Game Fiction: Playing the Interface in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* and *Asheron's Call*

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ABSTRACT

Videogame play requires the negotiation of multiple synchronic points-of-view enabled through the use of cameras, avatars, interfaces, and vignettes (the cut-scenes, dialogue, and other attributes normally attributed to the "story"). Concurrent mastery of these points-of-view contributes to the game field of play and enables a greater possibility to complete the game's goals. Using *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* and *Asheron's Call* as examples, this paper examines the interface as one of the various mechanisms that establish and control the player's point-of-view in videogames. By understanding the use of point-of-view as one of many components that establish game fiction, we can theorize the imaginary inventions that shape games, even those that do not resemble more traditional narrative forms.

Keywords

Game fiction, interface, point-of-view, genre

Videogame play requires the negotiation of multiple synchronic points-of-view enabled through the use of cameras, avatars, interfaces, and vignettes (the cut-scenes, dialogue, and other attributes normally attributed to the "story"). Concurrent mastery of these points-of-view contributes to the game field of play and enables a greater possibility to complete the game's goals. Point-of-view is rarely discussed in regards to computer games that do not intend the player to work through some kind of story or simulate a historical or quasi-historical event. *Tetris*, for example, seldom invites such a discussion, while the study of a first-person shooter or graphical adventure game would. Using *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* [1] and *Asheron's Call* [2] as examples, this paper examines the interface as one of the various mechanisms that establish and control the player's point-of-view in videogames. By understanding the use of point-of-view as one of many components that establish game fiction, we can theorize the imaginary inventions that shape games, even those that do not resemble more traditional narrative forms.

General studies of point-of-view exist in large number within a variety of disciplines, including literary and cinema studies, and have in turn been used in discussion of computer games. As Lev Manovich argues in *The Language of New Media*, "computer games use – and extend – cinematic language" in "their implementation of a dynamic point of view" [3]. He further notes that "directing the virtual camera becomes as important as controlling the hero's actions,"

although he limits his example to how players can move between the "point of view of the hero and a top-down bird's-eye view" [4]. Bob Rehak combines the roles of camera, narrative, and avatar in his investigation of player-avatar relationships through the lens of Lacan's mirror stage. The "intent" behind the use of cameras and avatars, for Rehak, is "to produce a sense of diegetic embodiment" [5] – not simply a player point-of-view into the game world, but an immersed sense of being. His extensive review of avatar development, from a spaceship in *Spacewar*, to the textual avatars of interactive fiction, to the embodied-camera of first-person shooters, leads him to declare, "through gaming, then, the concepts of avatar and interface became linked" [6]. Rehak, however, does not adequately account for the distinct points of view established between individual genres, which can vary widely. Additionally, the camera, the avatar, the interface, and fictional vignettes constitute multivalent player points-of-view, which are complementary, unique, and crucial to the player's ability to achieve the kind of virtual immersiveness, as Rehak suggests, and also to garner the crucial clues and aids the player needs to master a game. The player's view of the screen, the avatar's role in a story, and the difference between third- and first-person cameras each provide a unique and separate point-of-view into the game world.

Distinguishing between various points-of-view becomes particularly relevant when considering a game's use of story or narrative, the finer points of which have been fiercely argued throughout the so-called "ludology-narratology debate." Despite Gonzalo Frasca's misgivings that "the [ludology-narratology] debate … never took place," what seems evident from the discussion of these terms is that a gap still exists between our discussions of story elements within videogame play and our study of play within the game. Frasca rightly points out that many scholars typically associated with the 'narrativist' camp prefer to "situate themselves in 'a middle ground position' (Jenkins, [11]), 'a fruitful theoretical compromise between [narrativism and ludology]' (Ryan, [19]) or a 'hybrid space' (Mateas, [14])" [7]. Others argue that ludology would suffice, much the way Frasca does, as a term that embraces both the ludologist and narrativist approach. Despite these claims, the questions – which are really about how different game genres use fictional elements – persist, leaving us to ponder why the difficulty in finding a "hybrid space" in the study of games remains.

As many genres of computer games rely heavily on text and/or images to reveal exposition and action, which can often create an effect similar to a story-experience, comparisons to cinema or prose fiction is understandably tempting, often useful, but not without limitation. The material conditions that shape computer games, such as the potential for configuration or simulation, distinguish games as unique media objects with a variety of sub-genres. As Espen Aarseth's essay "Genre Trouble" reveals, the question of genre is also foundational to the questions (and accusations) of disciplinary colonialism and control that currently plague game studies as a whole [8]. Symptomatically, genre categories broadly follow industry and journalist standards: first-person shooters, god games, strategy and role-playing games (RPGs), and the unwieldy Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (and its unpronounceable acronym MMORPG). The use of the industry's taxonomy is quite telling because games are distinguished by points-of-view employed in the game, determining genre via visual or cinematic means ("first person shooter") or through narrative purpose ("roleplaying game").

GAME FICTION
Rather than arguing that we study games as narrative, which excludes any number of games from chess to *Gran Turismo*, I propose the term "game fiction" in order to emphasize the degrees to which different genres of games use fictional *devices* as native elements of the game to enable the player's engagement in meaningful play. Considering game fiction does not claim that games eschew narrative device, nor does it claim that games are (or are not) narrative. Rather, this concept allows us to explore strategies that create a "feigned state of things" [9], a condition typically associated with narrative genres (such as novels and Hollywood-style cinema), for ludic purpose. Studying game fiction and its implications for genre may enable us to simultaneously recognize videogames' various artistic, cultural, and disciplinary antecedents (including, but not limited to, cinema, narrative prose, drama, non-computerized games, and HCI); acknowledge videogames' unique algorithmic and configurative attributes; and effectively distinguish between various genres of games, including their individual use of fictional elements that are part of the rules and enable successful gameplay.

Brian Sutton-Smith describes a game as "an exercise of voluntary control systems in which there is an opposition between forces, confined by a procedure and rules in order to produce a disequilibrial outcome" [10]. Use of the term "voluntary" indicates that players are willing, rather than forced, participants. This willingness may include a desire to learn or overcome, but also suggests a desire to play within the confines of an established "control system"; in short, players agree to abide by the rules and procedures, as well as to suspend disbelief. Fictive devices in games shape rules by providing understandable, though often abstracted, perceptions of a game's boundaries and offerings. The inclusion of "disequilibrial outcome" in Sutton-Smith's definition implies some measure of competition, but this is not inconsistent with either Huizinga's conception of play and game or the later, modified iterations "paidea" and "ludus." [11] Videogames enforce certain rule sets that may, to greater or lesser degrees, enable freeform or sandbox play, but at all times rules are a necessary component of any meaningful gameplay activities. For our purposes, any successful navigation of the rules can be considered a disequilibrial outcome. Winning in the *Spiderman 2* videogame, for example, includes the successful completion of a mission, or the more freeform mastery of navigation in a game space, such as freely swinging through New York City.

While game, on the one hand, involves "voluntary control systems," fiction, on the other, most commonly refers to narrative imaginative prose, either in the form of novels or short stories. Its broader definition, however, is more useful to our purposes: "That which, or something that, is imaginatively invented; feigned existence, event, or state of things" [12]. The process of writing *imaginative inventions* quite reasonably results in novels and short stories - prose fiction. This genre demarcation indicates general form (narrative), material conditions (e.g., print), and opens forays into discussions of sub-genre (epistolary novel, e.g.). Game fiction combines the ludic qualities of a game - the "exercise of voluntary control systems" - with imaginative invention, those fictional devices that in many studies of games usually fall under the terms "narrative," "story," or "storytelling." Use of this term maneuvers between the ludology-narratology debate so that we can understand how various genres of games, regardless of their intent towards story-telling, can create a "feigned state of things," a fictive principle, for ludic purpose.

PLAYING THE INTERFACE IN *PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME*

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time is an example of a game that provides multiple points-of-view as a means to complete the game's goal. *The Sands of Time* is a game *about* storytelling. The Prince, who is the player's character, tells a retrospective narrative; the goal of the game is a process of actualization, where the player must work through the Prince's various memories to complete his recollection. His tale recounts his arrogant attack on the Maharajah's palace, his theft of the Dagger of Time, and the subsequent destruction when he used the Dagger to unlock the Sands of Time. The Sands sweep through the Sultan's palace, turning everyone but the Prince, the mysterious Farah, and the devious Vizier into sand zombies. While *The Sands of Time* employs multiple fictive points-of-view, including vignettes, cameras, and character-driven avatars, this paper focuses on the software interface that overlays the game screen.

The flat screen that is the primary visual interface for this (and most) videogames is often most conflated with the game's camera point-of-view. Mastery of the game's camera controls is an essential play component in *The Sands of Time* – and any other game that operates with configurable camera. Yet the camera shares the screen real estate with the interface display. In generic terms, maps, radars, and other navigational devices, when present, usually overlay or frame the camera point-of-view in order to aid the player in the navigation of game space [13]. Additionally, abstractions of character statistics such as health bars, timers and weapon icons often hover, frame, or clutter the screen space. Games integrate these elements within their fictional paradigm to varying degrees, often to the extent that they rely on game fiction as a whole[1]. Understanding the interface as a separate, and complementary, point-of-view is not intended to challenge the immersive possibilities when considering cameras and avatars, such as those proposed by Manovich and Rehak, but rather to suggest that we also need additional reflection on the player's relationship to the broader view of play. The point-of-view of a camera or character, and the point-of-view of a player to the material screen, are therefore synchronic *and* distinct.

The Sands of Time employs a simple, non-intrusive interface (see figure 1), bordering the sides of the screen on the upper-left x- and y-axis. The life bar shows the Prince's state of health, which can be affected by falls, enemy attacks, and traps. The life bar can be replenished by drinking water, which "is life" [13] – appropriate in an environment where the Sands of Time are consuming humans and turning them into sand zombies. The Prince uses the Dagger of Time as a weapon, as well as a tool, that allows the wielder to reverse time and, eventually, to control it. In functional game terms, pressing the L1 button allows the player to reverse already-passed frames from one to ten seconds, effectively moving backwards through time. The time circle, which resets after certain actions, dictates how far back the Prince can reverse time, with a full circle representing ten seconds. Each sand tank, which can be refilled by retrieving sand from an enemy in battle, or by capturing a "sand cloud" in the game, represents one opportunity to reverse time. The power tanks represent additional powers for the dagger, which include slow motion, hasting the Prince, or freezing enemies.

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[1] *Quake* and *Half-Life* both contain the equivalent of "heads-up displays" to reveal character health, armor, and weapon chosen, but *Half-Life* creates a greater sense of fictional immersion by providing a protective suit for Gordon Freeman (the main character) in the early stages of the game. Gordon's – and our – ability to monitor statistics and gear makes more fictional sense given that he wears a suit that allows him to do so. The heads-up display as a game function is also given greater fictive purpose. Unsurprisingly, *Half-Life* incorporates more fictional elements, such as dialogue and memorable non-player characters, than many other first-person shooters.
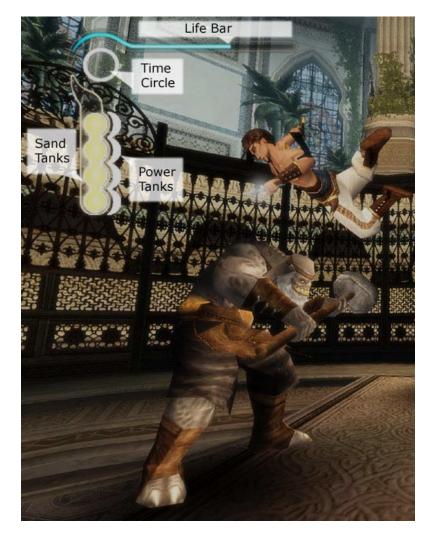
Figure 1: Annotated screen interface from The Sands of Time.

These four subtle components are displays of *condition* or *location*, distinguishing the interface as "fictional" as well as functional. Conditions detail the avatar or character's state of being. As cameras provide in-game vision to describe what is seen – the fictional "state of being" of the game environment – the interface details for the player in abstracted ways the avatar's "state of being." A camera angle, for example, cannot display a character's state of health; a screen interface must abstract the character's status in understandable ways for the player. Examples of a character's condition include descriptors such as "hurt," "armed," or "buffed[2]." In *The Sands of Time*, the life bar is an example of the Prince's health condition. When protecting Farah, which is an occasional play-element during the Prince's battles, a red bow on the right side of the screen appears and functions much the same as the Prince's life bar. Interface features are not limited to physical health, but can also indicate states of power. The sand tanks and power tanks, as abstractions of the amount of sand held within the Dagger, are displays of condition, representing the power available to the Prince to reverse time or employ useful battle techniques. The interface display provides a visual cue similar in function to an adjective, providing fictional

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[2] "Buffed" is a term used by players to indicate the presence of spells or power-ups that enhance a character's abilities. The antonym is "debuffed."

abstracted qualifications of a character's condition.

Whereas the life bar indicates condition, the time circle displays location. Location can provide geographic information as a map or radar would. In this case, the time circle indicates chronological location (where the Prince is in time), which happens to be integral both to the fictional imagination of the Prince's world and the logic present as part of the key to gameplay.[3] Should the prince die, either in combat or by taking damage by falling during the many platform jumps necessary to complete the game, the player can simply reverse time. Though the process of pressing L1 is supposed to signify the Prince actually pressing a button located on the Dagger of Time, the player can use this function even if the Prince has already died (thus making it relatively difficult for the Prince himself to react). The avatar is not linked to the interface, in this instance, but is distinct from it. With a dead avatar and a frozen camera, the player essentially plays the interface; using cues from the time circle to undo what in terms of the camera and avatar were final moments.

CHANGING THE INTERFACE IN *ASHERON'S CALL*
Other games, such as *Asheron's Call*, allow players the flexibility to alter the game's interface, resulting in significant changes to the game and its fictive attributes. As opposed to most other Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs), *Asheron's Call* developers maintained a relatively open stance regarding the use of player plug-ins. Third-party programs, authored by unofficial coders, run alongside the *Asheron's Call* game engine, altering the default fictive environment – and history – of a *persistent* and ever-growing world. Decal, the "plugin architecture for creating third-party tools for use with Asheron's Call" [15], is a passive program; it reads data delivered by the game server, but the program does not send data back. Instead, various plug-ins use the server data to augment gameplay in a variety of ways, such as tracking character development, creating an in game "TradeBot," or augmenting the player's ability to "see" in the game environment.[4]

Every plug-in is player developed, player tested, and player distributed, and the penetration of these tools in the game is vast. While some plug-ins influence item trading and record keeping (considered by some as tedious work rather than play), others radically alter how players view the game's fictive environment. The screen interface of *Asheron's Call* frames the camera perspective, with character condition elements such as health and magic points at the top of the screen, inventory and maps on the right side, and a textual interface at the bottom. The camera field is configurable, with a wide range of views centered on the avatar in third-person perspective. Since a flat screen cannot replicate the flexible visual range that we normally enjoy, player "sight" is augmented by a radar display. The radar (figure 2) provides compass directions and displays multicolored dots that indicate the presence and location of other characters and monsters.

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[3] The use of time in game varies, of course, and certain uses of time markers, such as the clock that counts down in *Super Mario Brothers*, is a limited example of fictional location, as its purpose is more a part an arbitrary rule (e.g., "You must complete this level within three minutes") rather than an indication of any clear fictive purpose. In contrast, the original *Prince of Persia* had a one-hour time limit, but this deadline was tied to an ultimatum given to the princess by the Vizier keeping her captive. As such, it functioned both as chronological location and health condition (after an hour, the princess was to be killed).

[4] A list of plug-ins available for *Asheron's Call* can be found at the Third Party Paradise website <http://acplugins.cjb.net/>.

Figure 2: Screenshot of trade bots in action. Note the radar display, top-right.

Initially, the radar display hid certain monsters that were outside the normal field of view. For example, a monster hidden behind the crest of a hill would not produce the radar dot signifying the monster's presence until the player character crested the hill, where he or she might be startled to find themselves in sudden battle. As with most 3D computer graphics, items, characters, or monsters nearest the avatar render in sharp relief, while items further away from characters blur into the horizon as with traditional atmospheric perspective. Alongside the camera and avatar, the use of radars and maps are fictive constructions that enable the game's creation of a sense of presence. The radar compensates for the limitations of sight created by the flat surface of the screen, but reflects natural visual boundaries by not marking a creature that players could not normally see, such as if a hill interrupted the player's line-of-sight.

Figure 3: Detail of Decal and Sixth Sense. The Decal toolbar at the top holds the list of active plug-ins. The box on the left is the in-game Sixth Sense plug-in interface.

Instead of having to rely on inconsistent radars and visual displays, players began to use "Sixth Sense," a plug-in that reads the data streaming to the player's computer and, through an altered interface, provides a view far greater than normally possible than either the camera or the default interface's visual cues would provide. The plug-in works in the following way: as a player enters the game environment, the server sends a data stream to the user's computer that details an entire land block – more information than a character could possibly "see" in the game. The data for the land block includes, among other things, the landscape design as well as any items, players, and characters that occupy it. "Sixth Sense" scans that data for special items or monsters according to criteria configured by the player in an XML file, and provides a textual and/or aural alert when a required object is nearby – even if it is far beyond the possible visual range afforded by the camera or radar. Players, in effect, move beyond the visual interface of the game, using a tool to scan and "read" the data itself – a type of networked hermeneutics unintended in the original design. By placing dangerous monsters on their list, for example, "Sixth Sense" alerts the player to the monster's presence even if the threat was well beyond normal line-of-sight. The use of "Sixth Sense" directly revised the fictive construction and control of a player's point-of-view. Even though Decal and its plug-ins did not have the ability to change the flow of data from the server, or even respond, by interpreting that data and presenting it through an altered interface, player point-of-view far exceeded the fictive construction of avatar awareness in the world, radically altering the process of play.

CONCLUSION

Whether engaging in general, unguided play, such as hunting monsters in *Asheron's Call*, or actively reconstructing a retrospective narrative, as in *The Sands of Time*, a player interacts with the game environment through several synchronic points-of-view that construct the player's relationship to the game environment. Games that use fiction are not inherently narratives, although more advanced uses of game fiction can create an experience somewhat akin to story-

growth experiences (the re-telling of which could be narratives). This is an important distinction, because it allows us to consider the use of fictive aspects within all sorts of games, even if the game itself does not resemble narrative or produce narrative outcomes. The distance between the player and the game space is, in varying degrees, reflective of the use of game fiction, those imaginary inventions that frame point-of-view through cameras, interfaces, and avatars. Any discussion of story within the context of ludology generally invites obvious comparisons between games that use some kind of story elements and those that do not (such as *Tetris*, *chess*, *go*, or sports games). Through the understanding of game fiction, we can begin to more effectively discuss games in the broader contexts of their individual genres.

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