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# 12.TEXTUALITY IN VIDEO GAMES

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Diane Carr  
Andrew Burn  
Gareth Schott  
David Buckingham

## ABSTRACT

In this article the participants report on a two year research project titled *Textuality and Videogames; Interactivity, Narrative Space and Role Play* that ran from September 2001, until late 2003 at the Institute of Education, University of London. After presenting an overview of the project, including the methodologies we have adopted, and the questions we have sought to address, we outline two sample case studies, one that relates to player agency, the other that considers role-play, social semiotics and sign making in an MMORPG.

## KEYWORDS

Narrative, RPG, Play, Textual analysis, Role-play, Agency

## INTRODUCTION

During the *Textuality and Videogames* project we have played and textually analysed games, recorded play sessions, and interviewed game players, producers and designers in order to examine the various ways that games are structured, and the relationships between games, play, and players. We have looked at genre and transtextuality, system and 'flow', and pondered the allure of particular games. We have also investigated the manner in which some computer games incorporate narrative elements. Accordingly we have utilised narrative theory, accounts of engagement, affect, and immersion, as well as models of flow and navigation. In the course of analysing these games we have sometimes focused deliberately on textual factors, at other times our emphasis has shifted more towards the player. We have, for example, looked at co-play in relation to a particular console game, *Soul Reaver*, reviewed fan and slash culture, and analysed aspects of agency and avatars in *Abe's Oddysee* (included here as a Case Study I). We also spent time playing and analysing role play, performance and sign-making in the science fiction MMORPG, *Anarchy Online*, and a report on this work is included here as a second Case Study. Finally we have interviewed and collaborated with game designers and producers, in order to examine our findings from the perspective of the games industry.

### **Interactivity, narrative space and role play**

The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board. It was developed by David Buckingham, Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, and director of the Centre for Children, Youth and Media. This sum-

mary draws on the original proposal, and on the discussions, essays and reports undertaken collaboratively and individually by the project team. The project has benefited from the cross-disciplinary composition of its contributors. Andrew Burn, who co-directed the project with David, has a background in media education, semiotics and multimodality. Gareth Schott is a critical psychologist with research background in individual differences and personal and social development research. Diane Carr is the full time player and researcher on the project. Her academic training is in film theory, textual analysis, and women's studies.

As outlined in the original proposal, the Textuality in Video Games project addresses questions relating to interactivity, narrative and role-play.

- How can we characterise the 'interactivity' that is offered in these games? For instance, how far are players bound by the cosmology and rules of the game-world? What constraints are imposed on the player by the game?
- How do game narratives construct space or use time? What kinds of exploration do they invite? How do games incorporate 'story telling' with real-time play?
- What kinds of 'identification' are on offer? How free are players to change or define the characters they play? What is the nature of this 'role play', and what are its limits?

The proposal was submitted to the funding body in late 2000. To place this in context, the first issue of *Games Studies* came out in July 2001, the same month that the *Games Cultures Conference* (one of the earliest games dedicated academic conferences in the UK) was held in Bristol. The past two years have seen a rapid increase in the amount of theory

being published, but even as universities and schools respond to the appetite for games related courses, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks from which these courses will need to draw, are still being formulated. [1]

In the interest of depth, we have focused on specific games drawn from a particular genre: Role Play Games (RPGs). These games are digital descendents of the dice and tabletop role-playing games epitomised by *Dungeons and Dragons*. Typically these games include an emphasis on character generation and evolution, storytelling, exploration, team play and turn based combat systems. RPGs have remained central to our inquiry, but over the length of the project we have also considered notions of 'role play' within computer games more generally. Common to the RPGs that we analysed was a commitment to characterisation and storytelling, and this motivated us to examine a number of 'story driven' hybrid genres and Action Adventure games. Some of the popular games that we have focused on include: *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape Torment*, *Silent Hill*, the *Final Fantasy* series, *Soul Reaver: the Legacy of Cain*, *The Thing*, *Abe's Oddysee*, the online multiplayer game *Anarchy Online*, and *Harry Potter: the Chamber of Secrets*. [2]

Our research involves the textuality of videogames, and we draw on academic traditions that see text as incorporating a variety of communicative modes (speech, writing, visual design, audio material). A 'text' is a form of communication that is composed for some kind of purpose, beyond the ephemeral forms of everyday communication. It is something made to last, something which employs recognisable conventions to represent the world and communicate between people beyond the immediate moment. Texts are produced in some kind of context: they have economic and political characteristics. Computer games are produced through complex systems of

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commission, franchise, sub-contracting, investment, marketing and distribution. In order to better understand the processes involved in game production and creation, we met with game designers and programmers including Katie Ellwood, co-writer of *The Getaway* (SCEE Soho), Katie Lea, who designed *Primal* (SCEE Cambridge), Diarmid Campbell, lead game programmer of *The Thing* (Computer Artworks) and Charu Gupta, a programmer who specialises in sound and audio research (SCEE Soho). We also spoke with a game designer (who prefers to remain anonymous) involved with *Escape From Woomera*, ([www.escapefromwoomera.org](http://www.escapefromwoomera.org)) an independent and politically informed game set in a refugee detention centre [3]. These interviews have helped us to appreciate the complexity of game production, the amount of co-ordinated collaboration that is involved, and some of the design issues that game creators contend with. We were relieved to discover that the questions we have been grappling with, especially those relating to the co-existence of narrative and play elements in a single text, are of import to game designers. For example, we recently convened a one-day seminar in order to disseminate our findings from this project at which programmer Diarmid Campbell spoke about the difficulty of combining plotted causality, with exploratory or non-linear game-play, in relation to the production history of *The Thing*.

Texts have users: games are played, and players exist in specific social and economic conditions. Games cost money to produce. New console games, in particular, are expensive to buy. Some consumers are aggressively targeted by computer game promotions, while others (especially women) are largely, or even strategically, ignored. Millions is spent on marketing games but, at least to a degree, it is players that drive game culture: buying or ignoring the latest releases, writing up 'walk-throughs' to share online, and designing and distributing cheats, modifications and patches (and these activ-

ities arguably blur the divide between producer and consumer).

As members of the project team have argued [4] the study of computer games accommodates not only the analysis of a game itself, but also user-activities (actions, reactions and responses) that justify relatively objective methods. This inspired an examination of the closed ecosystems of console action-adventure games and the social and collaborative game-play that is a functional, integral aspect of the pleasure derived from game-play. Access to gaming sessions was achieved methodologically through video-recording pre-adolescents' use of console systems within the context of users' own homes. Video cameras (plus tripods) were left in participant gamers' homes with instructions on how to record their game play over a one-week period.

All participant gamers were given instructions on the positioning of the camera (usually a wide-angle over-the-shoulder shot that would enable the player and their screen action to be viewed) and length of the capture required. In this way it was possible to capture user-activity at the times when the participants chose to play games. In addition users submitted an account of the length of time spent playing, the title(s) of the game(s) played, the level at which games were played and an account of the progress achieved.

As the video material was analysed it became clear that for these players a significant part of the pleasure achieved from game play involved interaction with friends in situations where game-play remained the focus of social practices. In the same way that games located in social spaces (arcades, education or online multi-player games) either foster and/or incorporate social interaction, data was collected on interactivity experienced with personal console systems beyond the interface of the game and their individualistic practices. These findings ran contrary to Sutton-Smith's [5] chronicling of the cultural evo-

lution of play from social, collective and public to private personal and solitary, and they problematise assumptions made about the solitary nature of game-play in early computer game literature that referred to the 'holding power' of computer games and a "new kind of intimacy with machines that is characteristic of the nascent computer culture" [6]. In the recorded instances the game itself became the focus for group-level practices and debates. Co-operatives of the nature appear so informal and pervasive within game culture that it is little surprise that they have yet to become the explicit focus of game research. Systematic ways of fully conveying the nature and function of these co-operatives have yet to be developed. Group-play extends interactivity beyond the dynamics between the execution of action and its on-screen consequences.

As well as considering the player, the relationship between players, and between players and games, our project brief required that we attempt to account for the ways in which particular games incorporate narrative factors. In RPGs like *Baldur's Gate* or *Final Fantasy*, storytelling sits alongside game elements such as rules, goals and chance, and many of the players that we interviewed stressed that their pleasure in these games was heightened by perceived narrative qualities:

"I like RPG's because they (normally) have a good strong story, and are normally fantasy or science fiction based, which I enjoy. Sometimes a good RPG can be like an interactive story book." [7]

"it's about being part of a story with a beginning and end that doesn't just tally all the people you have killed, I like the story element and interacting verbally (or in computer speak) with other characters at will...I hope this makes sense but it's kinda like being part of an interactive film..." [8]

Still, the structural differences between games and narration are pronounced, and they have been described by game theorists including Juul [9] and Eskelinen [10]. A central and definitive feature of narrative discourse is a distinction between story-time, and user or discourse time. Play events, on the other hand, are generated in real time, in the time of the user. Additionally, the player's collusion in the plotting of these events means that they flit between the 'implied author' and 'implied reader' positions. For these reasons it would be difficult to argue that games 'are narrative'. But games like *Baldur's Gate*, *Final Fantasy VII* and *Abe's Oddysee* are determined to tell stories to their users, regardless of the awkward difficulties this presents to game theorists.

Employing narrative theory, particularly Chatman's *Story and Discourse* [11] enabled us to identify the manner in which *Baldur's Gate* both accommodates, and deviates from, conventional narrative structures. One layer or strata of the game does offer quite straight forward storytelling: plotted events with a causal relationship to one another, are related to the player, more or less regardless of their actions. However, what is interesting about the game 'as a whole', is that by inviting and then incorporating differently generated events, different forms of causality, and multiple address, it manages to offer pleasures associated with narrative, such as plotted twists and revelations, resolution and characterisation, even as it breaks with existing accounts of narrative structure.

We found Seymour Chatman's work on film narrative pertinent because of his insistence that in a visual medium the differentiation between story-space and discourse space, and the arrangement of object (existents) in that space, are just as important as the discursive arrangement of events in time. When we considered existents we noted that classic accounts of

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characterisation focus on the link between trait and act. For obvious reasons this formulation is of doubtful reliability when applied to a playable, manipulated avatar. According to Todorov [12] the defining factor in a narrative's characterisation is not the relative dominance of either act or actor, because they are mutually dependant. What is significant is the number and variety of any trait's possible expressions, and the temporal distance between the description of a trait, and its manifestation in action. Todorov's assessment of psychological or aspsychological narration provided us with a more flexible, and thus more appropriate, model through which to consider the characterisation of avatars. [13]

It is worth reiterating that at no point were we interested in arguing that 'games are narrative' or that they should aspire to become a narrative form. We have examined the manner in which these games incorporate narrative elements into their game-play, but the fact that these texts are primarily games is not in question. We recognise and remain intrigued by the systemic aspects of games, something that we addressed when we looked at the fostering of momentum and flow states in RPGs [14]. These issues were explored via Friedman's [15] work on *Sim City* as well as Douglas and Hargadon's [16] account of flow, immersion and engagement. In addition to this, Richard Dyer's [17] work on representational and non-representational content in film musicals allowed us to explicate the antinomies we found in the temporal organisation of *Baldur's Gate*, while Michael de Certeau's 'Walking in the city' [18] offered us a route through which to approach and describe the differences between isometric and three dimensional games spaces, and the transience of play as 'practice'. [19]

Motion and transformation within the game-text, and the motivated progression by the player through the gamescape were examined in terms of the pleasures promised by different game genres. The RPG

*Planescape Torment*, was contrasted with the action adventure horror game *Silent Hill*, and an account of the manner in which each organises spaces and game-play in order to fulfil its generic agenda was attempted [20]. Aarseth's typologies in *Cybertext* [21] allowed for structural aspects of the games to be identified and then measured against Janet Murray's [22] models of spatial traversal: the rhizome and the labyrinthine maze. Aspects of cinematic phenomenology and psychoanalysis were employed in order to speculate about the manner in which the avatars in either game might be complicit in the evoking of affective experiences.

We also examined the relationships between players and avatars, with a focus on the *Final Fantasy* series of games (particularly the seminal *Final Fantasy VII*). We undertook a multimodal reading of the game and its central character/avatar, and conducted player interviews to investigate the relationship between this avatar's limitations and the wider game world, as perceived by users [23]. *Final Fantasy VII* offers its players a vast game world to explore, but its avatar has a rather limited range of possible motions. The apparent freedom of the game-world also masks a comparatively linear narrative. How do players feel about these potentials, and constraints? Some interviewees stated emphatically that the story was immaterial, and yet they were able to remember all the character's names and recite their complicated soap operatic histories. One player admitted he had come to feel responsible for his team's welfare: "They are like pets", he explained. Other players, of course, unhesitatingly announce that the story is the great lure in the *Final Fantasy* games; that these games are 'like movies' that you can explore.

Multimodal theory was employed as an analytical framework to apply to the game-text. Multimodality is a semiotic theory rooted in social semiotics; that is, it treats all sign-making as socially motivated, and

adopts certain overarching semiotic principles from systemic-functional linguistics, such as the notion of the basic functions of all semiotic acts: to represent the world, to enable interaction between people in the world, and to operate textual systems to ensure coherence and cohesion of the message.

Multimodality identifies how different semiotic modes are deployed in texts - how they offer different signifying possibilities, and how they combine in different ways; and it looks for principles common to them. In *Final Fantasy VII*, for instance, during the battle sequences, the game exercises an imperative - to fight - through moving image (the characters square up to their opponents), through language (the battle screen gives commands and information through words and diagrams), and through music (the urgent pace and insistent rhythm represent a call to arms). Social semiotic and multimodal theory [24] helped us to analyse how game-texts offer semiotic resources to players, how these work as systems of meaning potential, and how these potentials can be taken up and used by players to fulfill their own social interests and motivations. Finally, multimodal theory sees all acts of semiosis as transformative. It has helped us, therefore, to understand how players interpret game-texts, and transform them into other texts of their own, whether these be spoken commentaries, or web-based fan productions through writing or visual design.

At this point, we would like to move from describing the project in a general sense, to a closer examination of two particular games. The first case study is Gareth Schott's analysis of *Abe's Oddysee*. The central character, Abe, is a cheerful employee in an abattoir, up until the day that he has a 'Soylent Green' style epiphany [25]. If the character in a game is comparatively developed, how are the player, and the player's agency accommodated? Then, in a sec-

ond sample study, Diane Carr and Andrew Burn review their ongoing work on the massively multi-player role-playing game, *Anarchy Online*.

### **Case Study I: Abe's Oddysee, by Gareth Schott**

The project has focused on the relationship between players and avatars in highly structured story-driven console game. Abe is the central character of the *Oddworld* series. *Oddworld* games represent one of the first in a line of games, like *Black & White*, *ICO* and *Halo*, that have begun to shift public perception of computer games as 'cultural flotsam', 'candy entertainment' or 'digitised blood sport' to legitimate art [26]. In increasing the cultural relevance of gaming and breaking the pattern of the 'me-too' market (27), Abe is strongly developed central character "driven in a way that is fired by larger issues" [28] To create a gaming odyssey, required developers to make Abe more than a 'flat character' but a character that evolves and develops within the course of the game. But if the central role is filled by a character, how and where do players 'insert' themselves into the game world?

Interactivity has been applied to game-play as it describes how users are not just hosts of internal mechanisms orchestrated by environmental events, but agents rather than 'undergoers' [29] of experiences. However, the use of the term 'interactivity' has been questioned by critics who interrogate the extent to which games actually succeed in balancing the power and unidirectional nature of traditional mass media in favour of a 'consensus-finding processes'. In comparison to on-line games, console games offer different forms of mediated communication and opportunities for active engagement [30]. Indeed, if one applies Rafaeli's [31] definition of interactivity to the actions of console game-play, in which the *chain* of inter-related communication the quality of the con-

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tact between player and game is the focus, consoles can be seen to offer reactive communication. That is, bilateral interaction rather than the joint manifestation of simultaneous and continuous exchanges.

Using these models of interactivity one has to question the extent to which any console game is capable of producing game-play in which the consequences of a player's actions recount the relatedness of earlier conduct. In one way or another the process of game-play with a console game determines that the player follows directions, in which the role of the text is to provide an opportunity for the production of an event or happening. Although the structure of the text allows for different ways of fulfilling its potential, progress and movement is very much guided, pre-structured, and moulded by the game. Yet, the human mind is not just 'reactive' but generative, creative, proactive and reflective[32]. Janet Murray [33] has highlighted the role of agency as a desired effect from engagement within interactive narrative. Interactive game-play may therefore be conceived as the product of both agentic and environmental causality, operating at different phases of the sequence. Clearly game-play is 'conditionally orchestrated', but interactivity should summarise the complex integration of personal and exchange-based foci of causation within a unified causal structure. Where an agentic approach offers an extension to existing interactive communication models is in stressing the 'bi-directionality' [34] of the influences of reactive structures and personal reflectiveness.

Through examination of what fans of the *Oddworld* games chose to discuss on on-line forums it became apparent that different forms of agency operate in and around players' engagement with the games. Through distinguishing between personal agency, proxy agency and collective agency a divergent range of practices and pleasures were identified within and

external to the game-play experiences, but always connected to the game. Examples of personal agency were found in users' non-instrumental practices that fail to contribute to users progression within the game, but focus on embodying, 'being' and acting out the repertoires of behaviours attached to primal, alien characters. Personal agency was found in examples of how users pause and take full advantage of the interactive environment that has been created, rather than seeing it as a means to an end. Whilst proxy agency, refers to instances in which users actively defer responsibility and utilise cultural tools to obtain problem-solving solutions, enlightenment on aspects of the narrative background, or deeper understanding of the fan-created knowledge base of character orientation and history. Lastly, collective agency refers to the fans' extension of *Oddworld* through art, literature and games.

## **Case Study II: *Anarchy Online*, Andrew Burn and Diane Carr [35]**

In an online multi-player game like *Anarchy Online* each player constructs and then propels their own avatar through a shared world. There might be thousands of individual avatars cruising its cities and deserts at any given time: chatting, shopping, fighting, flirting, waiting, forming teams or taking off on solo missions. Some players collaboratively role-play inventive scenarios. Others prefer to focus on player-to-player combat, or 'power levelling'. The game, in other words, accommodates various styles of play. The theory we have adopted in order to make sense of this varied, multiple world, is Social Semiotics.

If, as proposed by social semiotic theory, the sign making and sign reading activities present in *Anarchy Online* are discursive and contextual, motivated rather than arbitrary, the first question is: what are these motivations? While we believe that the answer to this question might well vary from player to player,



we propose the following broad (and provisionally titled) areas within which to explore the presence of motivated sign making and sign reading in this game.

**Ludic motivation:** an interest in the skills, rules, competition and dynamic engagement invited by the game.

**Representational motivations:** this category involves presentational, dramatic, narrative and performative aspects within the game.

**Communal motivations:** These involve the game's generic identity, fan cultures, wider digital culture and the taste communities in which it is inter-textually embedded. The notion of the 'communal' is intended to refer to both the social, shared nature of the game, and the sense that the game itself is located within a generic community that encompasses similarly themed fiction and other computer games.

Ludic motivations involve strategy, goals, real time events, chance, rules, skills acquisition, exploration and levelling up. Ludic motivations involve questions of 'how to play', (how to learn to play, how to succeed, play well and progress) as well as the exploration of the game's strategic possibilities (to choose to play as a martial artist, or a sniper for instance).

Our category of 'representational motivations' includes aspects or potentials of the game that are of importance to players, but that are not crucial to scoring or progress in the game-world. Representational motivations involve the dramatic, expressive, narrative and performative potentials of the game. Experienced Role Players compose characters with full biographies (likes, dislikes, lost loves, busted hearts, broken families) to play 'in character' in collaborative fictions and scenarios. For these role players the parameters or constituents of an avatar

are only partially determined by the game. These players are involved in the use and characters whose invention encompasses, and then exceeds, both the construction templates offered by the game, and the ludic specifics of the 'avatar as game component'.

By contrast, our own early attempts at character generation were more like a playful 'dressing up'. After building characters 'Nirvano' and 'Aisea' we dodged toxic rodents and stumbled about the newbie training ground, and decided that our character/avatars are partial representations of us, at least in that as constructs they embody a set of choices and preferences. As well as bearing certain generic markers (they are martial artists in a science fiction setting) we also found that our avatars carried aspects of our real world identities with them, as the manner in which we experienced the game as a social space was resonant of the strategies we employ when managing (and mis-managing) social situations in real life. This, we expect, is a marker of our inexperience in online worlds.

Our last category, 'communal' motivation, refers to the social, shared nature of the game and to the fact that the game itself is located within a generic community that encompasses similarly themed fiction and other computer games. As a science fiction the game employs certain generic tropes, and players come to the game armed with particular expectations shaped by their gaming experience, or their lack of experience. Once in the game world, all players will find that other players affect their experiences within the game, even if they decide to stick with 'solo missions' rather than team play.

Social interaction in *Anarchy Online* is mediated through two primary channels: The visual, animated aspect of the avatar (how they act, how they look), and the less predictable text mode of live chat. The visual aspect of the avatar employs various poten-

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tials: costume, body, face and movement. There can be no lapse from this because the player's presence depends on and manifests as the avatar. The look and the motion of the avatar are relatively prescribed. The in-game chat mode involves the typed entries of players, and this mode is comparatively flexible: chat is at times the 'voice' of the avatar, but at other times it's clearly the player who is talking. The chat mode is at the player's disposal, it is possible to construct every shade of commitment to the avatar's identity: to slip in and out of role, to maintain the role at a low level, to modify the role, to speak in your own voice (as a player) from behind the mask, or to speak in the voice of the mask.

Just as a deceptively simple set of templates combine to create a huge range of possible avatars, the motivations (representational, ludic, communal) that we have examined all mesh during play, proliferating, compounding and informing one another. So, in practice these motivations become ambiguous and multiple. The game's visually individuated avatars and elaborate science fiction locale play against the abbreviated pragmatics of chat, levelling and team formation, and the available semiotic modes allow for these ambiguities.

## IN CONCLUSION

This is an overview of the issues that we have been investigating over the past two years, and the methods that we have employed. In the process we have presented papers at several game studies conferences, and we have written and co-written papers that are appearing in different journals. As final outcome, we have a book underway titled *Computer Games; Text, Narrative and Play* [36]. We have enjoyed working on the *Textuality in Video Games* project - and we still play computer games for fun. There are, of course, questions of import that have arisen during the project, that go beyond our original brief, especially as regards issues of gender, race and representation, the pedagogic potentials of games, and the teaching of games studies both at high school and at undergraduate levels. These are issues that we look forward to investigating further in the future. The cross disciplinary make-up of the project's team has been an enormous bonus. While we have each had room to explore issues from the perspective of our particular background, conferring with each other and collaborating on papers has been useful, educational, and productive. Computer games studies is still a relatively young field, and the object of study is various enough, and complex enough, to happily support input, theory and perspectives from a range of disciplines.

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Our project's website : [www.ccsonline.org.uk/media-centre/Research\\_Projects/main.html](http://www.ccsonline.org.uk/media-centre/Research_Projects/main.html) Portions of this paper are likely to appear in a article about 'Games and Methodology' presently with the editors of *Media International Australia*, a journal published by the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy.

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