

## Introduction

According to Zimmerman (2009, p. 29), game design involves math and logic, aesthetics and storytelling, writing and communication, visual and audio design, human psychology and behavior, and understanding culture through art, entertainment, and popular media. However Bateman (2007, p. 85) also describes that game design and writing are beset with issues of balance in keeping the player on the path of the game for the essential tension is between the player's freedom and the need for clarity of instruction.

In video games, narrative provides context for these game events, and a sufficiently believable context provides immersion. (Dansky 2007, p. 5).

The genre 'action adventure' will thus be focused in this article and as stated by Oxland (2004 p. 36), it is a sub-genre of adventure game which combined with the defined adventure prerequisites, has plenty of action also generally in the form of combat or shooting.

For as stated by Oxland (2004 p. 35), adventure games often have interactive stories which are revealed as the player journeys through the game and overcomes the challenges.

However, one wonders what the limits for its narrative storytelling are and how does player interactivity feed into the experience? Furthermore, how much control do the players actually have and does it add or distract from the pleasure derived from the game playing experience?

Two examples used for this genre would be *Assassin's Creed* (2007) and *Tomb Raider*:

Underworld (2008).

## **Analysing Tomb Raider: Underworld and Assassin's Creed**

Some formal elements in both Tomb Raider: Underworld and Assassin's Creed are:

- 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view
- Graphic interface consists of weapons inventory and health
- View is usually around the character

The experiential elements that could be found in both games consist of:

- Unpredictability
- Suspense
- Anxiety

The structured elements also consist of being:

- Funneled
- Linear
- Story driven goals

Along with these elements, the games are found in a gnoseological story structure. Described by Neitzel (2005 p. 235), the gnoseological narratives are build on a transition from ignorance

to knowledge.

In Tomb Raider: Underworld, the heroine, Lara Croft, finds herself in a burning mansion at the beginning of the game prologue. The player does not know why she is there but has just enough information on the game controls to escape the burning debris to get to the other side. Once she escapes to meet the other non-playing characters, a brief dialogue happens before the scenes changes to another level to see what Lara had been doing one week earlier before the prologue.

For Assassin's Creed, the game play also starts *in medias res* with Altair, who the player controls, in a temple to retrieve an artifact. The player does not know anything much except to move around in the temple while learning the game controls to get by like the prologue of Tomb Raider: Underworld.

In both games, the player has no knowledge of how the storyline would be like except for the beginning where they need to continue the game and learn more about it. Arsenault and Perron (2009 p. 116) also implies the more he [the player] knows about the characters, their motivations and their aims, the more he is in a position to evaluate and guess the possible outcomes of the story. In addition, another role that the narrative serves is of identification to tell the player what the elements of the world are, the reason why the player's character is in it and what actions are expected to take as a result (Dansky 2007 p. 6)

All these furthers the narrative development of the game as the player continues the gameplay.

## Game Narrative Design in Action Adventure

As described by Johnson (2006 p. 55), narratives are built out of events, not tasks where the player is forced to define and execute the tasks. I find it best using Dansky's term on what narrative is in games:

On the most basic level, narrative strings together the events of the game, providing a framework and what can alternately be called a justification, a reason or an excuse for gameplay encounters. At its best, narrative pulls the player forward through the experience, creating the desire to achieve the hero's goals and, more importantly, see what happens next. At its worst, narrative merely sets up the situation and turns the players loose to do as they see fit (Dansky 2007 p. 5).

However, also as stated by Dansky (2007 p. 7), in a videogame, the narrative experience must be completely defined in advance for the videogame writing is a closed system wherein the writing must lead the player to stay within the confines of the anticipated action.

With this in mind, the players do not actually have that much control over their characters for the narrative has been pre-written for them and that any action that the player takes is actually taken into consideration by the narrative designer. This is also reaffirmed by Myers (2009 p. 55) that this [narrative] structure often do not doubt or destroy but only, upon occasion, intervene – in a fashion similar to how readers intervene during the hypertext reading experience. Thus, the players are actually led to make choices to delve into the game

to continue.

There are many methods to lead the players to follow the narrative. McCarthy, Curran and Byron (2005 p. 59) suggests that strict game design gives players a series of problems, and one or two prescribed solutions while emergent game design provides the same problems, but offers a toy box rather than a set of solutions where players experiment to find their own answers.

However in this 'toy box', the characters in the game are still bound by the rules of the gameplay where the narrative designer has defined. For an example, Tomb Raider: Underworld follows an interrupted linear narrative while Assassin's Creed has some emergent elements in its narrative.

Most games have an entirely linear spine, or a spine that supports a small amount of flexibility in terms of the sequence of events but no variation in which events are involved in completing the game and its story. Often, those games that prominently feature a story prefer to have *all* the narrative material in the game spine, which is to say that these games do not afford the player any capacity to stray away from the path of the story (Bateman 2007 p.87).

This is especially true in Tomb Raider: Underworld as there is no way for the player to go beyond the prescribed events that are needed to complete the levels. Lara Croft needs to collect the items to solve the puzzles and complete her tasks in each level before she can proceed on to the next part of the narrative.

As for Assassin's creed, there is a little variation. By having just a minimum number of tasks

done in Altair's investigation, he can carry on his mission to assassinate his target without finishing the rest and continue on with the narration of the story. However, the player does not stray far from the path of the story even with the game's emergent elements.

To further define linear narratives and emergent narratives:

Formal [linear] narrative simply involves storytelling that is delivered via prescribed methods. Whereas implicit [emergent] narrative is generated through player interpretation of the game system interactions and is therefore unplanned by the game creators, formal narrative involves planned story elements (Boon 2007 p.46).

Emergent narratives however do not mean that the narrative designer had not planned for the events to happen. It merely means that the narrative designer had actually pre-planned the possibility of the scenario in the game to happen or it is within the rules of the gameplay that the designer had defined. It is a choice for the player to have if he or she decides to use it, giving the player some "freedom" inside the game.

Defining emergent narrative, Boon (2007 p.45) states it involves the interaction of elements within the game system to develop events that may be interpreted by the player as story – narrative results that are implicit to the game design.

It is implied to the player that the emergent narrative is part of the whole story in the game and not as a separate element that would not fit in the game world or storyline.

An example is the side quests in Assassin's Creed where the player may gain more allies by rescuing the citizens of the country from harassing guards. By rescuing these citizens, the in game non-playing characters would actually help the player's character, Altair, if he is attacked by the guards of the city. However, Altair is always able to scare the citizens if he keeps assassinating them in full view or fight with innocent civilians. The citizens will then hinder him from where he wishes to go. These examples are not part of the game narrative to complete it but enhances the game experience to the player and adds to the story.

By Arsenault and Perron's (2009 p.117) reasoning, a gamer will not interrupt his game every so often to think in depth about all the ramifications of the story's events, but will simply follow the narrative. The player would thus not have their pleasure in their game experience taken away by the narrative if the elements and tasks are implied to be part of the gameplay.

However, as warned on the features of emergent narrative by Muehl and Novak:

Games that depend on emergence must, even more than most games, be iteratively refined; you need to play intensively with the system to see what it's capable of (Muehl and Novak 2008 p. 190) .

Interestingly, while Tomb Raider: Underworld is an interrupted linear narrative, the game designers have now made downloadable content such as new costumes or bonus scenes to be added to the main game. This too could be taken as an emergent element for it adds to the story but is not necessary to complete the game. Perhaps due to this addition, it adds on to the player's interactivity with the game and increase more gameplay to get to the end of it.

In my own opinion, the downloadable content such as the new costumes increases my pleasure in playing the game as I am given more choice in what Lara Croft should wear in the midst of all the action. Also, the downloadable bonus scenes add to the intrigue of the main game's storyline.

## Engaging the Player

Järvinen (2009 p. 103) states that it is generally accepted that humans are insatiably curious, and that our curiosity can extend to the contents of our own or other's minds. While Johnson (2006 p. 37) describes that "seeking" is the perfect word for the drive these designs instill in their players for most of the time as when the players are hooked on a game, what draws them in is an elemental form of design: the desire to *see the next thing*.

In both Tomb Raider: Underworld and Assassin's Creed, the gnoseological narrative design plays on the curiosity of the player to keep them continuing their gameplay. Each level is designed so that a little piece of information is revealed bit by bit so that the full story will then be understood at the end of the game. The suspense and the mystery in the narrative keeps the player wanting to learn the rest of the story, similar to how they would continue reading a book or watching a movie.

Curiosity conceptualizes pleasures from learning something previously unknown (Järvinen 2009 p.102). This curiosity keeps tugging on the player to continue interacting with the



elements in the game to perhaps find clues about the narratives in an action adventure game.

## The Player's Interaction

Although it seems that the players are free to do anything with the characters in the game, there are unseen rules that are used to keep them from going off track from the narrative and gameplay using breadcrumb and funneling systems.

As stated by Bateman (2007 p.99), the main purpose for breadcrumb and funneling systems is to keep the players on track and make sure they do not lose track of what is expected from them to advance in the game and to reassure the players that they are on track.

In Assassin's Creed, the player is led to undertake the missions by having non-playing characters talk to Altair and lead him to find various people that he needs to pickpocket, intimidate or eavesdrop to aid in his investigation. Without these non-playing characters talking to Altair, the player would not know what he needs to do in the game and is given a guideline to follow.

For Lara in Tomb Raider: Underworld, the player is given hints on what to do with Lara talking about needing to explore a place further or that she will talk at times to herself so that the player would know what to do with the items found.

Funneling systems is important to this genre especially when the character the player controls is able to explore around in the game world seemingly without limits. In Tomb Raider:

Underworld, Lara is placed in Thailand and needs to explore the jungles to find the ruins. The landscape is fairly large and limitless. However, with the funneling system in place, the player cannot actually make Lara swim to the furthest reach of the sea as the tide will bring her back in or that the jungle scenery and will block the character from trying to climb all the walls there with its plants or rocks. The player cannot move Lara out of the predefined areas that she is able to explore.

This also happens in Assassin's Creed where Altair is not able to swim so the player may not be able to get him to go into the water without killing the character. Altair is also unable to climb up steep mountain ranges so the player is only able to move him within the gameplay area.

It does not distract the player and frustrate them however as the funneling systems placed is logical and shows what the player can do instead to get around a problem or manage the task to do in the game.

Besides leaving breadcrumbs and funneling the gameplay for the player, cut-scenes also help with the interactivity and narrative. By McCarthy, Curran and Byron's (2005 p. 123) reasoning, there are two main methods of advancing of the plot – through passive cut-scenes or as a natural part of the gameplay.

However, players have their controls over their characters snatched away from the gameplay during these cut-scenes. It gives the narrative director more control over the cinematics and narrative at these points. Interestingly, this is not a problem to the players.

As stated by Johnson (2006 p. 36), in the gameworld, reward is everywhere. A cut-scene could be taken as one as evidenced by this:

The narrative events can be revealed gradually, delivered as rewards for achieving in-game goals. When this has been done frequently enough inside the same game, the player will expect to receive another chunk of narrative after winning a boss fight or overcoming a particularly tough challenge (Dansky 2007 p. 6).

So even if the cut-scenes manage to remove the player's control over their characters, it is alright as it signifies that the player has managed to defeat the antagonist or solve the puzzle or that they will begin to start another part of the narrative soon.

In Tomb Raider: Underworld, the player expects a new cut-scene once they have finished solving the puzzle or retrieving an artifact that she needs to collect. In one level, Lara is found in an underground cavern and manages to pick up a gauntlet of Thor. Once the player had done that, a cut-scene sequence begins where it is stolen from her by some minions from her rival and that she must find a way to escape the cavern once the cut-scene sequence ends.

It is also a reward to receive a cut-scene in Assassin's Creed for it means that the player had finished his mission successfully and will continue towards the next mission to learn more about the narrative and the reason of all the targets in the assassinations. It might be taken that the player is interacting with the gameplay to get towards the cut-scene as a reward even if it is non-interactive.

Long and numerous cut-scenes in a game however would detract the pleasure from the

player and would seem more like playing an interactive movie instead of a game.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are limits to the narrative story-telling in action adventure. The genre's narrative is still rather linear even if it has some emergent elements as the player needs to be traditionally directed along a pathway to complete to the end of the story.

Furthermore the player is led to believe that they have control over their characters but this is not so. Even if the player has made choices within the game, it is actually preplanned by the game narrative designers. Along with breadcrumbing and funneling methods in the game, the player is actually led along to complete the narrative instead of wandering around lost in the gameplay. However the player does need to interact with the game elements to complete their tasks and the narration gives a reason for them to do so.

While the players technically do not have much control over the story of the game, this does not distract them from enjoying their experience as they are still curious to know more to get to the end.

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**No, I didn't put the smiley in there during submission but I'm putting it here in case anyone blindly copy pastes or something. Also! I got a good grade for this, yay!**