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**From *Adventure* to *EverQuest* –
Narrative Strategies in Computer Games Now and Then**

Introduction

Do computer games¹ tell stories? And if so, how? These two questions have been discussed controversially in computer games studies since the inception of this field of research in the 1990s. In fact, the debate between the so-called 'narratologists' and 'ludologists',² which played such an important role in the formation of the field, can be traced back to these questions, and the way they have been answered. However, today, there are still no definitive answers, and in the light of the fact that the subject of research is ever-changing, it is not likely that the question of narrative in games will be answered in any authoritative way in the near future.

Nevertheless, the debates of the last decade have helped to bring the question into sharper focus. We are now able to see, for example, that the question of narrative in computer games is connected to the question of genre, and that hence it cannot be answered in regard to the entire media form, but only in regard to individual genres of computer games. We have also come to the realisation that narrative in computer games is always, at least partially, determined by the player, or players, of computer games. Furthermore, we know now that narrative in computer games can transcend media boundaries, and involve other media than the games themselves (see e.g. Jenkins, 2004).

Even more importantly, however, we are able to see now that there has been a tension between narrative and interactivity in narrative computer games since their inception, which has not been resolved to the present day. However, game designers and players have found different strategies of circumventing this conflict, and it is my aim in this article to elucidate some of these strategies. In almost all cases, these strategies are non-diegetic, i.e. the narrator is hardly ever part of the fictional world of the game. This can be seen as a result of the tension between narrative and interactivity, since a disembodied narrative voice is more difficult to challenge than a personified narrator.

This article takes the form of a historical overview because I find it illuminating to trace the development of these narrative strategies from early text adventures like *Adventure* to massively multiplayer online games such as *EverQuest*. This historical perspective highlights the mutability and fluidity of this young media form, thus drawing attention to the fact that the theoretical and methodological tools we use to analyse narrative computer games constantly have to adapt to the development of new genres and to innovations in game design.

Nevertheless, there are also areas of relative stability, and lines of tradition, which are worth highlighting in order to offer guidance to those who are just entering this field of research and are looking for orientation in what might initially seem an overwhelmingly vibrant and multi-faceted area of popular culture. A narratological perspective is particularly useful in this regard because narrative is something we are familiar with from other media, and it is fairly easy to transfer this knowledge to a new field. However, it should be noted at this point that narrative is just one concept among many which could be used to gain access to computer games, and is by no means a privileged avenue of inquiry.

¹ Computer games is used here as an umbrella term for games played on personal computers (PC games), games played on dedicated game consoles such as the Sony PlayStation or the Microsoft Xbox (console games) as well as games played on handheld devices such as a Nintendo Gameboy (handheld games).

² For a more detailed study of the ludology-narratology debate, see Kücklich (2007a).

With this caveat in mind, it may prove very fruitful to study narrative structures in computer games. While textual analysis is increasingly complemented in computer game studies by approaches from the social sciences, media studies and cultural studies, I still think literary studies can contribute to the study of computer games a set of tools which has been successfully adapted for the analysis of other media as well. Narratology is just one tool in this set, which also includes, among others, concepts of fictionality, hermeneutics, aesthetics and poetics (see Kücklich, 2006). It is all too easy to reduce philological approaches to computer games to (structuralist) narratology.

Therefore, I will occasionally make reference to other areas of literary studies in this article, and I will also use terminology borrowed from other disciplines. My own approach thus emerges as multi-, rather than mono-disciplinary, although it remains rooted in literary studies. I am convinced that only a trans-disciplinary approach to computer games can be successful, considering that they combine elements of traditional games, narrative literature, theatre, film, animation, social software, and other media forms. It should also be noted that games increasingly take place within settings where the boundaries between games and their social, political, and economic contexts are increasingly blurred.

Therefore, even if we study games from a narratological point of view, we cannot disregard the contexts in which computer game play takes place. The stories that computer games tell are always informed by these contextual discourses, and hence they are always also stories about processes of technological, social and political change. Tracing these correspondences is perhaps the most interesting way in which literary studies can contribute to the study of computer games, i.e. not in a purely hermeneutic, but in a critical, and socially responsible fashion.

Thus, the question of narrative in computer games is revealed as a charged question both in regard to disciplinary politics and in regard to the critical potential of computer game studies as a field of research. In this way, it opens up the possibility of an immanent critique of computer game studies, while at the same time offering the opportunity to review both the development of narrative strategies in computer games, and the theoretical tools that have been developed to analyse them. In this way, this article serves both the purpose of gaining a deeper insight into the mechanics of computer games, and the purpose of critically reviewing the way knowledge is generated in this field.

Interactive Fiction

Irrespective of whether one takes *Space War* (1961) as a starting point or its analogue predecessor *Tennis for Two* (1958), early computer games were based on graphical rather than textual elements. In fact, it wasn't until 1975 that a computer game based on textual output was conceived and implemented. The first piece of what would later become known as interactive fiction, and what is commonly called adventure games, was a simulation of the Mammoth Cave system in Kentucky, created by amateur speleologist and programmer Will Crowther. He called it *Colossal Cave*, but since file names were restricted to six characters in those days, he named the file ADVENT (short for 'adventure').

The game opens with the words 'You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building. Around you is a forest. A small stream flows out of the building and down a gully to the south' (Crowther, 1975). While the second-person address might seem unusual, it is quite obvious that this is the beginning of a story which introduces the central character (you) and the setting. However, what is curiously lacking is any kind of narrative tension, and thus a

sense of direction. Instead the reader, or player, is presented with a decision: to type something into the command line that follows the above-cited paragraph, or to wait for the story to unfold independent of user input.

If the player decides to remain passive, she will never progress beyond the opening words of the game. As Espen Aarseth has observed in his analysis of adventure games, they can be seen as ergodic³ texts, which require "non-trivial effort [...] to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth, 1997, 1). In *Colossal Cave*, this non-trivial effort takes the form of typing commands, and finding a way through the textual representation of the cave system. If the player types 'go north' she will be rewarded by the following snippet of text: "You are wandering aimlessly through the forest." But not all actions are possible. Typing 'fly', for example, results in the reply "Though you flap your arms furiously, it is to no avail."

It quickly becomes clear, however, that *Colossal Cave* is lacking one crucial component of a narrative: events. Or more precisely, events that are not caused by the player. Whatever suspense there is, is the result of the intriguing presence of objects, which can obviously be used, although it is not always clear to which purpose. This is summarised concisely in a statement by Claus Pias (2002) about the game: "The story of the game process as a succession of tableaux of object puzzles consists in the reconstruction of their lost user manuals" (132, my translation).⁴

One description from the game, which became famous far beyond its original context, sums up the experience of playing the game in a nutshell: "You are in a maze of twisty little passages, all alike." It is this uniformity, which Don Woods sought to address, when he started reworking the game in 1976, adding monsters and treasures to it. Importantly, he also added a scoring device, which meant that there was a definitive end. When one had achieved the maximum number of points, the game was over. This in turn means that the game could more easily be regarded as a traditional narrative with a middle, a beginning, and an end.

Zork (Anderson et al., 1980), an enhanced version of *Colossal Cave/Adventure*, went on to become the first commercial success in the genre, and gave rise to two sequels (Anderson et al., 1981, 1982). While the game was originally published by Personal Software, the distribution was handled by Infocom, the company founded by *Zork* designers Dave Lebling and Mark Blank. Infocom was also the company that became synonymous with the genre of interactive fiction in the 1980s with titles such as *Deadline* (1982), *Enchanter* (1983a), *Planetfall* (1983b), *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1984), and *A Mind Forever Voyaging* (1985).⁵

Formally, these classics of interactive fiction did not diverge greatly from *Zork*. All of them relied on text for the representation of fictional worlds, were able to parse only a limited set of commands, and relied on puzzle-solving as the main means of overcoming the ergodic resistance of the text. In terms of content, however, the games became increasingly experimental. *Zork* was still a generic computer clone of tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Planetfall* relied heavily on sci-fi clichés, and *Deadline* was a formulaic murder mystery in interactive form. However, games such as *The Hitchhiker's*

³ As Espen Aarseth explains, the term 'ergodic' is "appropriated from physics" and "derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning 'work' and 'path'" (1).

⁴ Interestingly, Pias compares this narrative strategy with that of the *nouveau roman*, e.g. Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* (1955), in which the story must be reconstructed from the descriptions of objects by the reader.

⁵ See Montfort (2003).

Guide to the Galaxy and *A Mind Forever Voyaging* broke the mould by including elements of satirical and dystopian fiction.

A Mind Forever Voyaging also experimented with hypodiegetic modes of narration; in the game, "there are six simulated worlds in which Perry Simm is the player character; these occur in a framework in which in which PRISM, a sentient computer, is the player character" (Montfort, 2003, 29). In this case, PRISM can be seen as the narrator of the hypodiegetic worlds, while the diegetic world is narrated by an extradiegetic voice. However, this is a very rare occurrence in the genre of interactive fiction, which is usually characterised by extradiegetic narration.

Citing the *Inform Designer's Manual* (Nelson, 2001), a resource for writers of interactive fiction, Montfort draws attention to the fact that there is a "polyphony of voices" in these games, including the player, the protagonist, and the narrator. He goes on to say that "Nelson [...] notes that 'in some games it might be said that the parser, who asks questions like 'Which do you mean ...?' [...] is a fourth character [sic], quite different from the narrator'" (Montfort, 2003, 30), and that this has led some scholars, such as Aarseth, to conclude that the narrator speaks not with a single voice but in a "chorus" (Aarseth, 1997, 120) of voices.

It should be noted, however, that the notion of a narrative chorus is problematic, insofar as narration in adventure games is hardly perceived as polyphonic by the player. While it is certainly true that messages such as "Sorry, I don't know how to apply 'sing' here" (Crowther, 1975) must be seen as being enunciated by a different voice than that of the narrator, it simply relates information pertinent to the interaction with the text. It can thus be considered as part of the interface, and thus as a paratextual, rather than a textual, element. These interfacial messages could be more usefully compared to the 'next' and 'previous' buttons which link the nodes of a hypertext.

Aarseth (1997) himself regards the chorus of voices in adventure games not as a narratorial function but as "an imperfect simulacrum representing the intrigant and speaking with several voices" (120). According to Aarseth, ergodic *intrigue* "is directed against the user, who must out for herself what is going on" (113), and the *intrigant* is "the architect of the intrigue," who can be "compared to the implied author" (114). As I have pointed out elsewhere (Kücklich, 2001), Aarseth's addition of the intrigant to the narratological model is problematic because the added complexity does not correspond to an increase in usefulness, and only brings to the fore the unsuitability of the structuralist model for the analysis of non-traditional narratives, and particularly of cybertexts.

In the final analysis, it seems more useful to regard the stories told by adventure games as 'potential narratives', to use Montfort's (2003) term, which he defines as "a system that produces narrative during interaction" (23). Similar to Aarseth, Montfort compares adventure games to works of potential literature such as those produced by the Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (Oulipo),⁶ thus drawing attention to the fact that the computer merely facilitates narrative strategies also found in non-electronic writing. Insofar as the narrative of a work of interactive fiction is always virtual until it is actualised by the user, and is hardly ever actualised fully, it seems appropriate to use the term potential narrative in an even wider sense than that suggested by Aarseth and Montfort.

⁶ See Consenstein (2002)

While these authors still assume that interactive fiction is exhaustible in a similar way that a novel or a short story can be finished, I would argue that there is always a narrative excess, which escapes even the most thorough reading. This is also highlighted by the existence of 'Easter eggs', i.e. hidden rooms or secrets in adventure games, which can often only be found by accident. Thus, even when a player 'finishes' an adventure game, its narrative remains partly virtual. It is in this sense that I use the term 'potential narrative', and as we will see in the following sections, the pertinence of this appellation only increases as we move from interactive fiction to graphical, 3D, and multi-user games.

Graphical adventure games

While interactive fiction is still produced today, it ceased to be profitable in the mid-1980s. This was largely due to the increasing competition by graphical adventure games, which quickly surpassed purely text-based adventure games in popularity. The first graphical adventure game was Roberta and Ken Williams' *Mystery House* (1980), which complemented the descriptive passages of interactive fiction with black and white line drawings. These were still images, so the difference between *Mystery House* and *Adventure* is hardly greater than the difference between an illustrated novel and a novel without images.

However, the genre quickly developed, and was quick to include animated graphics. In 1984, Sierra On-Line, the company founded by the developers of *Mystery House*, published *King's Quest* (1984), which spawned seven sequels, published between 1985 and 1998. *King's Quest* featured animated characters, and partly animated backgrounds in full 4-bit colour. It also had a musical soundtrack. Importantly, however, the mode of interaction was still textual. If the protagonist of the game stood next to a rock, the player was required to type 'push rock' in order to move the obstacle. The result of the action was then presented in the form of a short animated sequence.

In effect this amounts to a move from textual to multi-modal narration. Rather than to rely on description to evoke a mood, graphical adventure games could use music and graphics. And instead of 'telling' the user the outcome of an event, it could simply be 'shown' to her. Only temporal and spatial discontinuities had to be narrated textually by using phrases such as "One year later" or "Elsewhere." Nevertheless, the primary mode of narration remained extra-diegetic. As in interactive fiction, the player takes over part of the narratorial role, but still her agency is so limited, due to the linear plot, that this does not result in a qualitative shift.

Many graphical adventure games exhibit what game designer Lee Sheldon calls a 'python structure'. Similar to a snake which has devoured several animals in succession, the 'possibility space' of adventure games tends to expand and contract on the way from beginning to end. Situations which require the player to fulfil several tasks, albeit not necessarily in a fixed order, will often alternate with situations where there is only one task, which needs to be fulfilled in order to progress to the next expansion of the game's possibility space. In an evocative turn of phrase, Aarseth (1997) has called the boundaries of a game's possibility space its 'topological constraints' (78).

This draws attention to the fact that in graphical adventure games, narration already starts to become spatialised. The topological constraints of gamespace determine where the protagonist can and cannot go, and to a certain extent what she can do there. Thus, the protagonist can be guided through a story by blocking some paths and opening others, sometimes even without the player noticing that she does not really control the player character's movements. However, the illusion of being in control is crucial for the player's sense of agency, thus giving rise to the characteristic python structure of the adventure game.

At the same time, graphical representation allows for more complex narratives. The second-person address of the textual adventure game allowed for only one central character, although games like *A Mind Forever Voyaging* tried to overcome this limitation by splitting the protagonist into several instantiations. In graphical adventure games, characters could be differentiated by their outward appearance and demeanour, which allowed for a larger set of *dramatis personae*. One of the first games to experiment with multiple protagonists was *Maniac Mansion* (Lucasfilm Games, 1987), which supplied the player character, Dave Miller, with two companions, which could be chosen by the player.

While Sierra On-Line must be credited with laying the foundation of the graphical adventure game, with series such as *King's Quest*, *Space Quest* and *Leisure Suit Larry*, Lucasfilm Games (now LucasArts) took the genre to new heights with games such as *Maniac Mansion*, *Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders* (1988) and *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990). Full of quirky humour, mind-boggling puzzles, and bizarre plot twists, these games pushed hard at the limitations of the genre, and are in some respects unsurpassed by later games.

Consider, for example, *Zak McKracken*, whose plot follows the eponymous central character and his friends around the world (and to Mars) in their attempts to foil the plans of evil aliens to enslave humanity through the use of phone dial tones. The game manages to poke fun at almost every major conspiracy theory, making reference to alien spacefaring races, lost continents, Elvis Presley, and other mainstays of speculative fiction. It can thus be seen in relation to post-modern literary works such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989), which similarly use the device of conspiracy theory to reveal the irrational substrate of modern society.

However, Lucasfilm games also made innovative use of narrative techniques such as prolepsis and analepsis. Thus, for example, the beginning of *Zak McKracken* featured an elaborate dream sequence, in which McKracken meets various characters from the game, including himself. While interactive fiction had already experimented with discontinuous narration, games like *Day of the Tentacle* (LucasArts, 1993), the sequel to *Maniac Mansion*, made prolepsis and analepsis an integral part of gameplay by rendering the narrative past, present and future playable. Hence, changes in earlier narrative time stages could have an impact on later ones.

LucasArts continued to produce adventure games well into the era of 3D action games such as *Doom* (id Software, 1993), *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996), and *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998), which quickly became the predominant genre. *Grim Fandango* (LucasArts, 1998) was the last original adventure game published by LucasArts and is still regarded as one of the finest ever made. Set in a Land of the Dead inspired by the Mexican *Día de los Muertos*, the game follows the quest of Manny Calavera for the recently deceased Mercedes Colomar. The vibrant soundtrack, montage sequences, and dry humour all contribute to the game's appeal, and hint at the immense potential of the genre as a storytelling device.

Unfortunately, today, the adventure game genre plays only a marginal role in gaming culture. While the original Sierra and LucasArts games are still held in high regard by fans of the genre, new adventure games are few and far between. Notable exceptions are *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream, 2005), *Syberia* (Microïds, 2002), and the *Broken Sword* series, which started with *The Shadow of the Templars* (Revolution Software, 1996) and has given rise to three sequels, the latest being *The Angel of Death* (Revolution Software, 2006). However, the gameplay of contemporary adventure games is increasingly interspersed with action

sequences, thus blurring the line between 'pure' adventure games and action-adventures such as the *Tomb Raider* series.

The demise of the adventure game genre is often attributed to the rise of 3D action adventure games, some of which successfully married the puzzle-oriented gameplay of adventure games with the less cerebral gameplay of action games. However, the reasons for the genre's decreasing popularity are certainly more complex than this deterministic, monocausal view suggests. While this cannot be discussed in detail here, it should be mentioned that marketing and discourses of technological progress may have played an important role in the perceived slump in demand for this type of game.

Computer and Console Role-Playing Games

Another reason for the increasing marginality of adventure games may be found in the fact that computer role-playing games (CRPGs) have taken over many gameplay aspects of this genre. Computer-role playing games actually preceded adventure games, since *Dungeon* (Daglow, 1975) is usually considered the first CRPG. *Dungeon* was a computer implementation of the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, and was set in a world similar to that of *Zork*, inhabited by dwarves, elves, and other mythical beings. However, the crucial difference was that it allowed the player to take control of a group of characters, rather than just a single protagonist. In contrast to later CRPGs, the characters of the player's 'party' had to be moved independently, rather than as a unit.

While *Dungeon* was almost entirely text-based, it featured maps of the dungeons which the player's party explored, taking advantage of the fact that many university computers switched from printers to CRT screens as the primary output device in the mid-1970s. The first role-playing game to feature crude 3D graphics was *Akalabeth* (Garriott, 1980a), a predecessor of the seminal *Ultima* series, which spans two entire decades, beginning with *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* (Garriott, 1980b) and ending with *Ultima IX: Ascension* (Origin Systems, 1999).⁷

While many of the genre's conventions actually stem from pen-and-paper role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), the *Ultima* series established a number of conventions which are still observed by contemporary computer role playing games. Thus, the numerical representation of characters' skills and attributes ('stats') and the 'development' of characters through an increase in these numbers were traits borrowed from *D&D*, but the innovative interface was entirely new and set the standard for countless other CRPGs. Characteristically, the CRPG interface consists of a main screen, which shows the position of the player's party in the world of the game, a small window showing the characters' stats, and a command window.

Early CRPGs used a number of abstractions for the representation of the fictional world in order to facilitate gameplay. For example, the player's party was usually represented as a stylised human figure, which only split into individual characters during combat. The world was usually composed of 'tiles' of a certain size, and the inhabitants of this world were usually not drawn to scale, so the icon representing the player's party would appear as large as the towers of a castle. When the player entered the castle, however, it would be revealed to be much larger than it appeared from outside.

⁷ A tenth part, to be called *Odyssey*, was cancelled in 2004, due to differences between lead designer Richard Garriott and publisher Electronic Arts, who also owns the *Ultima* brand.

These abstractions were used effectively to convey the illusion of a large world, which the player was free to explore. While this might appear to be only a quantitative difference in respect to adventure games, which often featured multiple but discontinuous locales, it actually translates into a qualitative difference, much in the same way that the detailed maps and descriptions in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954a, 1954b, 1954c) amount to a very different reading experience than, for example, the saltatory narrative of *Foucault's Pendulum*.

Role-playing games were thus the first computer games to feature epic narratives. Taken as a whole, the *Ultima* series spans centuries, and ranges across the entire world of Britannia, which is comprised of large swathes of land, great seas, and sprawling subterranean dungeons. Computer role-playing games may take dozens of hours to finish, requiring a significant investment of time and dedication on part of the players. However, in return they are often rewarded with great tales of heroism and magic.

At the same time, computer role-playing games are quite limited in terms of their settings and characters. Most CRPGs take place in 'high fantasy' worlds, featuring elves, dwarves, trolls, and orcs, or alternatively in science-fiction worlds such as that of *Star Wars*. Only a few games have dared to break the mould, e.g. *Vampire: The Masquerade – Redemption* (Nihilistic Software, 2000), which begins in medieval Prague and takes the player through 800 years of history to modern-day New York, and *Fallout* (Interplay, 1997), which is set in post-apocalyptic Southern California in the 22nd century AD.

Narration in CRPGs is similar to narration in adventure games, i.e. events are related by showing rather than by telling, although there is a stronger focus on dialogue as a means of imparting information relevant to driving the plot forward. Compared to the rather linear plot structure of interactive fiction, role-playing games are frequently much more multi-linear, however, this increased freedom is often coupled with a lack of direction, especially in early CRPGs. This means the player will spend a lot of time en route to the different locales of the games, slowly piecing together clues distributed across the narrative landscape.

In early CRPGs, this also meant that the player would have to keep a log of her actions, in which she could take down notes about places, characters and their interrelations. However, more recent role-playing games frequently offer an automated log function, which often takes the form of a diary, in which important events and conversations are entered automatically. Similarly, a lot of CRPGs now feature 'automapping', which frees the player from the onerous task of meticulously keeping track of her party's movement in a dungeon. As a narrative device, the diaries are especially interesting because they essentially transform the multi-linear structure of the game into a linear series of events.

Another interesting manifestation of the player's actualisation of a CRPG's plot are the items she picks up along the way. Compared to adventure games, where items are almost always exclusively functional (although there is a tradition of supplying the player with 'red herrings'), objects in role-playing games have a much stronger symbolic aspect as markers of achievement and status. Importantly, some character classes are banned from using certain items – for example, wizards can usually not wear heavy armour – while other items are unattainable as long as the character is below a certain experience level. In this respect, items serve the purpose of 'objectifying' the actualisation of a game's plot.⁸

⁸ It should be noted that this refers not only to virtual objects, but to 'tangibles' as well. Many early CRPGs were shipped with so-called 'feelies', i.e. collectible objects such as maps, postcards, coins, etc.

As far as the handling of space and time is concerned, narration in CRPGs is usually continuous, rather than elliptic, which also means that the traversal of expanses of space takes an equivalent amount of time. In order to solve the problem of travel fatigue, teleportation devices were introduced early on in the history of the genre, and have become a mainstay of CRPGs. The treatment of time is especially sophisticated in the Japanese console RPG, a genre which branched off the Western tradition in the 1980s and represents a largely independent development.

The first Japanese console RPG was *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft, 1986), the progenitor of seven sequels and numerous spin-off game series, such as *Dragon Quest Monsters* and *Dragon Quest Heroes*. Due to the fact that the game was produced for consoles rather than personal computers, and was thus subject to strict memory constraints,⁹ *DragonQuest's* gameplay was much simpler than that of its American contemporaries, such as *Ultima IV* (Origin Systems, 1985), but that did not keep it from becoming a huge success in Japan, and, to a limited degree, even in the United States.

Even more successful, however, were the *Legend of Zelda* and *Final Fantasy* franchises, each encompassing thirteen titles at the time of this writing, with further sequels in the making. The *Zelda* games in particular represent a hybrid genre which integrates elements of action, adventure, and role-playing games. Sometimes referred to as action role-playing games, they deviate even further from the standard set by games like those in the *Ultima* series than regular console RPGs by de-emphasising character development in favour of narrative complexity and challenging puzzles.

Beginning with the fifth instalment of the *Zelda* series, *Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD, 1998), lead designer Shigeru Miyamoto started to introduce more experimental narrative structures, which included time travel, cyclical time, reincarnation, and parallel worlds. Similar themes are developed in the *Final Fantasy* series. *Final Fantasy VI* (Square, 1994) is often regarded as the series' climax, with a plot that gradually reveals the interconnections between its fourteen playable characters, using analeptic gameplay sequences. The end of *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square, 1999) innovatively uses the device of 'time compression' which freezes certain parts of the game world in time.

These examples draw attention to the great narrative sophistication of computer and especially console role-playing games. However, this high level of narrative complexity can only be achieved through the use of lengthy non-interactive cut-scenes,¹⁰ which render the experience of playing console RPGs, especially those in the *Final Fantasy* series, more similar to watching an interactive film than to playing a computer game. This is also the most common criticism levelled against console role-playing games by non-Japanese players. Nevertheless, these games represent a fascinating, and largely under-researched genre, which would warrant more attention from the academic community.

3D Action Adventure Games

Historically, adventure games and role-playing games have been the most important narrative game genres, but the boundaries between game genres have begun to blur since the mid-1990s, especially between narrative genres and the action genre. Traditionally, action games

⁹ *Dragon Quest* was developed for the Famicom, which was marketed as the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the USA and Europe. The NES had an 8-bit processor and 2 kilobytes of RAM, and its game cartridges had a capacity of 48 kilobytes.

¹⁰ Cut-scenes are non-interactive film sequences which develop the narrative of a game. They are often regarded as a rather heavy-handed narrative device because they essentially reduce the player's role to that of a spectator.

require quick reflexes from the player but do not offer much in the way of narrative. In this respect, first-person shooter games such as *Doom* (id Software, 1993) or *Quake* (id Software, 1996) are not much different from early arcade games like *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978) or *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1979), despite their graphical sophistication.

All of this changed, however, with the publication of *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996), which did not only give rise to six sequels, but also became the model for a new hybrid genre of 3D action adventure games. While the *Tomb Raider* series stayed true to its adventure game roots by maintaining the characteristic third-person perspective (with the virtual 'camera' hovering behind and slightly above the figure of the protagonist), later games in the genre, such as *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998) adopted the first-person view of *Doom* and *Quake*.

Typically, these games combined the puzzle-solving element of adventure games with the twitch-oriented gameplay of first-person shooters. However, this marriage of convenience often involved lowering the standards in both areas, in order to appeal to a broad audience. *Tomb Raider*, with its emphasis on 'defensive' gunplay and its rather repetitive puzzles, is a case in point. From a narratological point of view, as Barry Atkins (2003) has pointed out, the *Tomb Raider* games can be regarded as 'quest narratives', and he draws attention to the fact that the "series has one foot firmly situated in the land of the folk tale" (43).

Structurally, this is certainly true of earlier adventure games as well, and in many ways *Tomb Raider* is a return to *Colossal Cave*, but the former exhibits its quest structure much more openly than the latter, insofar as exotic locales are as much a mainstay of the *Tomb Raider* series as they are of contemporary quest narratives such as the *James Bond* or *Indiana Jones* franchises. Part of the reward of overcoming the games' adversaries, and solving its riddles lies in the discovery of the next level's setting, be it a Peruvian cave system, a Greek monastery, the Egyptian pyramids, or even the legendary Atlantis.

In 3D action adventure games, then, the settings become as important as, or even more important than, the games' narrative, characters, and items. Properly speaking, they should be called exploration games, because it is the momentum of discovery that drives their plots forward. This is also recognised by Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins (1995), who liken games such as *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), which can be seen as the predecessors of 3D action adventure games, to new world travel narratives such as the legend of Pocahontas. As they point out, both genres

evoked explorations and colonizations of space: the physical space navigated, mapped, and mastered by European voyagers and travelers in the 16th and 17th centuries and the fictional, digitally projected space traversed, mapped, and mastered by players of Nintendo® video games (58).

In the 3D environments of exploration games, space thus becomes an even more important element in the structuring of game narratives, both as an agent of narrative progression, and as its organising principle. Events in 3D action adventure games are primarily tied to their locales, and their temporal succession is a result of this spatial organisation. Insofar as space thereby takes over part of the narratorial function, one could regard this as a form of diegetic storytelling, since it is space itself which guides the player through the narrative, highlighting what is important and obscuring what is negligible.

This conflation of space and narrative is brought to the fore in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Ubisoft Montreal Studios, 2003), one of the most remarkable exploration games of recent years. *The Sands of Time* is exceptional insofar as it is one of the few computer games

which uses diegetic narration, the narrator being identical with the game's protagonist. The events in the game are thus not only shown, but also told by the prince, including moments of self-reflection, anticipation, and most interestingly, erasure. In the event of the prince's premature demise, for example, the player hears the prince proclaim the words "No, that's not what happened" and is taken back to the last save-point.

While the resurrection of game characters is a staple feature of many computer games, it is rare that it is emphasised in such a self-conscious manner. What is more important, however, is that the prince's narratorial agility is matched by his acrobatic facility with space, which enables him to quite literally act as the shuttle which weaves together the woof of space with the warp of narrative, resulting in a spatiotemporal text. While *The Sands of Time* is exceedingly linear, proscribing almost every single step the player character has to take, the conceit of retrospective narration interwoven with spatial puzzles effectively serves to conceal this linearity.

The sophistication of *The Sand of Time's* approach can only be appreciated, however, if one is aware of the genre's history, and no historical account of 3D action adventure games would be complete without mentioning the seminal *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998). While the game is often described as a straightforward first-person shooter in the tradition of *Doom* and *Quake*, it is actually much more refined than these predecessors, both in terms of its gameplay and in terms of its narrative. Importantly, *Half-Life* was the first 3D game to tell a story entirely without pre-rendered cut-scenes, and rather by using real-time events that took place while the player retained full control of Gordon Freeman, the player character.

Thus, the player is able to move the protagonist around the room while listening to a dialogue between two non-player characters, or even leave the room altogether, which increases the illusion that he is part of a series of events that unfolds independently of the player's intervention. While the game's events are triggered in the same mechanical way in which they were triggered in the first adventure games, i.e. through a simple conditional statement,¹¹ the situation becomes indeterminate once it is triggered, thus engendering a subjective experience of greater agency on the part of the player.

However, this style of *laissez-faire* narration also creates a new set of problems, which has to do with the fact that the game has to be playable irregardless of whether the player absorbs the information imparted in the scripted event sequences or not. While non-interactive cut-scenes force the player to wait until they have finished before she can take control of the action again, the interactive scripted sequences of *Half-Life* do not possess this coercive power, thus inviting acts of *tmesis*, to use Roland Barthes' term for "the reader's uncontrolled skipping and skimming of passages [...] beyond the author's control" (Aarseth, 1997, 78).

While this once again raises the question of authorial control over interactive texts, it also draws attention to the fact that this style of narration necessarily results in a much more simple narrative structure than that of games with greater power over the player's movements. In other words, the conflict between narrative and interactivity rears its ugly head again. At times it seems as if the creators of *Half-Life* were very aware of this problem, especially when one considers the fact that one of the major agents of narrative progression, the mysterious 'G-Man', who regularly appears throughout the game, wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase, is revealed as a MacGuffin¹² in the game's end sequence.

¹¹ In computer science, a conditional statement describes a step in a computer programme which is only executed when certain conditions are met. They often take the form of an if-then clause.

¹² A MacGuffin is a plot device that drives the narrative forward, but has no actual relevance to the story.

In keeping with their similarity to quest narratives, MacGuffins are a device employed frequently by 3D action adventure games. This is even true for games that ostensibly use other forms of narrative motivation, e.g. revenge or the quest for the player character's lost identity, because short-term goals, such as the acquisition of a magical item, frequently override the long-term goal set up by these devices. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2001), a 3D action adventure game with role-playing elements.

The central source of narrative tension in *Deus Ex* lies in the fact that the player gradually learns that JC Denton, the protagonist of the game, has been implanted with false memories, and that his real identity is a well-guarded secret. While this conceit is simply a variation of the well-worn cliché of the amnesiac protagonist, the game manages to transcend the limitations of this conventional setup, and effectively deconstructs it, by answering each question with a bigger question, and without ever supplying any definitive answers.

The answer to the question of JC Denton's identity is thus perpetually deferred, and in order to retain narrative tension, the player is supplied with a constant stream of short-term goals, such as the acquisition of a certain item, which consume so much of her attention that the quest for the protagonist's identity becomes subordinated to these tasks. If she manages to finish the game, the player will have learned that the protagonist's parents were killed by the same people who have implanted him with experimental nanotechnology, but what she will actually remember is a string of rather mundane errands which make up the greatest part of the game.

This aesthetic of the ordinary is even more pronounced in the later parts of the *Grand Theft Auto* series, which adds yet another element to the mix, by transposing the gameplay of 3D action adventure games into the 'sandbox' setting of simulation games such as *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989). *Grand Theft Auto III* (DMA Design, 2001), which takes place in a surprisingly convincing urban setting reminiscent of New York City, is a point in case. The plot of the game follows the nameless protagonist's rise from small-time crook to mobster in the employment of various criminal gangs, all of which is necessitated by the kidnapping of his girlfriend and partner in crime, Catalina.

Significantly, *Grand Theft Auto III*'s gameplay does not only involve intimidation, coercion, and assassination but such mundane tasks as delivering packages, chauffeuring, and driving ambulances. However, the player can also choose to forego all these various choices, and simply wander around aimlessly, enjoying the hustle and bustle of Liberty City. This indeterminacy contrasts sharply with the authoritarian style of narration, which relies on cut-scenes as the main means of developing the plot. However, since the player always has the option to opt out of the main storyline, and do something else instead, the game creates a convincing illusion of non-linearity.

At the same time, the player's freedom of choice seems incongruent with the narrative, insofar as Catalina's abduction should be sufficient incentive for pressing on with the plot. In actual fact, however, this precarious situation never translates into a feeling of urgency on the part of the player. As a result, the plot never thickens in any significant way, but rather thins out as the game goes on. Hence, it is possible to have a satisfactory gameplay experience without ever finishing the game. It could even be argued that *Grand Theft Auto III* is inexhaustible, because there's always more to do and more to see.

The default mode for traversing a game like *Grand Theft Auto III* is therefore not to 'read for the plot', to use Peter Brooks' (1996) turn of phrase, but to use the plot as a device to open up

new areas to explore. This is particularly evident in the fact that each climactic event in the game results in a significant expansion of gamespace. In addition to that, the *Grand Theft Auto* games have shown a tendency to increase the playable space from sequel to sequel. A case in point is the latest instalment in the series, *San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004), which is set in the fictional US state of San Andreas, with most of the gameplay taking place in the cities Los Santos, San Fierro and Las Venturas.

This tendency to use gamespace itself as an incentive for narrative progression is also found in *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004), a role-playing game with gameplay features strongly reminiscent of 3D action adventures. Before its publication, *Fable* was advertised as the first game which would allow the player to accompany the protagonist from adolescence to old age, with factors such as diet, exposure to climate, and use of magic influencing his appearance, and his reputation determining non-player characters' reactions to his person. In an interview lead designer Peter Molyneux promised dynamic features, such as landscapes with growing trees and vegetation, but none of these were realised.

While the game fell far short of the goals of its designers (a failure for which Molyneux later apologised), and actually delivered quite a linear gameplay experience, it is nevertheless memorable for the fact that the game does not end with the protagonist's victory over his evil nemesis, Jack of Blades, but offers the player the choice of having the protagonist seize the Sword of Aeons, thus becoming virtually omnipotent. Thereby, the game offers the unique opportunity to experience first-hand what it means to 'live happily ever after' (needless to say, this mode of existence is mind-numbingly boring).

Nevertheless, the game is interesting from a narratological point of view, because it embeds the game's action within the context of everyday life, confining the heroism of the central character to his *Sturm und Drang* years. The effect of this framing is remarkably poignant, as it indicates that heroes are, after all, mere mortals. *Fable* thus performs a similar function for computer games as Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) did for superhero comics by depicting Batman as an old, embittered man in a desperate struggle against his enemies. While *Fable*'s nameless protagonist is not quite relegated to such a lowly position, his depiction as a hero without a cause still significantly tarnishes his glory.

A similarly anti-heroic stance is taken by *Ico* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2001), a unique Japanese 3D action adventure game, which pits Ico, a boy with horns on his head, and his ethereal and mysterious friend Yorda, against seemingly invincible shadowy ghosts which constantly dematerialise only to reappear a short while later. What is remarkable about this constellation is that both Ico and Yorda are depicted as weak and vulnerable, all but powerless against the forces of evil which they face. Only by working together can the two protagonists overcome the obstacles on their way out of the castle in which they are being held prisoner, and even so they seem in constant peril of being overpowered.

While most game narratives are tales of empowerment, of the acquisition and competent exercise of skills in increasingly challenging situations, *Ico*'s narrative is a story of alienation, loss, and a desperate struggle to survive. The game might never actually lapse into outright pessimism, and even features moments of supreme beauty, but its basic mood is a melancholy forlornness, which tinges even its most idyllic moments with sadness. The inclusion of a 'boss battle' at the game's end is certainly a poor choice from an aesthetic point of view, but the final scene of the game, which shows Ico and Yorda washed up on a beach, still lost, but finally free, partially makes up for this, because it resists facile closure, and leaves the characters' fate up to the player's imagination.

Games like *The Sands of Time*, *Half-Life*, *Deus Ex*, *Grand Theft Auto III*, and *Ico* represent the pinnacle of storytelling in computer games, but they appear almost pathetically clichéd and simplistic in comparison to the complexity and depth of literary and filmic narratives. A common complaint, both in the academic discourse on computer games and in the computer games industry, is that the medium has not had its '*Citizen Kane* moment' yet, i.e. a "a game that uses the medium in such radically new ways that it uncovers a new grammar of expression, and in the process reaches new artistic heights" (Stern, 2005). While some commentators blame the medium's youth for its lack of sophistication, others see it as a structural problem that arises out of the conflict between interactivity and narrative.

I would argue, however, that we are currently ill-equipped to even recognise the *Citizen Kane* of computer games, because we have not yet developed a set of aesthetic criteria with which to assess artistic merit in this medium. Clearly, computer games are unable to depict as great a range and depth of human emotion as literature and film, and thus it is likely that we will never see a computer game that touches us as deeply as, say, *Madame Bovary*, or *Casablanca*.

As simulatory and cybernetic media, however, computer games are able to depict the way we are inextricably entangled in myriad technological, social, and micro-political processes, few of which we control. This fundamentally post-modern condition, which is not easily captured on film or put into words, can be depicted much more easily in the medium of the computer game. A first faint stirring of the medium's growing consciousness of its own capabilities can thus be seen in the area of massively multiplayer online games.

Massively Multiplayer Online Games

One of the most interesting developments in the area of computer games in the last decade is the phenomenal success of games which allow hundreds or even thousands of people to play together in a persistent fictional world. Although the history of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) can be traced back to Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw's *MUD* (1978), the genre remained relatively obscure until the launch of *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems, 1997), which combined the well-established *Ultima* universe and interface with complex gameplay and social interaction. Now in its ninth year, *Ultima Online* is one of the longest running online games in the history of the genre.

However, the Asian MMOGs *Lineage* (NCSOFT, 1998) and *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive, 1999) quickly surpassed *Ultima Online* in popularity, with *Lineage* peaking at more than three million subscribers in 2003. The most successful MMOG so far is *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), which exceeded eight million subscribers in early 2007. The gameplay of these games is fairly uniform, and typically involves climbing the ranks in one's chosen profession, e.g. warrior or wizard, through the repeated application of one's skills, until the highest level is reached. In order to succeed, players usually have to find other players willing to team up with them; at higher levels belonging to a 'guild' becomes vitally important.

It is this social component of gameplay to which many observers ascribe the great success of these games. For example, in her ethnographic study of *EverQuest*, TL Taylor (2006) quotes co-designer Brad McQuaid as saying, "[i]n *EverQuest*, we forced interdependence in several ways and [...] I think it's one of a couple of reasons behind our success" (38). As Taylor points out, MMOGs foster reputation, trust, and responsibility among players, but their social mechanisms can also be a source of stress because of peer pressure and the susceptibility to

anti-social behaviour ('griefing'). Just like real societies, MMOGs must constantly be micro-managed by their providers in order to balance perceived or real inequalities between players.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Kücklich, 2007b), MMOGs can be regarded as textual entities, insofar as they serve as mechanisms to interweave the individual game narratives of their players into a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, they implicitly and explicitly reference countless other texts, often by such simple devices as players naming their avatars¹³ after fictional characters such as Merlin, Han Solo, or Harry Potter. The players themselves also create vast amounts of 'fan fiction' which transforms the events in the game world, whether 'factual' or 'fictional', into textual objects. In some cases, games are even used to create films, which satirise the in-game events (see Jenkins, 2006).

It is thus possible to see MMOGs as an instance of heteroglossic narration, borrowing a concept developed by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1982). Just like the novel speaks in many voices, often ranging from the argot of the *lumpenproletariat* to the sophisticated and exclusionary sociolects of the upper classes (e.g. in James Joyce's *Ulysses* [1922]), the MMOG speaks in all the different tongues of their users, ranging from chat room slang riddled with acronyms and emoticons to the faux Elizabethan English of overzealous role-players. As a result, immersing oneself in the world of *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft* is initially just as bewildering as entering Joyce's Dublin, and may require a similar process of enculturation.

What is missing from these worlds, however, is the structuring agency of the author, which separates the wheat from the chaff by highlighting what is important in a narrative. Hence, it seems more useful to regard MMOGs as narrative universes rather than actual narratives, similar to Tolkien's Middle-earth or Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* cosmos. In other words: MMOGs are vast repositories of narrative potential, which can easily be transformed into actual narratives, either by playing in them or by using them as toolboxes for fan-created narratives. Taken together these narratives may form a complex, multitudinous whole, but in the absence of a point of perspective from which to view it, this whole remains is perpetually obscured by its parts. In MMOGs, it seems, we can never see the woods for the trees.

The medium of the MMOG is thus simultaneously superior and inferior to more traditional media such as literature and film. It is superior in terms of its ability to capture the complexity and messiness of the real world, but it is inferior in terms of its inability to make this complexity legible. The narratives of *Ulysses* or *Short Cuts* (Altman, 1993) may involve a vastly smaller number of characters but they manage to convey a much more convincing picture of the messiness of everyday life than *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft*. Certainly, social realism is far from the agendas of these games' producers, but that does not mean that the games themselves cannot be realistic.

For example, in his case study of the science-fiction MMOG *Star Wars Galaxies* (Sony Online Entertainment, 2003), Ian Bogost (2006) points out that for certain character classes, particularly for 'entertainers', the "tedious, empty play that healing and commerce require seem to emulate work, not play." According to him, it is not particularly fruitful to think of MMOGs as being fun to play, and that we should rather regard *Star Wars Galaxies* as "a game that challenges certain contemporary social practices" (125). Drawing attention to the fact that the work of entertainers in the game is remarkably similar to waiting tables, which is characteristically one of the activities aspiring actors, screenwriters, and directors engage in,

¹³ The Sanskrit word 'avatar', which describes the manifestation of a god in human form, is often used to describe player characters in MMOGs and other games.

he challenges us to think of the game as a simulation of the entertainment economy of Southern California.

This highlights the fact that MMOGs reflect the conditions of their production in a similar way to novels and film. The 'narrative' of MMOGs can thus be said to continue the grand narrative of capitalist production which has always been reflected in these media. While the (realist) novel was particularly good at depicting the rise of capitalism in the 19th century, film found many ways of representing the reconciliation of a capitalist system with social justice movements, and was often instrumental in achieving their goals. By contrast, the MMOG is a phenomenon suffused by the spirit of late capitalism, with its focus on 'soft' control, post-Fordist modes of production, and immaterial labour, and the story it tells is that of a willing submission to exploitative practices.

While this is not the place to rehash the arguments of critical MMOG scholars such as Sal Humphreys (2005), it is worth pointing out that narratology is in a privileged position to comment on these developments, and that this could well be one of the most valuable contributions literary studies has to make to the field of computer game studies. For those who see it as desirable to establish narratological research as a critical practice, and I certainly count myself among them, regarding MMOGs in the tradition of the grand narratives of the 19th and 20th centuries is a great opportunity to put their money where their mouth is.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this article, the ways in which computer games tell stories are numerous and varied. Some, like interactive fiction, use narrative techniques similar to those of literature, although there are also marked differences. While narrative literature and storytelling share a reliance on language as the primary mode of narration, and both use similar devices to move the plot forward, they differ in the way they communicate with the user. For example, the second-person mode of address which is routinely used in interactive fiction would be quite a remarkable breach of convention in traditional narratives, although such narratives do of course exist.

More importantly, however, interactive fiction can be described as ergodic, i.e. as relying on user input to tell a story. While non-electronic narratives also often feature possibilities of audience interaction, especially in oral storytelling traditions, this is by no means required in order to move the story forward. Nevertheless, it is problematic to conceptualise the player as a co-author or a co-narrator in interactive fiction narratives because their plots are predominantly linear, and do not offer opportunities of actually changing what is being told and how it is told.

What is unique about interactive fiction is the sense of inexhaustibility it conveys to its users. Even when all the monsters have been defeated, all the treasures found, and all the dungeons explored, there remains a narrative excess which compels some users to return to the games time and again. While this aspect is somewhat subdued in graphical adventure games, it re-emerges with 3D games such as *Grand Theft Auto III* and massively multiplayer games such as *EverQuest*, which are inexhaustible in a quite literal sense. This is an important difference in respect to other media, which may be hermeneutically inexhaustible, but do not feature the same kind of textual abundance.

This plenitude is expressed both spatially and temporally. In terms of space, we have seen a development from the comparatively confined spaces of early graphical adventure games to the wide open spaces of games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, which offer the illusion

of an unconstrained possibility space. In terms of time, we can see a development from contained games like *Tomb Raider* and *Ico* to persistent world games such as *Ultima Online* and *World of Warcraft*, which could potentially go on for decades, although the time individual players spend there is usually much shorter.

At the same time, massively multiplayer online games are by necessity much more conservative in regard to their narrative manipulation of time than, e.g., graphical adventure games. While instances of analepsis, prolepsis, and other forms of temporal discontinuity are quite common in the latter, the former are bound to a linear temporal development due to the constraints engendered by their need for consistency. From a classically narratological point of view, adventure games are much more interesting than massively multiplayer games, because they make much more use of the classical devices of artful storytelling.

By the same token, computer role-playing games could be said to be almost negligible from a narratological perspective, if it were not for the Japanese console role-playing games, which represent a separate development, which has resulted in some quite interesting examples of how time can be manipulated in the RPG genre. In Europe and the USA, games such as *Half-Life* and *The Sands of Time* represent a similarly sophisticated way of handling time, although they are clearly less experimental, and narrative finesse is clearly subordinated to elegant gameplay.

This raises the question whether computer games should be striving to emulate the narrative sophistication of literature and film, or if they are not better off developing their own native techniques. Recent developments, such as the success of massively-multiplayer online games, seem to suggest that the aesthetics of computer games does not necessarily derive from the tradition of the romantic author, with all the concomitant notions of autonomy and authority, but rather from a more communal tradition, which stresses sociability and the sharing of resources.

While this may seem like a quite utopian note on which to end, and one that may seem overly optimistic in the light of the struggles around corporate accountability and ownership which take place within games and without, it still seems worth highlighting that games can be spaces in which users get to tell their own stories, and that this is a goal worth aiming for. Games may never achieve the narrative sophistication of a *Ulysses* or a *Citizen Kane* but they can become repositories of utopian stories which allow us to look beyond the current state of affairs. If this can be achieved, we will finally be able to say that computer games have fulfilled their narrative potential.

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