

9/10/2003

The Hebrew University
Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Communications

New Media and the Information Age

Lecturer: Paul Frosh

Seminar Paper

From Medal of Honor to Grand Theft Auto

The Moral Deterioration of the Computer Game Protagonist

Dubi Kanengisser

0 - 3 5 8 1 2 9 2 - 4

Contents

Introduction	3
Games, Computer Games and Narratives	7
A Definition of Games	
Computer Games	
Meaningful Narrative in Computer Games: Are Plots Just a Ploy?	
A Typology of Computer Game Genres	14
Shooters Protagonists	20
The Soldier	
The Loose Cannon	
The Accidental Hero	
The New Protagonist on the Block: The Criminal	
Moral Deterioration: A Comparison of Six Games	
Conclusions	32
Notes	34
Bibliography	37

Introduction

The computer game is the fastest growing field of entertainment in today's economy, and the least understood one. Despite the overwhelming numbers of computer games sold throughout the world annually, with turnovers superceding those of even the motion picture industry, computer games are still viewed by many as a bizzare, small sub-culture. "Gamers", as the computer gaming community refers to itself, still suffer from a derogative image as juvenile social outcasts. This situation is exacerbated in Israel, where computer games are considered by most a childish activity, whereas in truth, most gamers are well past their teens.

It is therefore not surprising that most academic study of computer games is focused on its psychological influence on children, and mainly on the twin issues of aggression-inducing computer games and genderial disparity as promoted by computer games. Little to none is invested in studying computer games as cultural products with a distinct and potentially complex narrative, not unlike literature and cinema (Rockwell 1999). But this lack of research cannot be blamed wholly on the misperceptions of potential researchers. Computer games are a technologically driven medium, which is mounted on the fastest changing technology in human history. It is therefore difficult to study computer games comparatively on a scale of decades, and today's study could become outmoded and obsolete tomorrow.

These two problems - the belittling of computer games as cultural texts and the fast, never-ending change in the world of computer games - have together brought about another problem plaguing the study of computer games. As Juul (1998) puts it, "[i]n literary theory, it has always been presupposed that one has read perhaps 1000 books

and seen a 1000 movies. But when studying computer games, it has been acceptable to play four computer games and then write articles about it.”

This paper is therefore standing on very shaky ground, as I try to combine what little resources available with my own personal experience to derive some sort of insight into the narrative of contemporary computer gaming.

The first chapter of this paper will present a basic theory of computer game narrative, and try to dispel some of the misconceptions and misrepresentations of contemporary computer games evident in the literature, regarding their power as storytellers. The gist of it is that contemporary computer games are not a mind-numbing series of senseless missions loosely tied by a makeshift story, but rather unfold a distinct, often complex and sophisticated storyline.

The second chapter will give a quick introduction into the current leading genres in the world of computer games, their history and their future prospects.

The rest of the paper will center on a specific type of computer game, popularly referred to as the “1st/3rd person shoot-‘em-ups”, “3D shooters” or, simply, “shooters”. These games are and have been for the past decade or so at the cutting edge of computer technology, and particularly real-time 3D graphics. Many games of this type have become “killer-apps”ⁱ, but the violent nature of the Shooters genre has recently brought it also to the cutting edge of the cultural revolution that has already been taking place in the motion picture industry. The moralistic tone which has apologetically accompanied Shooters has been succeeded, in several recent games, by a joyful sociopathic fest of bloodletting, unashamed of what gamers have known all along: computer violence is fun. This is not to say all new games have abandoned the moral justification of the protagonist’s actions, but the remarkable success of games

produced by bad-boy publishers Take-2 Softwareⁱⁱ are threatening to bring a barrage of games designed for mature gamers, with a somewhat less than righteous narrative.

The penultimate chapter of this paper will therefore describe the new type of protagonist in Shooter games, and attempt to delineate the differences between this type of character and older types. This chapter will also include a comparison between six computer games, all published between 2001 and 2003, which feature the entire spectrum of computer game protagonist typology as described below. The last chapter will then attempt to take a step back and evaluate the conclusions to be drawn from this preliminary study, and especially further research to be made on the subject to further our understanding of the social implications of recent developments in the computer game narratives.

A note on the sources

As noted above, there has been very little research into computer games as narratives or as cultural products deserving an in-depth analysis in and of themselves, rather than as merely the potential progenitors of dysfunctional social behavior (Rockwell 1999). What little relevant research there is was mostly out of my reach for the writing of this paper. I have therefore based my paper on two main sources: (1) articles available on the net, mostly by people from within the game industry, and (2) my own personal experience with the games described.

This paper is, then, but a preliminary stab at a subject that deserves far more serious an effort, with a more variegated sample both of games and of gamers.

A note on the language

While Hebrew, not English, is my mother tongue, I have chosen to write this paper in the latter. Computer games in Israel are practically never translated for a variety of reasons. In fact, even the names of games are not translated, and Israeli publishers sell the games under their original English names. Since the gamers' jargon is itself mostly in English (including the term "gamers" itself, that has no common translation into Hebrew), it seems most sensible to write the paper in the language that is most unavoidable when writing about computer games, rather than busy myself with translating the titles and terms, or worse - using the two languages in parallel.

Games, Computer Games and Narrative

A Definition of Games

Games are an activity taking place beside, or in parallel with real-life. As Caillois (1957) put it, games are an activity devoid of important ramifications on the stability and continuity of collective institutional existence. While different games have a multitude of different goals, they all share the same purpose: fun. A parent may encourage a child to play at a certain game for educational reasons, and a school gym teacher may allow his pupils to play a game of basketball to improve their fitness, but the main incentive for the players themselves must always be fun. In Erwin Goffman's words, "fun alone is the approved reason for playing [games]" (Goffman 1961: 17).

It is important to draw a distinction between games and child's play, or "make believe" games (Juul 2000). The latter is unstructured, and there are no clear rules to speak of. While the rules of games may be flexible and negotiable (as in when attempting to balance a game between unequal parties by biasing the rules in the weak side's favour), they are, however, very much present. It is games, then, that can be formalized into algorithms and properly be carried out, or at least simulated by a computer. Games are, by their nature, limited and repetitive, in that a certain situation is reproduced every time the game is played, and a certain sequence of events takes place, at the end of which a "winner" is declared. These basic starting points could vary from one occurrence of the game to another: a game of hide-and-seek can take place in different places, allowing for different places to hide and different routes for the hiders and the seeker to take as they try to win the game. But there will always be

a seeker, and the rest of the players will always hide and attempt to outrun the seeker before he disqualifies them. A game of chess, of course, is a much clearer case of formalized rules and repetativeness: the opening position of every game is exactly the same, and there is a limited (though astronomical) number of possible games.

Play, on the other hand, has no winner, as there are no rules to define one. Play ends when the players tire of it, and it is not limited in time, space or goal-attainment.

Caillois (1957) defined six conditions which exist in the game: (1) games are voluntary and not coerced; (2) take place in a defined time and space; (3) uncertain: the result of the game cannot be determined at the outsetⁱⁱⁱ; (4) unproductive: no product or artistic creation can be the result of the game; (5) formalized: while playing the game, the rules of the real world are irrelevant, and a distinct set of rules is the sole system governing the actions of the players; (6) fictional: all players must be aware that the game is not reality but a fictional reality or a non-reality.

It is important to note condition 4: while play may generate a story (say, an outlaw and a sheriff do battle in the wild west), games do not, as a rule, generate narratives. Games can only be described in the technical terms that are defined by their rules: the seeker disqualifies the unsuccessful hider, or the rook takes the queen. Describing the game as an unraveling plot (as in, e.g., Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*) would most likely render the gameplay itself irrelevant and would require the utilization of imaginary ideas that were not present during the game itself.

Computer Games

Computer games are, then, an algorithmic representation of rules. When played out, they offer an opening situation and a certain degree of freedom for the player to

achieve a defined goal. Some games are theoretically never-ending. These are games where new levels can be generated randomly (e.g. *Tetris*^{iv}), or where the same level is repeated over and over again with only a slight increase in difficulty from one level to the other (e.g. *Space Invaders*, where the only difference between one level and the next is the speed of the Invaders). These games often have little or no narrative frame, and the gameplay itself is, naturally, completely devoid of narrative.

However, the majority of contemporary commercial games (as opposed to Java applets freely available on the net) are not of this type of senseless arcade. Most games have some extent of an actual plot which unravels throughout the game, with a clear and reachable ending. As the focus of this paper will be games of this latter sort, I will ignore, for this purpose, the earlier arcade games.

How are computer games different from regular games? A computer game is, obviously, played on some sort of computer - today it could be a PC or one of several consoles available on the market, such as the GameCube or the Xbox. That alone allows the games to have immensely complex rules, which can only work because the player is blissfully unaware of them. Calculating the probability of hitting a target at a given range can be a tedious task if done manually.^v A computer can do numerous such calculations every second, and still have time to show us an impressive (and sometimes gory) representation of the results. This is, however, a quantitative difference.

But computer games are qualitatively different from regular games in that they incorporate a measure of narrative into the gameplay: computer games are a hybrid between game and play, or rather, due to the predetermined nature of the narrative - between game and storytelling.

Meaningful Narrative in Computer Games: Are Plots Just a Ploy?

Descriptions of the narrative in computer games often contend that the player becomes the author of the story (Juul 1999: 17). This can easily be shown to be mistaken. A better representation, more often used by the game developers themselves^{vi}, will put the player in the position of the protagonist. Such a representation will explain some of the seemingly odd features of computer games as interactive narratives.

For instance, while players are accorded a given amount of freedom in manipulating the world around their characters, they are often highly restricted on where they can go and what they can do. Most games become dreadfully dull if the player does not follow the set path of the story-line/puzzle. In many the character would simply be killed if the player does not follow the set path, or otherwise the mission will be declared a failure and the player is brought back to the beginning of the mission (or a saved game) to give it another shot. In short, while the exact actions of the character are left to the player^{vii}, their outcome (e.g., the killing of a certain character, the attainment of a certain object) is predetermined by the true authors of the narrative - the programmers of the game.

A comparison to Role Playing Games such as Dungeons and Dragons or Vampire: the Masquerade would help see the difference between being a character thrown hither and thither by the plot, to having a real power of changing the plot. RPGs, often referred to as shared storytelling (Tweet and Rein-Hagen 2000), or “shared fantasy” (Fine 1984), are games where a group of people sit together, each playing a specific character acting in a world described and made real by one player designated “Dungeon Master”, “Game Master” or “Storyteller”. While in RPGs the storyteller

has the power to control everything that goes on in the game-world, it could be said that some of this power lies with the other players as well. The common goal of enjoying the game (which cannot be attained if the characters are often killed) drives the storyteller to amend the game world to accommodate the actions of the players. The computer game, obviously, cannot do this - the turns the story can take are fixed and set once the game is committed to disc. The player has no power to act as co-author of the plot with the storyteller.^{viii}

Why do computer games need narratives and plots? As mentioned above, the end all and be all of games should be fun, and fun is its own motivation - so why do game designers feel compelled to offer further motivation for game players to play, in the form of a plot? It is evident from some titles, such as *Serious Sam*, that a plot is hardly necessary to make a successful game. With the exception of graphic adventures, most games could easily change the cut-scenes in between levels and no-one would be the wiser. In fact, before the advent of broadband internet, warez^{ix} sites offered their clientele "rip versions" of popular games in a compact and easily downloadable package: the kilobyte-heavy cut scenes were simply removed from the game, and the playable parts were left bare. The popularity of such rip-versions proves that, for a large number of gamers, the plot is not an important part of the game. Juul (1998, 1999: 53) even goes as far as saying that plots are a burden on games, making them less fun and lowering their replayability value.

The answer to the question may be commercial (Bates 2001): the hardcore gamers look only for the action in games, but more casual potential players may be more inclined toward games that look and feel more like other familiar media - mainly the cinema - hence computer games have grown to look more and more like motion

picture features, complete with an introductory credits scene in the beginning of the game, and a full-blown credits roll at its end (Juul 1999).

Even if we agree that computer games are a narrative medium, it could still be contended that they are unable to sustain *meaningful* narrative that carries a message to be interpreted by the player much like a quality book or movie does. Plots are, in this view, mere ploys - loose connections between the important bits of action that are there merely to give the whole a more respectable appearance.

It is telling that while the movie *Matrix Reloaded* was criticized for being nothing but a string of special-effects laden action scenes loosely tied together by a ridiculous plot, saying the exact same thing of the game *Enter the Matrix* would not really be a criticism. If *Matrix Reloaded* were a computer game, it would have most probably been considered incredible.

While I do not believe plot-lines and cut scenes are mere breathers for the player in between levels, I do believe we can speak of meaningful narrative in computer games even without them. Computer games can communicate an idea or even a philosophy through the actual gameplay sequences.

When trying to evaluate the ideological value of a computer game we should first pretend to play a stripped “rip version” of it. Whatever ideological message can be gleaned from the actual gameplay sequences could then be only supplemented by the framing story and the cut scenes.

An excellent example of how an ideological narrative can be communicated without any vestige of a plot can be found in the game *The Sims*. This game allows the player to direct the lives of a number of people called “sims”^x. The characters go to work, eat, sleep, play, interact, etc. The game has no real plot except the one the player itself imagines for his sims: all they want are their needs satisfied. The most outspoken

criticism about *The Sims* was regarding its underlying narrative. For to satisfy your sims' hearts' desires, the best you could do was purchase things: a bigger TV, a better computer, a swimming pool, a pet, decorations for the house etc etc etc. *The Sims*, said critics, is shamelessly pushing a consumption-oriented lifestyle, serving a capitalistic world view.

If a plotless game giving the player such extensive freedom as *The Sims* could be so laden with meaning, it seems obvious to me that games with a clear protagonist completing actual missions would have to have some sort of meaningful narrative even if the cut scenes are ignored. That is why I turn to the protagonist of contemporary computer games to try and analyze changes that may be taking place in the messages being communicated to players.

A Typology of Computer Game Genres

An interesting (and revealing) peculiarity of computer game jargon is that the word genre has a somewhat different meaning in this realm than in other media. While in literature or the cinema the word genre refers to the narrative content of the piece (sci-fi, fantasy, tragedy, romantic comedy, romantic novel etc.), the computer game genre is a type of playability. Computer games are divided not according to the type of story that is played out, but by the type of actions the player will take during the game and the way these actions will be represented on the screen. An adventure game can take place in space (*Space Quest*) or in a historical setting (*Heart of China*), a real-time strategy game can take place in a fantasy world (*Warcraft*) or in a contemporary alternate history (*Command and Conquer: Red Alert*) - the important thing in determining the genre is not setting, but the game system. In the next few paragraphs I will try to outline the main genres of computer games available commercially. This list will not include arcade games, which I have already discussed above. I will also limit the list to single-player games only, as Multi-User Games are irrelevant to this paper. Even with these limitations, this list is not to be taken as exhaustive.

Adventure Games

Some of the first computer games available on PCs were the text adventure games.^{xi} These games allowed the player to navigate her character in a purely textual environment. The character was moved by typing orders such as “go north” or “enter building”, and all interaction with the world was likewise carried out via typed commands. While some games (e.g., *The Hobbit*) incorporated meager graphics to

supplement the text, these graphics had little or no influence on the way the game was played. The year 1984 saw the first ever truly graphic adventure^{xii} with the publication of Sierra's *King's Quest*, which went to become one of the best-selling, and longest, computer game franchises in computer game history (Sierra On-Line 1989). This and other games which followed it still retained the textual interface to carry out certain commands, but the movement of the character was now controlled by the keyboard arrows, and the interaction with the surrounding world became that much more vivid. Later on in the evolution of adventure games, the textual interface was done away with completely and replaced by the point-and-click interface, highly criticized by players for its tendency to promote "hunt-the-pixel" strategies, where instead of figuring out what the player is to do next, he would simply scan the screen with the cursor looking for hotspots that can be activated.

Adventure games were basically about brains, not reflexes, and centered more on puzzle-solving and plot-advancing than on action and violence. Some games did not allow you to die at all, others did - but mostly at the player's own hands.^{xiii}

Adventure games are a dying breed these days. The number of titles of this genre to be published since the turn of the century can probably be counted on the fingers of two hands. The two main publishers of adventure games in the past - Sierra On-Line and LucasGames - have all but given up on the genre, leaving a small but dedicated group of fans to try and do what they can to save this dying breed. The Tierra group, for example, is refurbishing old EGA Sierra games to run well on modern computers.^{xiv}

Real-Time Strategy Games

A modern incarnation of the traditional war game (Fine 1984), the Real-Time Strategy game (RTS) uses the superior powers of the computer to follow and control a vast army of various units as they do battle against an enemy army just as complex. The player in such games is often portrayed (in cut scenes and sometimes in unit verbal responses to commands) as the commander of an army sent to complete different missions by training/building different units and giving them orders. The point-of-view is most commonly a 45-degree angle from above the battlefield, allowing the player to supervise as much of the action as possible, but at the same time distancing him from any single battle. As the genre's name indicates, the main quality demanded of a player in these games is strategic thinking. The actual battle is carried out by computer-dictated laws of range, damage and armor. Quick reflexes will do the player no good in this genre, and a careful planning of the types of units sent to battle as well as their formation is critical to winning the game.

The first ever RTS was the groundbreaking title *Dune II* by Westwood Studios, who went on to become one of two leading publishers in the genre (along with Blizzard Entertainment, owner of the *Warcraft* franchise). The late 1990's were dominated by RTSs, with some of the biggest blockbusters of the industry coming from this genre, but recently the genre has suffered a decline, as publishers were unable to reinvent the game and a dusty repetitiveness took over the genre. However, attempts at crossovers with other genres, such as *Warcraft III* which combines Role Playing Game elements, have proved successful and the genre may yet be redeemed.

The RTS genre should also be noted for consistently allowing the players to choose the side they wished to play - the Bad-Guys or the Good-Guys. *Command and Conquer* games, for example, give the player a choice between the Global Defense

Initiative and the terrorist group Brotherhood of Nod, while *Warcraft* allows players to command either a human or an orc army.^{xv}

God Games

Also called “Blank Map Games”, the God Game allows the player to create a world from scratch. Players are given a multitude of building options, development venues, and revenue-making schemes. The player is then faced with the various calamities that could face any civilization, as crime, war, natural disasters, over-population, disease and other hazards are plaguing the budding population. While RTSs utilize a very limited model of an economy (usually a mining/harvesting operation financially supports the base), the economy of the city in a God Game can be highly advanced, with a variety of venues for income, from trade to taxation, are available.

A constantly renovated genre, the God Games have taken over a large chunk of the computer game market. Variations include the historical *Age of Empires*, the above-mentioned *Sims* with its focus on a single neighborhood, and most recently - *Black & White* where the term God Game is taken quite literally: the player acts as a god taking care of a tribe of believers, creating miracles for their well-being or terrorizing them into worshipping him.

Role Playing Games

Previously I’ve mentioned real-life Role Playing Games such as Dungeons and Dragons or Vampire: The Masquerade. The computer Role Playing Game (RPG) genre is a pale shadow of the original, focusing on character enhancement rather than

character development, and putting an emphasis on battles. RPGs, however, usually have a developed plot with numerous puzzles and items.

The player usually commands a single or a small number of well-defined (if somewhat flat) characters at a top-down angle similar to that of RTSs, with the main characters always at center screen. Battle results are effected by chance as the computer calculates probability of contact and damage, but the game's focus on a small number of characters allows the player to give far more concrete commands to her avatar in the game, as the various abilities and properties of the character are taken into consideration.

With a steady output of successful RPGs, the genre will most likely stick around for at least a few more years.

1st/3rd Person Shooters

Also known as 3D Shoot-em-ups or simply as Shooters, this genre was heralded by one of the most popular games in computer game history - *Doom*. While the concept of the 3D shooter already existed in such earlier games as *Castle Wolfenstein*, it was *Doom*'s originality in usage of different gory weapons^{xvi} and its gung ho killing sprees that earned its place in computer games' hall of fame, as the progenitor of the Shooter genre.

The Shooter genre is recognizable by two distinct traits: the player's point of view is either the character's POV, or one directly behind the character, watching it and its surroundings at once. As such the environment of the game must be rendered in real-time 3D graphics, to allow freedom of movement in all open spaces (as opposed to platform games, for example, where the character can only move on one axis); and the

gameplay focuses on weapon-use against enemies, with a variety of different types of weapons available to the player. Over this basic layout, different gimmicks and concepts can be applied: a “bullet-time” feature in *Max Payne*, a “concentration” feature in *Enter the Matrix* which allows the characters to bend the laws of physics, an additional driving motif in *Grand Theft Auto 3*, a stealth motif in *Splinter Cell*, etc. The simple playability of this model means different features and motifs can be easily implemented without encumbering the interface. The central place of the protagonist on the game screen, the movie-like action offered by the real-time 3D graphics and the seamlessness of the shift from game sequence to cut scene and back enabled by this graphical rendering also allow for intricate stories to be told through the game.

It is, I believe, safe to say that the last few years have been dominated by Shooters, in their different variations. The most highly expected, and highly praised, titles have been of this genre, and a proliferation of plots, settings, implementations and publishers allows for a comparative study that would have been difficult in other computer game genres.

The variation in themes across the genre, the strong narrative capabilities of the Shooter model and the sheer popularity of these games are the main reasons I chose this genre as the focus of this study.

Shooters Protagonists

I would like to propose that, despite the large variety of settings, features and plots in the Shooter genre, the protagonists types in these games are very limited. Until very recently only three such types existed, and a fourth has been added in the last two years.

While the first three types can be viewed as morally equal - indeed, as morally upright - the new type of Shooter protagonist offers a drastic change from the usual moral tone that accompanies, perhaps apologetically, most Shooters. In this chapter I will attempt to describe the different protagonist types, and try to identify the spectrum of moral deterioration in computer game protagonists.

The Soldier

The classic Shooter protagonist is the soldier. His actions morally sanctioned by patriotism and an often demonized enemy, the action can then commence without fear of any moral issues. This moral ground is often emphasized by placing the games in indisputable Good Vs. Bad situations, e.g. World War II^{xvii}. The first ever 3D Shooter, *Castle Wolfenstein*, was based on just such a setting: the protagonist was an allied soldier who has entered a Nazi strong-hold. Placing the game in a battlefield also helps explain why no innocent bystanders are present, allowing the player to progress freely, unhindered by fear of killing anyone but the Bad Guys. The soldier setting also helps progress the game from level to level - the movement between one level to another is facilitated by the military, shifting forces back and forth according to their needs.

One problem with the soldier setting is the presence of fellow soldiers on the field, and the possibility of friendly fire (made all the more real by buggy AI, often making fellow soldiers jump into the player's line of fire and getting shot in the back). Different games deal with this problem in different ways. Some games, such as *Medal of Honor* (MoH) simply prevent friendly fire from harming fellow soldiers.^{xviii} More often the protagonist is labeled a "commando unit" and sent on missions on his own (as is the case in some levels of MoH, as well as in *Splinter Cell*, though there the protagonist may encounter innocent bystanders who must not be harmed).

The Loose Cannon

A favorite protagonist of game designers is the loose cannon. This protagonist echoes many cinema protagonists and therefore enjoys a large connotative symbolism which helps propel a plot without too heavy an emphasis on narrative in the game itself. The loose cannon is a member of a law enforcement agency who is either wrongly identified as the perpetrator of a crime, or disobeys orders which he believes would lead to bloodshed. The loose cannon is then off on a mission that, while it is not sanctioned by the law, is morally justified.

The loose cannon will invariably fight a clearly depicted evil - a murderous gang, a terrorist organization threatening the peace of the world, or some other villainous organization. By definition, the loose cannon is not accompanied by other law-enforcers, though she sometimes may be aided by interested parties. In many cases, the protagonist is being chased by law enforcement agencies, and his vengeance on the bad guys also incorporates a search for evidence to clear his name of whatever charges he has been accused with.

The loose cannon will avoid confrontation with law enforcement, and if he encounters an innocent bystander, will avoid killing him.

The quintessential loose cannon is depicted in the game *Max Payne* (MP), where an undercover cop is blamed for the murder of his operator in the force while slowly unraveling a conspiracy to experiment illegal drugs on innocent people, wreaking havoc with their and other people's lives. Staying a step ahead of the cops up to the very end of the game allows the character to avoid any confrontations with law enforcement agencies^{xix}, and a so-called "worst blizzard in recorded history" serves to explain the lack of innocent city-dwellers on the streets and the protagonist casually disposes of anyone within sight.

Command and Conquer: Renegade (C&C:R) presents us with a hybrid soldier-loose cannon protagonist, both setting out on his own missions and taking orders and advice through a communication device from HQ. The commando soldier "Havoc" is faced with both solitary missions and missions accompanied by other soldiers who come to his aid, as well as *resistance* civilians who attempt to aid him. All characters in the game, enemy or friendly, can be hurt by Havoc's fire. In most cases, killing a friendly unit will result in a reprimand from HQ, but rarely would a mission terminate on account of too many friendly units killed by the protagonist.

The Accidental Hero

Countless game designers have found the easiest way to motivate a character into a hazardous situation is to blame it on chance. Accidental heroes are protagonists who stumbled upon a dangerous situation and are merely trying to survive it. The most famous Shooter in gaming history, *Doom* has just such a protagonist: accidentally

getting himself into an experiment gone terribly wrong, the protagonist must defend himself from the mutant monsters attacking him while attempting to get to the bottom of this horrendous crime against nature and put an end to the monstrosities. The accidental hero is always on his own and will most often be fighting an inhuman enemy that cannot be reasoned with - therefore the protagonist's violence is morally sanctioned as self-defense against an inhuman foe.

While this is not a necessity, experience shows that accidental hero-based games are often less interested with plot. The accidental stumbling into a precarious situation is often a thin excuse for unleashing a barrage of increasingly dangerous monsters at the players, with little narrative motivation to speak of (e.g., *Serious Sam* or *Vivisector*).

The New Protagonist on the Block: The Criminal

The last and latest of protagonists is a sharp contrast to the previous three types. The criminal is an immoral, sometimes merrily sociopathic, protagonist. The criminal protagonist made his debut into the computer gaming world in racing games^{xx} - namely *Carmageddon* and *Grand Theft Auto*, but both games offered little narrative, and the immoral underpinning of the games was easily averted. *Carmageddon* is an interesting case in point. The original game depicts a car exuberantly mowing down bystanders, cops and animals. But the lack of any real story allowed government enforced regulations to force the game onto more moral grounds. Thus, for example, in the UK the innocent blood splattering people were replaced by green-blooded zombies. Germany went the extra mile and forced the publishers of the game to change the people into black-oil spewing robots. Interestingly enough, despite the complete identity of every other aspect of the game but the skins and fluid-colors of

the people/zombies/robots, gamers in Europe felt robbed of the experience, and hacking tools to reinstate the original graphics were quickly spread through the internet (Heavens 2003).

But the criminal protagonist only got his life's role when he emerged in *Grand Theft Auto 3* (GTA3) - a hybrid Shooter and driving game. Once there, it seemed strange that no-one had thought of it earlier. What better protagonist for a genre called "shooter" than a gun-toting murderer? And indeed, GTA3 became an instant hit with its own hit sequel (*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* - GTA:VC) and all-new games in the same format (*Mafia*). Highly criticized for its immoral content, the game was however lauded by gamers around the world for offering a fun, exhilarating experience.

GTA3 places the player behind the back of an unnamed small time criminal who was busted out of jail just for being in the same transport with someone who was important enough for someone else. Taking the opportunity to flee, the "hero" gains a foothold with the local Italian mafia and starts gaining a reputation for being a reliable handyman. While the protagonist never utters a word throughout the game, he takes orders from rival gangs, playing them off at one another, and finally taking his revenge on the woman who put him behind bars in the first place.

The game constantly plays on the border between dead-serious and mockingly humorous - be it the silly banter of passers-by diving for safety as the player's car casually drives up the sidewalk, or the mock commercials for services such as Maurice Chavez's "marriage saving" hooker services on the car radio. Even the ending of the game, after the protagonist kills his betraying ex-girlfriend and rescues the woman she kidnapped to blackmail him, gets a screwed up twist. As the credits begin to roll we hear the rescued woman starting to complain about her hair being messed up, followed by a final gun-shot.

The criminal protagonist, then, has no sanctioning for his actions, yet does not lack narrative motivation. Unlike *Carmageddon*, where the only motivation is the player's fun, GTA3 has a story that makes sense. Even though the game's progress is mildly non-linear, and the player can actually play the game enjoyably without accessing the missions in the game, there is a clever, intricate story being told by the game, as plot motivates missions and missions propel plot.

Every character can be killed by the criminal protagonist - be them gangsters, cops or innocent bystanders. While some characters' death could spell the failure of a mission, GTA3 made a point of never allowing the protagonist to really die. One could complete the game without ever saving and restoring the game: whenever the protagonist gets "wasted" or "busted" by the police, he would reappear, *sans* weapons and a little lighter in the pocket, at the local hospital or police station, ready to retry the current mission.

Moral Deterioration: A Comparison of Six Games

In this section I will draw a spectrum of game morality using six games issued between the years 2001-2003. I should state at the outset that I view all games (with the possible exception of C&C:R) as equally good and fun on the gameplay level. Labeling a game as "bad" in some sense merely because its protagonist is immoral would force us to likewise label some highly regarded movies such as Quentin Terantino's *Pulp Fiction* or Guy Ritchie's *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. The purpose of the following classification is merely to follow a certain change the industry is undergoing and try to understand it, its causes and its ramifications.

In analyzing the following games I will apply the four categories set by Rockwell (1999) for computer game interpretation: (1) The type of media and fiction integrated into the game; (2) The types of characters in the game, particularly the protagonist; (3) The types of interactions the player can carry out with the game world; (4) The Physical and temporal settings of the game.

Highest on the morality scale among our games would be Steven Spielberg's *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, depicting a soldier protagonist in the second world war. The protagonist, Lieutenant Mike Powell, is sent on several different missions, both alone and accompanied by other soldiers (up to and including the invasion of Normandy along with hundreds of other soldiers). Powell's bullets cannot hurt friendly units, and so all possible killing is sanctioned both by law and by justice, as the hero does his best to thwart the Nazi war machine.

The game is played in 1st person perspective, and Powell is stripped of any personality, allowing for complete immersion between player and character^{xxi}. Powell does not speak throughout the game and does not initiate any missions.

Command and Conquer: Renegade has a hybrid soldier-loose cannon protagonist. From the very beginning of the game (after a quick tutorial mission), Captain Nick Parker, AKA Havoc, is shown to be disobedient. The first mission is initiated by the protagonist despite direct orders from his commander to stand his ground. Further missions are sometimes given by Havoc's commander and sometimes initiated by Havoc himself. All missions, however, are for a good cause. For example, the first mission is initiated by Havoc because "civilians are being brainwashed" in a facility

of terrorist organization Brotherhood of Nod, and the protagonist “cannot just wait and watch it happen”.

Gameplay itself is a simulation of realistic conditions - Havoc’s weapons can hit and kill friendly units, in which case he is reprimanded by his commander over a communication channel. No real sanctions are taken, though. Plot-critical NPCs cannot be killed.

The character of Havoc is fairly detailed (if flat), and added banter during gameplay adds to the soldier-with-an-attitude image of Havoc. The game can be played either in 1st or 3rd person perspective, allowing the player to choose the level of immersion.

Max Payne is a full-fledged loose cannon. Working as an undercover cop investigating a large scale drug operation distributing the mysterious drug Valkyr, Max is framed with the murder of his operator and is forced to both flee the police and find and dispose of the heads of the drug operation. The game takes Max Payne through a series of levels full of nothing but criminals that must be killed on sight. A small number of NPCs exist - all of whom are plot critical, and killing them ends the game. The only exception are drug addicts cowering away at corners throughout the game levels. When left undisturbed, they are harmless (if annoyingly vocal). However, once awoken, they will shoot wildly in all directions. Killing these addicts is allowed by the game, and is even encouraged, as ammo can be collected from the dead bodies. A blizzard is the given reason the streets are free from innocent bystanders (a fact remarked by the protagonist himself in one of the cut scenes).

The game is played in 3rd person perspective with the protagonist’s voice-over a prominent part of the game, keeping a distance between player and character.

It may be worth noting that the game is overtly pre-determined by virtue of the very structure of its narrative: the opening scene of the game is also the very last scene. The game sequences themselves depict the protagonist's recollection of the events of the past few days. Such overtly closed endedness is quite uncommon in games (Juul 2001), and on first glance may seem to take the punch out of the game. However, the commercial success of MP proves this is not so.

Mafia presents us with a toned down version of the criminal protagonist. This hybrid criminal-accidental hero is dragged into the world of organized crime through no fault of his own. Protagonist Tommy Angelo starts out as a simple cab driver in a fictional city in the 1930's United States. Bad luck strikes when two passengers order him to flee from a battle scene, and soon enough Tommy is forced into working for the mob, with a game model similar to that of GTA3 - combining Shooter gameplay with driving missions.

However, as the game progresses and Tommy climbs up the Mafia's hierarchy, he begins initiating jobs, until eventually he takes on a bank heist unbeknownst to the mafia's boss, and ends up killing his former partner and fleeing the scene of a massacre.

The protagonist's morality is however somewhat redeemed by the frame story. As in MP, *Mafia* too is told as a recount of past events. Tommy is meeting a police detective in a diner and confesses of all his crimes, willing to turn state evidence if his and his family's lives are protected. Thus all events in the game, including countless killings and even the assassination of a politician, are viewed through the prism of the post-factum comments of both Tommy and the detective.

The game's moralizing, however, does not end there. The game ends with Tommy a middle-aged man living under an assumed identity. He is paid a visit by two men, and is shot point blank as a "message" from his old boss, now doing time in prison. Not settling for this plain message, the designers added then a long-winded, somewhat apologetic speech by the deceased Tommy Angelo about how crime doesn't pay, how it is better to lead a normal life with a normal, clean job.

It is a bit strange, then, that once the end credits fade out, we find Tommy Angelo at his home, alive and well, and ready for some free-form cruising around town, much like what happens at the end of GTA3 - only in GTA3 the protagonist never died. It seems clear that the designers were looking for a way to eat their cake and leave it whole, and came up with this half-hearted eulogy to give lip service to morality.

GTA3 is finally the real McCoy - the unnamed hero of the game is a criminal protagonist through and through. Unlike *Carmageddon*, where running over people was rewarded by points, in GTA3 the player is invited to run over people just for the fun of it. Points (i.e. money) are awarded for trashing vehicles, but running over pedestrians is rewarded by nothing but a heartening squish.

The game designers missed almost no opportunity to have the protagonist do something wrong. He can even pick up hookers on the street for a quickie in the car, which gains him extra life points - even beyond the normal maximal level. Also, certain weapons enable the player to shoot off particular body parts of surrounding people - an arm, a leg, the head - and watch the unfortunate victim spray blood in every which way before he or she collapses.

The protagonist takes the stereotypical "strong silent type" model quite literally, and does not utter a word throughout the game. Cut scenes show him sitting with

different bosses, but at no point does he respond with anything but a quiet nod. This may allow for a greater immersion of player into character, but it also makes for a less believable protagonist, seemingly puppeteered by the different families, his fate left to... well, fate.

It is therefore the sequel to GTA3 - *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* that must receive the rank of most immoral game in this classification. The gameplay remains basically the same (plus motorcycles and helicopters, and some gory new weapons), but the plot is very different.

The game takes place in the 1980's. It begins in a New-Yorkish setting, where protagonist Tommy Vercetti has just been released from 15 years of jail after taking the fall for the Family. The family boss wishes to dispose of his disgruntled employee, so he sends him off to sunny Vice City - a Miami clone - where he is to carry out a large drug deal. The deal goes awry, the money entrusted with Tommy is stolen, and our "hero" sets out to set things straight.

However, unlike GTA3, the criminal protagonist of GTA:VC initiates his own missions. Soon after the game starts, Tommy takes over a large crime operation in Vice City, and starts collecting his own protection money, teaching a lesson to competing organizations and amounting a personal fortune large enough to buy half the city (almost literally). Tommy does every crime and misdemeanor from vandalism to blackmail (and, of course, murder) to achieve his goal of attaining riches. In GTA:VC the protagonist not only has a name, but he also has a voice, a mind, and ambitions.

Also ending with a great big show down between Tommy and his former boss, the game is open ended as the player is allowed, once the credits sequence is over, to

continue caring for Tommy's businesses around town, messing with the police and attempting new stunts on the many ramps throughout the town. The immorality of it all simply doesn't seem to matter to the protagonist, and any moralizing speeches are spared from the player.

Conclusions

The above comparison has revealed a wide spectrum of morality in contemporary computer games. A moral narrative is influenced by both gameplay and the frame story, and contradictory message can be sent from the two parts of the game narrative. However, most games manage to circumvent and avoid any clashes between the morality of the protagonist in gameplay and his morality in the story frame. I have also shown how when the two narratives crash, the game's credibility suffers. This happens both in Mafia where the game's gratuitous violence is given a moral spin through the story frame, and in GTA3 where the designers' reluctance to give the protagonist a voice has rendered him less credible than he is, for example, in the sequel, GTA:VC. It could also be said to be true of C&C:R, where the reprimands of the protagonist's commander following the killing of friendly units is easily ignored by the player and protagonist, somewhat bruising the image of a soldier in the service of a generally well-meaning army.

The computer game criminal protagonist did not develop out of empty space. Recent years have shown a boom of likable criminal protagonists in movies (*Pulp Fiction*, *Lock Stock*) and in television (*The Sopranos*) as well as in literature (*Fight Club*). However, the immersive nature of computer games may warrant a deeper look into this change, which may render previous studies on the effects of computer game violence on gamers moot: the criminal protagonist makes for a whole different gaming experience. With all social justifications removed from the acts of the computer game hero, identifying with the main character must necessarily mean accepting his actions, at least within the game world, as "good" in some sense of the word.

This paper showed how similar playability with different moral meaning assigned to basically identical actions could create both a different ideological narrative and a different game experience. This relationship and possible consequences should be examined further, both socially and psychologically. In the meantime, a discourse with the game-design industry must be kept in an attempt to understand the direction the industry is taking, to prevent any negative results, and to assist in creating games that are fun, but without unwanted side-effects on society as a whole.

Notes

ⁱ“Killer Applications”, or “killer-apps”, are those games or applications that propel the computer hardware industry forward by the sheer number of people who upgrade their systems for the specific purpose of running those applications. A classic example is *Serious Sam*: This game, with an almost non-existent plot, composed mainly of a series of haphazardly constructed levels offering a never-ending onslaught of monsters, was originally designed merely to show off the abilities of its engines, as a platform for more complex games. However, it became an overnight hit and has become a killer app for the very technologies it was meant to show off.

ⁱⁱE.g., *Grand Theft Auto 3*, *Mafia*, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, and, most recently, *Vietcong*.

ⁱⁱⁱIt is interesting to note how advanced players of chess will terminate the game and announce a winner once both agree that there can only be one logical course the game can take from a certain point on, leading to the victory of one of the players. Once the result of the game is certain, it is no longer “fun”.

^{iv}It should be noted, though, that, like chess, even *Tetris* has only a limited number of possible games - though the number is unimaginably huge.

^vIn dice-based Role Playing Games a single fight scene could take hours to complete (even though it represents mere minutes in game-time), exactly because the players are required to carry out the probability calculations manually.

^{vi}For example, Juul (1999) quotes an add by Infocom: “[...] as hard as we work at perfecting *our* stories, we always leave out one essential element - *the main character*. And that’s where *you* enter. [...] Find out what it’s like to get inside a story” (italics added). Game descriptions on the games’ boxes often start with “you are <protagonist’s name>”.

^{vii}Recent games try to make interaction with the environment as universal as possible: while older games allowed interaction with only a very small portion of the decor of the game-world, newer ones enable the player to literally rip out of the wall whatever she sees as use it

for attack or defense. This interaction, however, is almost always destructive, and sometimes completely irrelevant to the game. A good exception is *Black and White* where the god protagonist can and should manipulate anything and everything in the game world to achieve its goals.

^{viii}Some games have tried to work around that problem. The game “Neverwinter Nights”, while allowing for a single-player, pre-written plot, also allows the players to create game groups on the net where a specific player will take over as storyteller, and be able to change the game world as he pleases to fit the on-going plot. Massively Multi-User Games, such as EverQuest, allow hundreds of people to log on into a game world and do, basically, whatever they wish: the game designers create a continuous flow of new plots for the players to participate in, but the game world is also used by some as a mere free-form play ground and a social meeting place. They cannot create game plots, but they simply choose to ignore them, and generate social plots, through relationships with other characters, rather than adventure plots.

^{ix}Warez is cracker slang for pirated software.

^xThe name “sims” come from previous titles by the same publisher such as *SimCity*, of the God-games genre, where the player builds and manages a city. *The Sims* attempted to focus the game on a smaller scale, allowing the direct control of individual people in a single neighbourhood rather than entire populations in a city.

^{xi}This name probably originates from the first ever text adventure game, titled simply “*Adventure*” (Rockwell 1999).

^{xii}Then called “3D graphic adventure”, but now more often referred to as “2.5D” - meaning the characters were able to move all around the screen and move around obstacles, but the image the player saw was two-dimensional and static.

^{xiii}Anyone who had played the early King’s Quest games can recount the unnerving tendency of the character to fall off cliffs or drown at sea because of an inadvertent keystroke or the failure to type “swim” quickly enough.

^{xiv}<http://www.tierraentertainment.com/>

^{xv}This is not the case for *Warcraft III* in which the player is forced to play a certain plot, switching protagonists between leaders of four armies: the “good” humans, orcs and faeries, and the “evil” undead.

^{xvi}I once saw a gamer who appended this tagline to his email messages: “Real men do it with a chainsaw” - a reference to one of the more popular weapons in *Doom* - more for the gore value than for functionality.

^{xvii}In a recent visit to Germany I discovered games such as *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, depicting allied soldiers battling the Germans are just as popular there as they are in the countries that fought Germany. A study into the feelings of players basically disposing of the likenesses of their fathers and grandfathers could prove interesting.

^{xviii}This particular feature allows for harmless (in game terms, at least) aggression release through emptying clip after clip of ammo into the body of an especially annoying non-player character (NPC).

^{xix}The sequel to this game, *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne* is yet to be released, but from gameplay clips released to the public (www.maxpayne.com), it appears this description will not hold for this next installment. The protagonist, Max Payne, is shown to be battling police men in these clips, and the game as a whole is described by the publishers as an adult oriented “film noir” style game. It is telling that *Max Payne*’s original publisher Remedy was joined by Rockstar Games, authors of *Grand Theft Auto 3* and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, for the production of *Max Payne 2*.

^{xx} Many RPGs allow criminal characters such as thieves or assassins, however these denominations influence mainly the abilities of the characters, not their moral fiber, not the gameplay model.

^{xxi}For a discussion of the effect of 1st person POV on the gaming experience, see Juul (1999: 46-47)

Bibliography

- Bates, Bob (2001). *Story: Writing Skills for Game Developers*. (Lecture)
<<http://www.gdconference.com/archives/proceedings/2001/bates.doc>>
- Caillois, R. 1957. "Unity of Play: Diversity of Games," *Diogenes*. 19: 92-121.
- Fine, G.A. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goffman, E. 1961. *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.
- Heavens, Andrew (June 23, 2003). "Computer Games Tackle Their Local Difficulties". *Financial Times*.
- Juul, Jesper (1998). *A Clash Between Game and Narrative*. (Paper)
<<http://www.jesperjuul.dk/text/DAC%20Paper%201998.html>>
- (1999). *A Clash Between Game and Narrative: A Thesis on Computer Games and Interactive Fiction*. Copenhagen: Institute of Nordic Language and Literature, University of Copenhagen.
- (2000). *What Computer Games Can and Can't Do*. (Paper)
<<http://www.jesperjuul.dk/text/WCGCACD.html>>
- (2001). "Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives." *Games Studies*, 1 (1).
- Rockwell, Geoffrey (1999). *Gore Galore: Literary Theory and Computer Games*. (Paper) <<http://www.arts.ubc.ca/fhis/winder/cochcosh/ppr1999.htm>>
- Sierra On-Line (1989). *Tenth Anniversary*. Coarsegold, Ca: Sierra On-Line, inc.
- Tweet, Jonathan and Mark Rein-Hagen (2000). *Ars Magica, Fourth Edition*. Roseville, MN: Atlas Games.