer games higher up the scale of reflexivity than any post-modern novel

I have read. Taking this a step further, the game does not only require effort to read, it is driven by the reader (gamer). In order to uncover the plot and reach the end of a game, the players themselves must take it forward (Carlquist 2002, 10). As Carlquist states, "the player is in focus right from the start", denoting that the story "is not found in the game itself, only in the interaction between player and game" (Carlquist 2002, 13). In other words, the focus of games is entirely on the player and his response to the text, without which, the game would not work. This is one of the key differences between other texts and games: if one was to press play while watching a movie and leave the room, the story would progress – not so in a game, which relies on the interaction of the player to move the character forward.

Investigating games as literature

I would now like to demonstrate the issues of point of view in games by engaging with several games I have played, namely *Age of Empires*, *Torchlight*, *Dear Esther* and *Portal*. The last two games employ a similar point of view in how they operate, but aside from that, all these games approach perspective in a different manner, due to their subgenres. *Age of Empires* is a strategy game, in which the player builds up a civilization from scratch (four villagers who forage for food and lumber, eventually enabling the player to build an army), which then must engage enemies in a war. The objective is usually to destroy anything of military interest which your opponent has built. In this game, the player works to control all characters with no special attachment to any of them, as if he were a god controlling his own group of tiny people. In *Torchlight*, the gamer controls his avatar on a series of quests to defeat the Alchemist. There is a far closer linkage of the character to the player. In the other two games, *Portal* and *Dear Esther*, the games are conducted from first person point of view, meaning the player can see the scope of the environment around himself (his avatar in the game), but not see the character he is controlling.

These different levels of involvement are interesting as they reflect three different processes of authority over the text.

In *Age of Empires*, the gamer has almost total control over the game and the characters, and can choose to move them where he likes. In this manner, the gamer replaces the author as the highest authority in the game. In *Torchlight*, the closer relationship between the character and the gamer leads to a stronger identification with the processes of the game, although the third person perspective still leaves some distance. The player is more likely to have an emotional reaction to what essentially becomes his puppet in the game, as there is an element of personal relationship. In *Dear Esther* and *Portal*, there is a first person perspective, which means that it feels like the gamer is sucked into the screen to play the part of the character, and the actions taken are direct and unmediated. There is a greater blurring between the character and the player, as the character's subjectivities are foisted upon the gamer.

All three of these scenarios are interesting if contemplating these games as (post-) postmodern narratives of a kind, as they openly play with levels of agency and control. In *Age of Empires*, the god-like status of the gamer means that he has absolute control over the characters. There is no personal interaction between the gamer and the characters, and as such, he takes on an authorial control over the 'lives' of his soldiers and villagers, able to kill them with the single tap of a button. In *Torchlight*, there appears to be a form of dialogue between the gamer and his avatar, even though he (the gamer) still controls the avatar like a puppet. This closer relationship means that the avatar sometimes speaks directly to the gamer, uttering sentences like "my pack is full" and "not enough mana", which indicate that the character is unable to fulfil the instructions of the gamer. This indicates a push by the game on the authorial control over the outcomes. In *Dear Esther* and *Portal*, there is no visible avatar to control like a puppet, just a body which reads and responds as if it were the gamer's. In this way, the gamer's subjectivity is directly and literally brought into the text, though unlike the first two

examples, he seems to have a more limited agency. He can only control his own actions, not the actions of a puppet or many puppets, as occurs in the other situations. The differing levels of control over the texts drastically challenges traditional ideas about literature. Games make allowance for differing levels of control and identification by the gamer (the reader), which alters the texture of the text entirely.

Conclusion

Literature would do well to acknowledge the place of computer games in its modernising canon. Despite their difficulty to read as a literary form, they have some significant departures from that which has gone before which could be useful in writing texts to keep up with the bleeding edge of the media culture. They are significant works of literature in the method they engage the reader, and noteworthy in the sense that they place the reader in a uniquely powerful position in relation to the text. They engage the gamer through their structure and point of view, regardless of storyline or puzzle to be solved, as well as engaging the gamer through the specially chosen point of view, giving different senses of agency in the game. In this way, I would consider that games may be seen as the perfected form of post-modernist literature – they manage and engage the reader in the text, to put in the hard work of solving the puzzles to make sense of the text, and in doing so, appreciate its artistry.

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Notes

1. I have found only one elective course in a literature department tackling this issue to date.

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