Introduction

There is much hype nowadays about interactive electronic media as the future of storytelling; their immersive and emotion-inducing potential only being hinted at by all the efforts to generate meaningful, artistic experiences from them. Because of this hype, one could easily be fooled into thinking that for successful game designers, games are a narrative or story-telling medium, i.e. that well-designed videogames must necessarily tell a story. This is simply not the case.

What is a well-designed game, then, if not a rich story? Well, it is engaging, fun, immersive, and requires a way of solving problems which, once incorporated by the player, makes the player “at home” in the game. Tetris, Doom, Metal Gear Solid, good fighting games—and especially the simple classics of the 1980s—are fun because one could figure out exactly what the game wanted, deliver it, and make visible progress because of it. Each challenge in the game is only slightly different from the previous, and once the player has the format of the challenges figured out, the game becomes easier but at the same time more rewarding. All those frustratingly unsuccessful attempts at the game finally pay off, now that the gamer can deliver what the game wants of him.

One reason one would want to deliver is because the gamer cares about the game character. The gamer essentially is the character, the character’s struggles are the gamer’s struggles, the character’s fears are the gamer’s fears. And to create this level of engagement and connection, this caring, a story is an effective device. A story also transforms the spatial and symbolic puzzles which make up the gameplay (defeating a boss, navigating a series of platforms to get to the other side, dealing with hostile fighters and artillery during a bombing run, infiltrating a building with hallways full of bad guys…) into a supposedly meaningful conflict with an ending in sight.

Here we must ask ourselves some questions: Is a story necessary to get the player to care for the character? And, is a story so effective in getting the player involved? As you will see, I do not believe a story is necessary for a fun, immersive game. An exploration of both these questions should also show that, due to the nature of games, they cannot be a very successful medium for meaningful storytelling.

Why a Story is Not Necessary

The challenge of a game is in its symbolic puzzles. Even the most modern of games, such as TimeSplitters, Metal Gear Solid, Tekken, Ace Combat, Tomb Raider, and their sequels, all challenge you to press the right buttons at the right time in order to respond to quickly-changing aggression, and to figure out what sequence of actions opens up the opportunity for progress into the next challenge. In other words, the most realistic games can be stripped of their fancy texture-mapped anti-aliased z-buffered polygons to reveal a basic core similar to the earliest games. This is demonstrated by the fact that in most 3-D shooters, a locked door cannot be opened even by the character’s most powerful weapon—the gamer cannot escape the puzzle that is finding the key.
The modern games I mentioned are fun at the abstract level; they are about knowing the abilities of your character and of his environment, about performing certain actions in certain places at certain times in order to make progress, and about figuring out what those actions are. Most game characters’ abilities are so limited, and most environments so non-interactive that the gamer does not see people in a building, but entities in an environment, with properties and abilities different from those of real things (otherwise, Solid Snake’s C4 should blast that locked door open). The story, then, plays the same role as realistic graphics and good animation: it dresses up the basic puzzles (and their entities and environments) to make them look like a real situation and to make the gamer think a real person might for some reason really want to do what the gamer sees the character doing.

The story also adds a sense of continuity to the series of challenges and puzzles: a big picture challenge that ties all of the game’s smaller parts into infiltrating a base, winning a tournament, or simply defeating evil and saving the world. However, it is the process of figuring out the relationships between the character’s actions and their effects on their environment in different circumstances (and how these could be used to perform a task) that constitutes the fun, engaging, stimulating part of a game. It is what occupies the gamer’s mind during gameplay. So no, a story is not necessary for a great game.

Great games have been made where the action is not dressed up as part of a plot—Pac-man, Tetris, Mario Kart, Pilotwings64 and Smash Brothers come to mind. These games are good because the way they present challenges encourages the gamer to keep playing by presenting him with small but noticeable rewards as he learns and then masters the aspects and variables of gameplay. The player understands what the game wants and the properties of the character and environment progressively better. This enables him to solve harder and harder challenges, to better predict the consequences of his actions, and to think about a new challenge in terms of the game’s logic and rules, but intuitively. Therefore, these old games are fun and always will be, and this is the reason why Metal Gear Solid: The VR Missions is every bit as addictive as the other Metal Gear Solid games.

The makers of the Solid Snake knew that the style of challenges and gameplay in the game were fun enough to be successful without a story, so they then released a quasi-sequel to Metal Gear Solid subtitled The VR Missions. Here Snake faces many of the same challenges of the original game (navigating mazes, avoiding and following and battling enemies of many sizes, crossing spaces undetected), but represented by abstract symbols in space, rather than by soldiers and lifelike environments.

**The Incompatibility Between Narrative and Interactivity**

Steven Poole’s book *Trigger Happy* explores further the inconsequentiality of a story in gameplay, and that of gameplay in a game’s story. In his chapter on the use of stories in videogames, he makes the distinction between the synchronic and diachronic stories. The synchronic story—what happens in the game, the story made by the player—is “purely kinetic”, while the diachronic story—the background story, which is often a proper, real story—is “immutable”. Somewhere in-between are the full-motion video cut-scenes, which develop both the synchronic and diachronic stories, but are also immutable. Thus, any real progress in plot is always divorced from any interactive challenge. Decisions made during challenges based on timing, sequences of actions, or spatial navigation arrangements, are not the decisions that can change the course of a story, influence relationships, or reveal something about human nature.

This is why games are not fundamentally a storytelling medium. All of the actions to which the player is restricted are kinetic. The actions the character performs while under the gamer’s control will never be meaningful in any way other than the symbolic solving of a puzzle or challenge. Any decisions involving emotions and values are made in the parts of the story that are not under the player’s control.

Why can the player not interact with the synchronic story, i.e. with the plot, in any real way? The synchronic...
Non-interactive cut-scene from Final Fantasy 7 with unusually involved storyline.

story, the progress of the plot—changes in motivations or alliances or identities, the revealing of hidden relationships and interests, the death of a character, and the consequences of all these changes—involves variables that cannot presently be simulated by a computer. The plot will remain divorced from interactivity until computers become much more powerful, and until artificial intelligence allows game makers to include real-time emotion as a characteristic of video game characters who can understand their objectives and motivations in an abstract way and change their plans and alliances at their own will during gameplay. This happens to a very small extent today—storylines branch given different possible results of each battle—but the branching happens at specific, unchanging points, and only leads to a few discrete possibilities. The branching is neither dynamic nor in real time with near-infinite possibilities. In effect, the gamer may pick from a few possible endings, but not create his own. The gamer may play towards one or another ending only physically and spatially. He may not create a new mission that will indirectly help with a battle effort, or try to convince the villain to change sides, or do himself the actions of a character he must protect. Even if the player can envision a different outcome for a situation in a game or a different story development, the computer running the game would not be able to execute it in real time without an impossibly advanced understanding of language or of human psychology and emotions. Computers cannot write stories. This is why any decisions involving emotions and values are made in the parts of the story that are not under the player’s control.

**Second Chances Prevent Empathy**

It is in the interest of a video game designer to give the player more than one chance in a game. In fact, the gamer has many tries—as many as he wishes—to attempt to go through the game in an optimal way. This is part of the fun of a videogame—doing it many times and mastering it—but also gets in the way of meaningful storytelling. One of the main purposes of narrative storytelling is to put the reader or listener in someone else’s place, to allow someone to see the world through the eyes of a person in the past, or in a very different society, or in an imaginary society. The reader or listener comes to appreciate the struggles of the character, the fears, the injustices, and the hopes of the character. Uncertainty and risk are essential to this appreciation (especially in mystery and suspense stories). A gamer simply cannot understand the worry felt by, say, a POW escaping a prison camp, or by a fighter pilot in a war—be it over the Midway islands or the Jovian moons—or by an athlete in a martial-arts tournament, etc., because the player knows that if something goes wrong, he can hit “continue” or start again from a recent save point. If the gamer only had one chance at the task, then maybe the difficulty and fears and struggles of the game character would be communicated, but no one would pay $60 for a game that refuses to be played after one death.

This idea, based on the alternative world hypothesis, is explored in *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Videogames*, by Geoffrey and Elizabeth Loftus. Psychologists claim regret in real life is caused by the awareness that if only a past action had been performed slightly differently, a much better outcome would have resulted. Most people worry on a day-to-day basis about the drive to make the right choices and not to make mistakes. But in a video game, the gamer does not have to live with their mistakes. The alternative world can be realized. Mistakes can be unmade, and their consequences (often death) can be fixed. As long as this is true, the imaginary world of the videogame is too easily manipulated and exploited to resemble the real world—or even the world in a novel or movie.
Earlier I said that the character’s struggles become the gamer’s struggles. We now see this is not quite true. The gamer’s struggle is to figure out how the character should go about solving his struggles in an optimal way. This figuring out often causes the character to die a reversible death, and this is an accepted part of videogaming. Therefore, the gamer often does not care about the character’s life or immediate well-being. The player cares about the character because of all the work that has gone into mastering the controls and making progress in the game. Actions that do not compromise that progress in the long run are acceptable, no matter how painful to the character.

**Conclusion**

The telling of a truly insightful, meaningful story cannot be achieved by placing a gamer in control of a character and giving the gamer many attempts to do what the character would have one chance to do. Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, as well as Poole, Loftus, and Loftus, all briefly touch on this fundamental incompatibility between interactivity and narrative, but assume some way will be found around it, and go on to talk about the future of interactive storytelling. What they refuse to say outright is that the experiences provided by an interactive event will never be as insightful as the experiences portrayed in great literature. Interactive experiences may be immersive, exciting, educational, artfully made, and even potentially very emotional. But the insights acquired are about manipulating the environment and developing timing (although part of the pleasure of gameplay can be aesthetic, as in the beautiful environments of *Tomb Raider 2*, *Ace Combat 4*, or *Metal Gear Solid 2*, to name a few examples). These spatial and kinetic insights will not reveal anything profound about the human condition. A cut-scene, or the diachronic story, might. But as we have seen, they are not interactive, and cannot be interactive until computers learn to write stories.

The levels in *Tomb Raider 2* were designed not only to be player-friendly, but also aesthetically beautiful and intricate, faithfully incorporating the looks of their respective locales (Venice and Tibet, for example). This contributed to making the game successful and immersive.

Some well-designed games tell a story, not as their ultimate objective but as a device to engage the player. And this story’s progress, plot-wise, must be separate from the game’s interactive experiences, because those interactive experiences are spatial and kinetic. This is why games should not aspire to tell us great, insightful, meaningful stories. But, of course, they should keep telling simple stories, because I would rather be saving the world than just navigating around collections of polygons inside a computer’s imagination.

---

**References**


