

Waiting for Something to Happen: Narratives, Interactivity and Agency and the Video Game Cut-scene

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ABSTRACT

Since the appearance in 1978 of *Adventure* on the Atari 2600, the cut-scene (alternatively cutscene or cut scene) has been a key component to many video games. Often, the cut-scene gives narrative shape to the game experience, moving the player along through a series of events culminating in the story's end. Cybertheorists such as Hayles, Murray and Frasca have explored the ways in which digital interactive media and the video game introduce new paradigms of narrative and storytelling, as well new conceptions of interactivity and agency. However, in many ways the inclusion of cut-scenes raises many of the problems concerning the theoretical structures with which to investigate video games. Since cut-scenes often follow cinematic codes of representation, current theory often renders the cut-scene as passive and non-interactive, as opposed to the interactive nature of gameplay. Yet as film theory has shown, especially in the effects of suturing and such, cinema offers a kind of psychic interactivity that blurs the hard boundary often drawn between cinema and gameplay. The cut-scene then becomes the locus of the tension in video games between cinematic representation and gameplay, and subsequently, an investigation of the cut-scene and its role in the video game can offer substantial insight into the nature of agency and interactivity within the video game. Using the release of Capcom's *Resident Evil 4* and Ubisoft's *Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie*, both of which challenge the traditional definitions and uses of the cut-scene, this paper will study the different ways in which the cut-scene operates within the video game. It will not only discuss current conceptions of agency and interactivity within the video game, but also offer an transmedia framework, after the work of Marsha Kinder, with which to explore the relationship between narrative and gameplay, cinema and simulation in the video game.

Author Keywords

cut-scene, interactivity, agency, transmedia.

For digital media theory, 1997 was a banner year with the release of Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. In many ways, the discussion that

these two seminal works raise about digital form and narrative as a whole, has had serious stakes for debates within video game theory regarding the idea of the "ergodic" and the narrative. Since those two volumes, the debate has, in many ways, become "heated and polemical [with] the potential role of narrative [in video games] being subject to both exaggeration and out-of-hand dismissal" [10]. It is King and Kryzwinska who summarize this ongoing question of narrative versus game play by asking "To what extent are games a medium with a significant narrative or story-telling, component? How far are game specific tasks...affected by the narrative frameworks within which such activities are situated" [10]? On one side, while Murray waxes poetic on the "promise [of the computer] to reshape the spectrum of narrative expression" [13], Eskelinen, working from Aarseth, describes stories in video games as, "just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kind of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy" [11]. However, this approach of "radical ludology" [11], whereby any serious discussion of framing or narrative is brushed brusquely aside, is clearly limiting in light of the fact that video games have undoubtedly presented strong attempts at producing narratives. More recent approaches to video game theory, such as those by King and Krzywinska's and Juul, have been much less polemic in their approach to the divide between narrative and play, suggesting models of video game theory that addresses this tension between the ludological and narratological. Even as Aarseth notes, "to claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories. And yet...the difference is not clear-cut, and there is significant overlap between the two" [1].

The present state of video games, especially so-called "story-driven" games like the *Resident Evil* or *Metal Gear Solid* series point more and more to seeing video games within this overlap, and for us to consider video games as neither purely narrative nor purely ludological. In fact, video games can be viewed as both an ergodic medium, wherein the user engages directly with "the materiality of the text [and] participates in the construction of its material structure" [11], and a representational one, wherein the user engages with a variety of different signs to

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create semantic meaning. For the purposes of this paper, the often maligned “cut-scene” becomes a key object by which we can parse contemporary debates on this narrative-ludic divide. King and Krywinska characterize this divide and the role of the cut-scene, noting that, “narrative reliance on cut-scenes and other 'out of game' devices...is one of the main reasons why the narrative dimension is often seen as essentially opposed to that of gameplay” [10]. Similarly, Juul observes that “cut-scenes are often considered problematic because they prevent the player from doing anything and are in a sense a non-game element in a game” [7].

Both observations identify the cut-scene as one of the locuses to the problem of narrative within the video game. Juul further highlights this problem by noting that the problem with the cut-scene is also a problem of “interactivity:” where the narrative elements of the cut-scene contrast directly with the more interactive game play elements that are chiefly used to characterize the ergodic and ludic in video games. Similarly, as both theorists suggest, a close reading of the cut-scene can then serve to highlight, define and interrogate not only the question of narrative vs. gameplay, but also that of interactivity vs. agency.

This paper will closely engage these questions of narrative, interactivity and agency within the cut-scene, not by exploring the whole history of the cut-scene and its capacity for narrative play, but by focusing on two specific games and their uses, or rather, their unique innovations within the realm of the cut-scene. Capcom's *Resident Evil 4* and Ubisoft's *Peter Jackson's King Kong: the Official Game of the Movie* released within a month of each other on the Playstation 2, both challenge the fundamental nature of cut-scenes within video games, and in many ways highlight the overlaps and problematics between narrative and game play, interactivity and agency. In addition, the cut-scene provides a way to talk about video games in a transmedia context, and to consider the way in which innovations in the the cut-scene can alter the meanings of interactivity and agency within this larger context as well.

At this point in the paper, it is important to note the way in which the term “interactivity” is being used. As suggested by the use of Aarseth's term “ergodic,” interactivity here is defined in terms wherein “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” [1]. As King and Krywinska expand on the idea, “the videogame player has to respond to event in a manner that affects what happens on screen...success often depends on responses, effective hand-eye coordination and learned moves or skills effected through devices such as joypads and keyboards” [9]. In other words, “interactivity” is defined in terms of the users' direct influence in navigating through the digital text. This definition is many ways the same notion of the term as more broadly defined in larger

media studies, where “interactivity” allows for “a more powerful sense of user engagement in media texts, a more independent relation to sources of knowledge, individualized media use, and greater user choice” [12]. Furthermore, “being interactive signifies the users'...ability to directly intervene in and change the images and texts that they access. So the audience for new media becomes a 'user” [12]. The focus here is on the user's active and *physical* engagement with the text, beyond as Aarseth notes, “eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of the pages” [1].

Building on this definition then, the standard distinction made between game play and cut-scene is the fact that the former is “active” or “interactive” and that the latter is “passive.” This is the problem that Juul points to his in definition of the cut-scene, because they “prevent the player from *doing* anything” (emphasis mine). Similarly, Rehak defines the cut-scene as moments in the game that are, “intended for viewing, not playing. At those moments, the game cues players (typically by shifting to a ‘letterboxed’ mode with black bars at the screen top and bottom) to remove their hands from the controls and simply watch information that advances the game’s narrative” [18]. It is this supposed lack of activity that causes many theorists to characterize the cut-scene as moments of passivity within the larger interactive structure of the game, “generat[ing] considerable consternation among players and commentators alike” [15]. Grodal gives voice to this consternation when he suggests that the cut-scene actually “block[s] interaction” and because of this blockage, cut-scenes are “experienced...as more 'dead,' less 'vivid' than in a film context” [5]. In each case, the video game is defined as a ludic medium, highlighting the importance of game play and “participative involvement” [15]. These arguments about the nature of the cut-scene as “injurious to the video game experience as a whole” [15] are clearly those, to borrow Klevjer's term, of a “radical ludology,” wherein anything that detracts from the so-called “interactive” element of video games is viewed as somehow undermining the only thing that makes video games unique as a medium. However, in each of these cases, the notion of interactivity is defined quite narrowly; as the Rehak definition suggests, interactivity only occurs when the player has his hands on the controller, in other words, as part of the cybernetic, or homeostatic feedback loop when the player engages in “some motor action via an interface” [5].

The “Interactive” Agent: *Resident Evil 4*

But what happens when the player has to hang on to the controller during a cut-scene? This is exactly what happens in *Resident Evil 4*. The latest iteration in the popular series of the so-called “survival horror” genre, the release of this game was noted for a large number of design changes in the not only the construction of the game, but also of the control interface as well. Described by

reviewers in the popular video game media as nothing less than a “massive transformation” [14], *Resident Evil 4* also offered a significant change in the presentation of cut-scenes. This is in addition to the so-called “standard” usage of cut-scenes, as listed by Newman. These include, but are necessarily limited, to the following:

- practical computing issues
- save point
- respite
- progress/feedback
- reward
- story development [15]

In addition to these usages, *Resident Evil* also utilizes cut-scenes in two very specific and unusual ways that suggest different ways in which to view the notions of interactivity and agency.

The first of these usages occurs in several of the cut-scenes, where players are quickly prompted to hit certain buttons on their controller in order to affect the outcome of the action presented before them. Some of these moments are pretty simple: a quick press of the button allows the main character, Leon, to dodge out of the way of a swinging ax or a runaway truck. Others are often more involved: in one longer sequence, Leon must race ahead of a giant boulder, threatening to crush him unless the player successfully negotiates a multi-button combination. In both cases, the results are similar: if the player fails to time the button presses correctly, Leon dies a horrible death by ax, truck, or boulder, related, after a slight pause for disc access, in another brief cut-scene. On the surface, it seems then that *Resident Evil 4* offers a solution to question of the passive cut-scene by providing a form of interaction wherein the player directly affects the outcome of the narrative event depicted in the cut-scene. As the *Playstation Magazine* review for the game notes, because the game is “packed with interactive moments during cinema scenes,” such as those moments discussed above, “*RE4* [sic], more than *Metal Gear Solid* even, is the closest yet a game has come to making you feel like you're the star of an action movie – *without taking away control from you*. Sometimes it's used just for dodging larger enemy attacks, but it still helps make the action look and feel damn cool” [14]. The question then comes to be, how much more control is actually given to the player?

Formally, these moments within the game have less to do with the other play elements in the game and more in common with the simplistic push button interface of interactive movies from the 1990s, such as 1994's *Under a Killing Moon*. The control scheme in the game play elements of the game are quite complex and allow for a wide range of navigational and combat interactivity. For

example, using the joystick, the player can use Leon to engage in a spatial navigation of the world in a fully-formed 3-D environment. Furthermore, combat is distinguished by activating an “over-the-shoulder” perspective where the joystick can now be used to specifically aim and target Leon's weapon with an almost pinpoint accuracy, especially when compared to previous incarnations of the *Resident Evil* franchise. However, when it comes to these cut-scene moments, the dynamic use of the interface is boiled down to merely hitting the right button at the right time in order to activate one of two pre-determined cut-scenes: the first, where Leon succeeds, and other, where he fails. In fact, there is even a brief lag as the game console accesses the correct cut-scene. The “interactivity” described here is the interactivity similar to CD-ROM based “interactive movies” of the 1990s where “the interactivity...is described as selective, branching-type, or menu-based” [16]. Furthermore, this is “a closed interactivity in which 'the user plays an active role in determining the order in which already-generated elements are accessed,'” leading to the conclusion that this interactivity, is “in fact an illusion” [16]. Thus, these moments read less like a “solution” to the problem of interactivity within the cut-scene and more like a regression to an earlier form, where despite the raves of the review, the player actually loses a sense of control rather than gaining it.

Yet, it is interesting to return to the *PSM* review, where the reviewer describes the effect of these moments: where the game “is the closest yet...to making you feel like you're the star of an action movie” and the fact that the mechanic “helps make the action look and feel damn cool.” While it is easy to dismiss the conclusions of this review as simply misinformed, it is important to note the way in which the review describes the effect of the use of these moments on the player. While “look and feel damn cool” isn't exactly precise critical language, it is defining the way in which these moments, coupled with the other interactive elements of the game, create a specific type of *representational agency* for the player: the feeling of being “the star of an action movie.” I use the term “representational” to suggest an idea of agency wherein the user experiences agency not so much in terms of real-life, but in terms of a fictional figure, such as the hero of the action-adventure film.

Because the notion of “agency” lies at the center of my argument regarding the use of cut-scenes, it is important to not only define this term, but to contrast it with notions of interactivity. For Both Grodal and Murray, the use of “interactivity” has become a troubled term, and thus, each feels the need to not only more accurately define the term, but to expand it through the notion of “agency.” “Interactivity” for Grodal and Murray, then, is similar in many ways to the notions of Lister and Aarseth, where it involves the user's physical engagement with the computer, and the ability of user action to affect the appearance of the

computer in some way. However, “the mere ability to move a joystick or click on a mouse” [13] it is not enough to describe the idea of agency: “But activity alone is not agency” [13]. “Agency,” for both Grodal and Murray “goes beyond both participation and activity” [13] and into the realms of narrative and player experience.

In order to clarify his use of terminology, Grodal uses the additional word “agency” to describe the player experience of “interactivity.” He further goes on to say that “the only necessary condition for experiencing 'agency' and interactivity is that our actions *make a difference*” [5, emphasis mine], not only in the appearance of the screen, but more importantly, in the *player's experience* of the narrative, or the “different stories” [5] of the game. As Grodal says, “the key element in agency and thus the feeling in interactivity is the ability to change the player's experience” [5]. Similarly, Murray makes the argument that “agency is the *satisfying* power to take *meaningful action* and see the results of our decisions and choices” [13, emphasis mine]. This idea of “meaningful action” for Murray as well takes place in the context of the video game as a “narrative,” whether enacted in the form of the spatial navigation of maze or labyrinth games, or the solving of puzzles in so-called journey stories such as *Zork*. While it seems that Murray's notion of agency is unduly anchored to narrative in myriad ways, her view of agency as “the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials” [13] is broad enough for application beyond just her narrative. The importance of both Grodal's and Murray's discussions of agency, and which applies to this paper's discussion, is the notion that agency links player effect to player affect. That is, the player *feels* a sense of agency from the way the video game responds to her input.¹

In the case of *Resident Evil 4*, the use of cut-scenes is integral in the creation of representational agency. As pointed out earlier, these larger cut-scene moments are not the only usage of the cut-scene within the game. In addition, scattered throughout the game are moments where button activation activates much shorter cut-scenes. For example, early in the game, the player can prompt Leon to jump out of a window in a dramatic low angle cut-scene with a context specific push of the “A” button. The game then quickly switches back into game play mode with no discernable lag. In fact, the game is full of moments like these that allow Leon to interact with specific parts of the environment in different ways. Through these cues, Leon is able to jump over logs, push down ladders, hoist Ashley onto his shoulders or catch her when she jumps down, and even apply well-placed spin kicks. Of course not all of these moments are strictly shown by an activated cut-scene, such as this moment when Leon jumps out the window, but the overall effect is to add to the repertory of actions available to the player. Though limited situationally in terms of elements in the game environment (for example, Leon must be positioned correctly in front of the window

before the cue appears), it still provides an increased number of options to the player: simply put, the player is allowed to *do* more. Similarly, the runaway boulder of the larger cut-scene can then be read as providing a similar moment of this type of agency, where the player is allowed to do something incredibly “cool” in dodging aside at the last second, ala Indiana Jones.² It is this increased availability of options, partially articulated through different cut-scenes and cut-scene innovations, that, while based on an almost regressive model of interactivity, that actually increases the sense of player agency in the game.

While the load time in accessing the new cut-scene is a problem, most notably in the longer ones, as indicated above, the fact that cut-scenes are rendered through the game engine as the game play is a significant visual element in this creation of representational agency. Advances in game programming and design have allowed programmers to utilize the in-game engine to produce the cut-scenes, as opposed to using pre-rendered. The advantage of the former is that there is less of a visual gap for the player to bridge in moving from game play to cut-scene, maintaining “a more uniform aesthetic” [10], keeping the player immersed within the game world. This distinction is especially relevant in the case of *Resident Evil 4*, because not only does this allow for the interactive component of the cut-scene on the technical level, it also helps maintain an uniformity and relative smoothness in moving from game play to cut-scene and back, aiding the player in sustaining the illusion of the coherent game world.

Narrative Supersystems: A Transmedia Context

In his study, Klevjer makes explicit the role the cut-scene has in creating this coherent game world, but with serious implications when it comes to the notion of video game agency. He argues that one of the most important features of the cut-scene is its ability to create “a narrative-oriented framework within which subsequent sequences of player activity are situated” [10], pointing out the cut-scene's role in establishing a coherent fictional world, often based on pre-existing film genres, such as the horror or action genre for the *Resident Evil* series. However, Klevjer argues that these “story-game[s]” offer “a contradiction. We want freedom of action, and we want to do the same as the hero from the movies does. The illusion of potent agency in a mythical world — as any representational event — is a paradox, creating conflict when we play.” Thus, the paradox of the narrative framework is that at the same time it constrains true agency, it still creates the conditions for the actions of the player to “be meaningful within a mythical fictional universe.” In the end, Klevjer suggests that the “conflict between narration and play is not a question of discursive levels...but a conflict of agency. There is a balancing, and a struggle, between the agency of the story-game and the agency of the player.” Thus, the cut-scene becomes a key element in the definition of video

game agency by helping to create the narrative conditions and fictional world in which the player is allowed to play “make believe.” For games which utilize cut-scenes, the cut-scene plays an integral role in creating “established fictional genres” within the game and placing the user “as a typical subject in a typical world.” Klevjer’s notes that a player often “wants to do the same as the hero from the movies does,” suggesting the “voice of a genre” that speaks to the player is almost invariably that of film. Given not only the amount of crossover between video games and film, but also the role of film in popular culture, Klevjer’s move seems a logical one to make.

The connection between cut-scenes and film can be reached in a slightly different way when we consider Grodal’s argument that “the more this motor interaction [agency] takes place in a world that simulates being an agent in a world that simulates aspects of a possible real world the greater experience of interactivity” [5]. It is interesting then to consider the method and kind of “action hero,” or representational, agency offered in *Resident Evil 4* in light of this observation. There are very few people who would argue that the action movie actually simulates “a possible real world.” But the game still provides the player with a powerful sense and large repertory of possible actions with few “real” world parallels, at least any parallels without the deployment of complicated special effects, stunt work and the like. Thus, the “possible real world” invoked here is the possible real world of film. It is important to note here that cut-scenes are only one part of the general strategy, which also includes the details of the game play environment and the use of music, with which video games like *Resident Evil 4* point to film traditions and genres.

It bears repeating at this point that the demarcation between game play and cut-scene as “activity” versus “passivity” is an overly simplistic one [9], and is focused almost too exclusively on the cybernetic feedback loop involved in video games. However, there is undeniably a filmic quality to the cut-scene. Rehak points to one of the reasons for this cinematic characterization when he notes the ways in which the cut-scene draws from the formal codes of film: “During cut-scenes conventional codes of cinema reassert themselves; viewing competencies developed through movies...guide players in the proper interpretation of ‘unembodied’ visual grammar such as shot-reverse-shot, dissolves, zooms...and so on” [18]. Two implications can be drawn from Rehak’s observation. First, as the literature involving audience reception in film has shown, such as in the work of Laura Mulvey and the processes of cinematic suturing, film anything but a “passive” medium. Both Rehak and Grodal actually build their arguments on psychoanalytic and cognitive film theory, respectively.³ Secondly, as a formal element in video games that specifically draws from the visual codes of cinema, it makes sense to position cut-scenes in a transmedia context to consider the ways in which such a

context affects both the readings of video games *and* films.

These changes and observations regarding the relationship between cut-scene and game play, traditionally separated by theorists and gamers alike, ask us to reconsider the way in which we view and discuss questions of narrative, interactivity and agency in video games. The transmedia context that this paper proposes is similar to the idea of “entertainment supersystems” described by Kinder in her study, *Playing with Power*. Kinder uses the term to describe a system of transmedia intertextuality “across different narrative media” [8], including movies, video games and Saturday morning cartoons which “construct[s] consumerist subjects who can more readily assimilate and accommodate whatever objects they encounter, including traditional modes of image production like cinema and new technological developments like interactive multimedia” [8]. For Kinder, the ultimate goal of entertainment supersystem as a transmedia construction is the creation of a new generation of capitalist consumers with an advanced degree of media literacy. In positing the notion of this system of transmedia intertextuality, Kinder provides a valuable context with which to look at the cut-scene, which is in itself a transmedia product. While this paper will not carry the analysis of the cut-scene to Kinder’s conclusions regarding late-market capitalism, this paper can utilize this concept as a way to position the cut-scene, bridging two media through form and content, to allow us to consider the different modes of intertextuality between the two. It is important to note that, in suggesting this type of transmedia framework, this paper is neither attempting to somehow privilege film or to define video games in a primarily filmic context. Instead, it is offering a way to think about the ways in which film and video games work in conjunction, producing new frameworks for narrative and interactivity.

In fact, both Klevjer and Newman suggest a way of looking at interaction between the ludic and narrative elements of the video game that is related to this idea of transmedia intertextuality. As previously observed, the nature of interaction in a video game goes beyond that of the cybernetic feedback loop. Klevjer argues that “a cutscene does not cut off gameplay,” but is actually “an integral part of the configurative experience. Even if the player is denied any active input, this does not mean that the ergodic experience and effort is paused” because the switch between ergodic and narrative results in a distinct “rhythm of gameplay” where the player is “constantly being thrown rapidly in and out of bodily ergodic effort.” Newman makes a similar claim about the nature of video game interactivity, noting that “Videogames are highly complex, segmented arrangements of elements,” including both game play and cut-scenes, and that whole “videogame experience is...the product of a complex interplay of [these] elements, each demanding and facilitating different degrees and types of participation and activity” [15].⁴

Both theorists note that in the transition between game play and cut-scene, between the ergodic and narrative, that there are still a complex series of interactions between the player and the game. While Klevjer folds this interaction into the overall ergodic framework of the computer game, Newman suggests a much broader picture. What both theorists demonstrate, though they do not state directly, is that a kind of transmedia mental processing that occurs wherein the player switches between the physical interaction of game play and the decoding mechanisms required of cinema. Klevjer describes how this “oscillation” between cut-scenes and play has become “a standard convention in story-based computer games” noting how “it is becoming a new kind of artistic language, developing its own rules.” This is similar in many ways to Kinder’s conception of the entertainment supersystem that produces savvier technological consumers, in this case, the creation of the player/viewer that can easily switch between the codes of the ergodic and the codes of the cinematic.

Watch as Man, Play as Kong: *King Kong*

Though this paper focuses primarily on the formal and aesthetic elements of the narrative supersystem, and the way those elements creates a crossover between video games and films through the vehicle of the cut-scene, it does not deny the market-driven imperative of such a transmedia context. Clearly, as the economic and business relationships of between the film and video game industries have evolved, the formal and aesthetic elements have developed in their own way. It is no wonder then that *Peter Jackson’s King Kong: The Official Movie of the Game* (now referred simply to as *King Kong*) was viewed in the mainstream press as “widely touted as the missing link between video games and movies” [20]. Even it’s awkward title foregrounds the close connection between the video game of the movie, finding a way to label it not only as “official,” but the “official game” of the Peter Jackson’s version of *King Kong*. While this paper seems like it is coming to some kind of conclusion regarding the venial nature of this economic aspects of this transmedia context, the awkwardness of the title actually speaks of the effort on the part of the game designers and filmmakers to develop a game that works very hard to bridge the supposed gap between film narrative and game play. In their attempt, they have created a game that interrogates and highlights the similarities and differences, in the terms of this paper, the ludic and the narrative, game play and the cut-scene, and creating new implications for the notion of interactivity and agency within the video game.

There are many unique aspects to *King Kong*. It uses a first-person perspective when the user plays as Jack Driscoll and also a third-person perspective as Kong himself. This switch in perspective has important implications in terms of agency that will be explored later in the paper. In terms of its cinematic presentation, *King*

Kong consciously upsets several conventions of the video game in order to, according to game designer Michel Ancel, “put...you in the movie” [6]. To this extent, many items that would be considered standard for games, mostly in the form of on-screen indicators for life, ammunition or mapping, is noticeably absent. Instead, health levels are indicated by audio and visual cues: the screen turns red and the images blur to indicate severe injury and the music and sound effects change, as if your character is beginning to fall unconscious; the player presses a button to hear your avatar, Jack Driscoll, report on the amount of ammunition remaining: “I’m almost dry;” and the game is designed in such a way, through level progression and shorter levels, that a real-time mapping mechanic is rendered unnecessary. Most importantly, *King Kong* utilizes a game play dynamic first seen in the ground-breaking *Half-Life* in 1998. Narrative information commonly presented in cut-scenes is instead presented in the form of “dynamic story events” [6], meaning that narrative information, usually found in the form of dialogue and conversations or even key plot events, are presented as part of game play, wherein the player still has full game play control of the character. While such a dynamic is seen as the outright elimination of the standard cut-scene, to say that the game fully eliminates cut-scenes is a misnomer. What happens in *King Kong* is something much more complex, wherein the more traditional cut-scene is integrated with the game play elements in such a way as to suggest new ways in which a transmedia intertextuality can be developed between cinema and games.

The game itself, once the player hits “start,” actually begins with a cut-scene, demonstrating one of the two standard usages of the cut-scene found within the game. In this case, the cut-scene utilizes film clips from the Peter Jackson movie to introduce the characters and situations leading to the game itself: beginning with Carl Denham plotting his escape from New York City and moving quickly through the gathering of the other principal characters of the movie, Jack Driscoll and Ann Darrow; the boarding of the *Venture*, the ship which takes them all to Skull Island; and ending with the moment the ship encountering the mysterious island. This particular use of the cut-scene testifies to the ease with which the cut-scene, along with its use of the filmic quality, of editing allows for the relatively quick and easy delivery of lots of information in a short period of time. This particular cut-scene allows for the quick creation of the narrative framework to deliver the player into the game proper. In addition, it clearly signals the transmedia context in which the game exists: it actually assumes a basic understanding on the part of the player of the movie from the game is adapted. However, after this initial use, these filmic cut-scenes using actual film clips no longer make an appearance in the game.

The next standard usage of the cut-scene actually appears when the game proper begins, with a cut-scene showing an image of an antique map and a dotted line

drawing the path the ship takes to its destination, a hoary staple of adventure movies. This is an image repeated throughout the game, spatially mapping the character's progress through Skull Island, suggesting the spatial unfolding of narrative, and evoking Murray's suggestion that, "as I move forward (spatially), I feel a sense of powerfulness, of significant action, that is tied to my pleasure in the unfolding story" [13]. In addition, this is clearly a moment as discussed above, when elements from traditional film genres are utilized to create a larger narrative framework for the game, a framework, again, created within the cut-scene. These map cut-scenes are part of a series of between level cut-scenes. In fact, the majority of scenes in these between level cut-scenes do not deliver the type of narrative information commonly found in cut-scenes. They are often short, impressionistic clips of either of what the player has already experienced, or some of the creatures or action that the player will encounter on the next level. Outside of the mapping sequences, the cut-scenes here are actually between-level load screens that do more to establish mood and entertain the player rather than impart any practical narrative information.

Instead, practical narrative information is presented during game play moments. The first of these occur as the player, playing as Jack, journeys across choppy seas in a tiny rowboat towards Skull Island during a beautifully rendered thunderstorm. All the while, scripted conversations take place between the various characters: Denham and Hayes, Denham and Ann Darrow (all voiced by the actors from the movie). The player can move the view around, to watch either the conversations or the other boats, towards the rear to see the *Venture* retreating into the distance, or even to admire the scenery of chopping seas and falling rocks. However, outside of the ability to move around, the player is not able to effect the environment in any other way: he cannot move around the boat, nor swing his fist, or use a weapon for that matter. In fact, outside of the ability to change the view, there is actually little to distinguish this cut-scene from one where the player is asked only to watch the unfolding events. In this sense, this moment can be seen as a mere, almost cosmetic expansion of the standard cut-scene.

There are further problems that the game encounters in communicating narrative information during ludic game play moments. Foremost of these is balancing the delivery of narrative information against the notion of player agency. In other words, players don't always do what designers need or want them to do, such as actually paying attention to on-screen conversations between non-player characters. In the traditional cut-scene format, unless, of course the player takes the option to skip them (which many games allow), the player is beholden to receive information in the format and method the designer deems as most "efficient," though this is also predicated on the fact that player chooses to pay attention (clearly another

way in which a player can enact agency regarding a game). Since the player is (mostly) allowed full-range of motion as conversations occur, the player could simply move away from the characters on-screen who are having the conversation. However, as important information regarding background and objectives are given in these conversations, they still occur within earshot of the player, no matter how far goes from where the rest of the characters are. True, the volume of the conversation fades as the player moves further away, but the player, in effect, still has to "listen" to what they have to say. In fact, if the player refuses to do anything and just stand there, the other characters will repeat the last line until the player takes action. Part of the argument for this type of interaction is to increase the player immersion in the game, as Ancel suggests, to give the player the feeling that she is actually playing in the world of the movie. However, the conventions and problems of game play continue to create problems for this type of "interactive movie."

Despite these difficulties, this mechanic creates several spectacular moments wherein a powerful sense of player agency is fully realized. The first occurs after Jack and his party are captured by the natives of Skull Island during the climactic moment when Ann is sacrificed to Kong. Jack slowly comes into consciousness (a blurry screen slowly comes into focus), and the player attempts to move. However, the player suddenly realizes that he has almost no movement, only minor movement left or right, and a limited range to look around. After a few seconds, fears of a game crash are allayed when Jack informs the player, "Damn it, my hands are tied." In fact, the only thing that the character can do at this point is watch helplessly as Ann is first lowered via a wooden scaffold and Kong appears from out of the jungle to take her away. A few seconds after Kong disappears with Ann, Denham appears to untie Jack and the rest of the level unfolds. The difference between this scene and the earlier one of the boat crossing is that though the scene actually *limits* player interactivity (in the sense of affecting on-screen action), it actually increases a sense of player agency. This occurs because the limitations imposed upon the player are not due to any arbitrary reason of game mechanics, but arises from a situation that makes logical sense in the game world: the player cannot move because Jack is tied to a stake. More than the previous scene, the player is given a real sense that they are involved in the game, and paradoxically, creates a stronger sense of agency. Here, the question of "meaningful action" can easily be described as "meaningful inaction."

The question of the development of narrative agency is a core one in this game, and in offering two different modes of agency, the game highlights a blurring between cut-scene and game play within the transmedia context. As the box promises, "Play as man. Play as Kong." The chief way that this switch between human and

animal agency is enacted is by switching game play point of view from a first-person perspective as Jack to a third-person one as Kong. Part of the reason for this switch is a sense of scale: as Jack the player is stuck in the underbrush and on the ground, grimly fighting for every inch of progress. However, as Kong, the player suddenly gains the ability to traverse canyons in giant leaps and defeat enemies that as Jack, the player could only flee from. As reviewers note, “shifting from a vulnerable, scared human to the unstoppable king of the jungle is the ultimate power pellet” [2]. However, the game must still narrate the player into entering Kong's agency, and that is accomplished through the narrative bracketing of the Jack Driscoll levels. In one especially well-integrated moment, Jack sneaks into Kong's lair in order to rescue Ann. As the newly reunited pair attempt to sneak out the lair, they are suddenly beset by giant eels. The game then switches to a newly awakened Kong, who in this level, must battle and defeat the eels. Here, the Jack level provides the narrative structure to the Kong level, where, without this narrative framing, becomes a level of disconnected fighting. It is in this moment that the boundaries between game play and narrative most effectively dissolve. In essence, the Jack sequence effectively becomes a fully playable cut-scene wherein the switch from Jack to Kong more closely resembles a cinematic edit, rather than a mere switch in game play mechanic.

Perhaps the greatest question regarding player agency as Kong is the fact that even before the game begins, most players are aware of the tragic ending, in which Kong dies. Thus, what does it mean for the player to control Kong in New York City in the final ten minutes of the game? What does it mean for the player to have agency when the player knows she cannot win? The opening of the New York moments provides the way in which the game designers answer this question: the level opens with Kong chained to a stage, and Carl Denham offering some remarks introducing Kong to an unseen audience. At this point, the player interaction is locked out, a cut-scene by any other name if there was one. However, once the stage curtain opens, and a gasping audience is seen, the player suddenly has control, and hitting the buttons in rapid succession causes Kong to break out of the chains holding him to the stage. At this moment, the player is filled with a sense of power, suddenly breaking out of the confines of chains and given the opportunity to rampage through the city, before the inevitable end. It is this ability to cause chaos, to destroy a wide variety of cars, tanks and planes as the rampaging Kong that gives the player a sense of powerful agency despite the limitations of the inevitable end. It would be easy to read this moment as a metaphorical breaking away from the traditional notions of narrative in video games into new forms of narrative and agency, and in many ways, by narrating agency through Kong, the game does that. But in the end, this can still seem more as a

gesture towards that direction, rather than the revolution everyone has been hoping for, because despite the fact that Kong can destroy a seemingly endless number of attacking planes, he must still die at the end.⁵

Conclusion

While the notion of placing the cut-scene within a transmedia context may at times seem obvious and limiting by again yoking video games to film theory, it is within this context that we can understand not only changing relationship between video game narrative and game play, but also the larger relationship between cinema and video games as well. While the uses of the cut-scene within a video game context has been well demonstrated, recent innovations in cut-scene function and form, as evidenced by *Resident Evil 4* and *King Kong*, reveal the tensions between cinema and interactive media and has several implications. First, by fully recognizing the transmedia relationships between the narrative form of movies and ludological content of video games, we can begin to look beyond the simple dialectic of video game analysis as merely the opposition of narratology and ludology. More importantly, by introducing the ability to “play as Kong” through both game play mechanics and what I have argued are cut-scene innovations – that is, to identify with the monstrous – is an idea that is actually only ever latent in the film, because of the way Kong's death has to be narrated in order to satisfy narrative requirements both historical, in the sense of “classical Hollywood,” and “contemporary,” in terms of the conventional roles for spectatorship or identification that audiences are willing to take; that is, it raises new possibilities for narrative, genre, and reception. If in *Resident Evil 4*, the cut-scene moves towards other forms of interactive media in the form of point and click interaction in offering new forms of agency related specifically to existing film genres, then in *King Kong*, there is a functional evolution of the cut-scene which seems to be deployed in folding out modes of “agency” that is not necessarily the representational agency of *Resident Evil 4* – allowing us to do what we can't do in real life – but instead, is directed towards gaining symbolic control over modes of reception of mass media that have been traditionally bound by constructions of genre, narrative form and reception contexts. Thus, the transmedia context reveals the way in which these different modes of “agency” have less to do with “real life,” but towards the development of a changing audience's power to interpret these narrative supersystems.

As a coda, a reviewer for *King Kong* noted how, “one second I'm watching the comically fearless movie director Carl Denham...set up another shot for his real-life monster movie, the next I'm staring dumbly at my costars, waiting for something to happen” (Ashley 88). This reaction lets us know that the audience for a “perfectly agentive media” is still on the horizon as well, and in a way, the producers and the players and the theorists, are all

waiting for something to happen as well.

NOTES

- 3 Grodal insightfully notes that one of the implications of this definition is the fact that a player's sense of agency and meaningful action is actually a subjective experience that "varies over time, [and is] not something that is a static feature of any given game" [5]. It is instead based on the ability of the player to not only master, but "automate" [5] her ability in playing the game. Thus, the feeling of agency diminishes over time as the player becomes better and better at playing the game, and learns the "constraints and optimal strategies of a given game world" [5].
- 4 Of course this is also an excellent example of the way in which cut-scene content, in addition to form, refers explicitly to movies.
- 5 In fact, in his article "Playing at Being," Rehak gives an excellent summary of some of these identificatory psychoanalytic film processes and applies them to video games. Oddly enough, he applies them to only the ludic elements of game play and play environments, relegating the cut-scene, arguably the part of the game that relies most exclusively on these processes, to a footnote. Even Grodal develops his theory of video games along the lines of cognitive film theory, positioning video games at the end of his model of narrative flow: "the basic story experience consists of a continuous interaction between perceptions...emotions... cognitions...and an action" [5], one step after film. However, when it comes to cut-scenes, as discussed earlier, Grodal makes the claim that because of the interactive context of video games, the insertion of cut-scenes into games serves only as a detriment to the reception of those scenes, appearing "dead" next to the "liveness" of the ludic interaction. Clearly, this paper disagrees with Grodal on this point.
- 6 Newman's full quote reads: "Some of these elements may seem to be highly "interactive", requiring considerable player participation and responding to player action, while others, most obviously inter-level movie cut-scenes, appear to demand little or no direct player input or control, nor do they respond to attempts to exert influence. Yet, this is not to say that the player is not actively interrogating the material, exploring it for clues to aid forthcoming play or reading a presented narrative in order to make sense of past events or predict those yet to come" [15].
- 7 Though in this case, this is not necessarily true. The designers have added an "alternate" happy ending that the player can only access after playing through the game once and earning 250,000 points in play-throughs of various individual levels. In this, version Kong

fighters off the planes at the end with the help of Jack in a seaplane. After escaping the city, the game ends with Kong roaring triumphantly at Skull Island. This ending is unique as well in that game play switches between Kong and Jack on the same level, with its transition handled, by appropriately, a brief in-level cut-scene.

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