

# End of story? Quest, narrative and enactment in computer games

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## ABSTRACT

Espen Aarseth recently claimed that all games referred to as 'narrative games' could better be described as 'quest games'. The writer of this paper suggests that *Max Payne* is a possible counter-example to this hypothesis; i.e. a game with a strong focus on narrative which is not easily understood as a quest game. The writer suggests that this, and other similar games, could better be understood in terms of a theory of 'enactment', which is seen as related to, but not similar to theatrical acting. Extending this idea, the concept of 'the estrangement effect' in theatre theory is used to analyze a collection of small computer games from the perspective of theory about "serious games".

## Keywords

quest, narrative, enactment, agency, *Max Payne*, serious games

The emergent field of computer game theory has for a while been dominated by a debate between an approach known as ludology and an approach known as narratology. The question debated is whether one could best view computer games as a special, new variation of the narrative form, as the narratological approach implies, or as a phenomenon that is fundamentally different from that of narrative (although stories or story elements may be a part of games) – as the ludologists argue. In a recent article, one of the central figures in the ludologist school, Espen Aarseth, presented an argument with which he hopes to have settled the discussion [1]. Aarseth is referring to recent work by Ragnhild Tronstad, who describes the difference between narratives and quests [2]. Narratives, says Tronstad, are told in retrospect, after the fact, while the experience of questing is a practice that occurs in the present, with an undetermined outcome. And, she says, "[t]he reason quests can easily be confused with "stories" is that we are normally analysing the quest in retrospective, after we've already solved it" (Tronstad 2001:3). Thus Aarseth suggests that all games that have been referred to as narrative games could more accurately be termed 'quest games'. Unless this hypothesis is refuted with a convincing counter-example, he wants us to accept that games and narratives are different things. In this paper one possible counter-example is discussed.

I agree with the view that any analysis of computer games as narratives necessarily risk obscuring important aspects of the experience of a game. But at the same time there can be no doubt that among a significant portion of the players of computer games, and among practically all of the producing companies, narrative is seen as an important, integral part of modern

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videogames. Therefore, any analysis which does not give due attention to the narrative aspects of games will be blind to what a lot of people love – and hate – about them.

### **MAX PAYNE: GUNSHOTS AND EXCLAMATION MARKS**

The fact that Remedy Entertainment's third-person shooter game *Max Payne* has been played by millions of people since the release in 2001, should indicate that it is a game that is more loved than hated [3]. The game starts with a prerendered video sequence that shows police forces surrounding a skyscraper on lower Manhattan. The virtual camera swirls up along the building and brings the viewer face to face with a man on the roof, holding a sniper rifle, while a stern voice-over proclaims: "They were all dead. The final gunshot was an exclamation mark for everything that had led to this point." Then the video sequence is exchanged for a series of images in the style of a graphic novel, showing the policemen on the street, the same voice-over continuing: "To make any kind of sense of it I'd have to go back three years. Back to the night the pain started."

Already in the first sentence, with a metaphor comparing a game event (the final gunshots, which occur in the game, as actions performed by the player/avatar) with a linguistic sign (an exclamation mark), *Max Payne* exclaims the intertwining of game and story. And in fact, everything that comes after this point in the game is part of the events that lead up to it. The voice-over – which belongs to police detective Max Payne of course – takes us back three years in time to the day when his wife and only child are murdered. This event is presented first as a series of panels from a graphic novel, with voices on the audio track; then as a miniature game level, filled with small, prerendered video sequences and more voice-over graphic panels. The rest of the game presents Payne's desperate hunt for the people behind the deed, until he finally ends up in the situation where we first met him; which is in fact the end of the game, mystery solved and all the bad guys brought to justice (that is, of course, the bullet-in-the-face kind of justice).

Of course, from the player's perspective, the experience of playing the game is still something that takes place in the present, and at least in a theoretical sense the outcome of the game is undetermined. But the design of the game is linear in the extreme sense, so that by and large the only possible variation in playing through a given sequence of the game is of the type "shoot, then duck" versus "duck, then shoot". Admittedly, the 'duck', 'shoot' and 'jump' movements of this game are more exciting than in most games preceding it. They are enough to provide the player with meaningful gameplay, but not enough to let the player have any real influence on the outcome of the game, other than to leave the game before finishing. And thus the game can safely present itself as a string of events from the past, and Max Payne can take on the role of the narrator of events, narrating retrospectively in the past tense.

Whatever meaning is conveyed in the term 'narrative game', as an actual analytical category or a heuristic label, it seems certain that if any game can be defined as such, *Max Payne* must be too. But is it a quest game? At first glance, certainly: The policeman Max Payne is on a quest for revenge. But that is a statement about a fictional character, and thus about the status of the story told in the game. And of course what we wanted to look at was the game itself, which according to Aarseth's approach is something that is fundamentally different from the story.

The game of *Max Payne*, stripped of all the narrative elements, is a traversal of a series of

unicursal labyrinths, where the player continuously encounters opponents which must be conquered in order to move on. If the term ‘quest’ is used simply to describe a formal skeleton structure of this type, this may of course be considered a quest. But in my opinion, this doesn’t capture the full meaning of what a quest is. Certainly it seems that Tronstad uses the word in a more specific sense: “To do a quest is to search for the meaning of it. Having reached this meaning, the quest is solved” (Tronstad 2001:3). In *Max Payne* the central question in the fictional quest is to find out who were the people behind the murder of Max’s family. This is a question that the player already knows the answer to; of course it must be the people at the top of the skyscraper belonging to Aesir Corporation, where we first met Max – just as he had finished his revenge. The end is known, but still there are two things that urge the player to go on: On the one hand, the pure thrill of adrenaline involved in the jumping around corners, shooting and ducking – the gameplay itself. On the other hand, the desire to witness the dramatic sequence of events that lead from quiet family life on the Jersey side to a ragnarok of violence on lower Manhattan – the story. The relative importance of these two elements will depend on the individual player. However, the only way *Max Payne* can be properly understood as a quest game is in joining these two perspectives, thus seeing the narrative as an integral part of the game, intertwined with it at every level, giving the ‘shoot’s and the ‘duck’s of the game meaning as actions leading toward a resolution of the narrative conflict – the quest.

### **CLEVERLY DISGUISED STORIES: ENACTMENT**

I find it an unsatisfying solution, as Aarseth suggests, to consign games like *Max Payne* to a category of “attempts at telling stories, cleverly disguised as games” (Aarseth 2004). Whereas Aarseth claims that “[t]he narrativistic approach is also unfortunate because it imposes an external aesthetic on the games, treating them as inferior narrative art” (Aarseth 2004), he himself appears to be describing the opposite hierarchy: By privileging games where story elements play a less important role, he is portraying games where narrative plays a dominant role as an inferior kind of games. Thus he risks overlooking the ways in which games and stories can blend and create expressions that are truly innovative mixtures of the two, and that can only be viewed from a multiplicity of perspectives, informed by narrative theory as well as game-specific theory.

I believe *Max Payne* is such a game, and I am suggesting that a theory of ‘enactment’ might contribute to a productive approach to many of these games. The term captures the idea that in a computer game, the player is more than just a spectator; but claiming that she is the author of her own experience seems like a gross exaggeration. Instead her situation can be compared to that of someone who is in a position between author and audience; an actor. If we imagine a kind of improvisational theatre, where a play consists of some characters, an initial situation, some rules and a script for the environment – but not for the actor – we are very close to the situation of the player of many first person shooters.

For lack of better words in the English language, I am suggesting a distinction between the terms ‘enacting’ and ‘acting’. The important point is the balance between freedom and unfreedom captured in these terms. The enactor, as I use the term, has less freedom than what is normally associated with the role of a player in a game: She is not a near-omnipotent figure like the player of *Civilization* or *The Sims*, but someone controlling (or partly controlling) an avatar which is also a character in a story, with limitations and opportunities dependent on that role. But the activity of the enactor is fundamentally different from that of an actor playing out a narrative or a

play of some kind. While the actor is *acting out* a script, the enactor is *reacting to* a script. This script is of course more complex than a theatre script, consisting both of narrative and of a labyrinth with a rule-based environment. While the actor in a play is just repeating a sequence she has already performed in rehearsal, so that she knows at every point what will happen next, the enactor does not know what will happen, but is operating according to certain rules and an initial situation that is known, and acting and reacting on the fly according to input and response from the virtual surroundings. Of course, in improvisational theatre the role of the actor is closer to that of the enactor, since improvisational theatre is closer to a game. And on the other hand, when a player of a deterministic first person shooter like Max Payne replays a sequence several times in order to get through it, her situation comes closer to that of a rehearsing actor – or, perhaps more precisely, a rehearsing circus performer – who already knows what will happen in the next second and is trying to adjust her actions to fit the scheduled events.

The concept of enactment can illuminate some important aspects of several, surprisingly different games. In *Max Payne*, since the end of the story is known, the narration turns away from the external mystery and towards the internal one: What happens to a man that must cope with the death of his loved ones, and his own transformation into a violent gangster and killing machine? This problematic is stated over and over again in the narrated sequences, in a language that is melodramatic on the verge of parody. However, this problematic also grips straight into the design of the game itself. At two points in the game, Max is drugged, and the player has to play through some nightmarish dream sequences re-enacting the day that Max's family got killed. In these sequences some conventions of the game genre are bent and challenged; for instance, at the end of one of them Max/the player has to fight a gunfight against himself. Seen in the light of the narrative this is of course easy to interpret in a number of ways: Max dealing with his feeling of guilt for not having been able to protect his family, Max killing his old, law-abiding, peaceful self in the process of becoming a stone-cold killer etc. But this interpretation easily obscures the fact that the experience of having this retold is something quite different from playing it. In the dream sequences the normal rules of the game are set aside, and the player must find her way in a true labyrinth of confusion, which is an experience that potentially can immerse her into Max's experience in a way that older media could not have done. And when the genre conventions are broken, this can create a momentary sense of confusion, and perhaps estrangement – and thus compel the player to start reflecting and contemplating on the events in the game.

Though *Max Payne* is not a great work of art, it also doesn't deserve all of the characteristics that Aarseth puts on the category of disguised stories: "poor to nonexistent characterization, extremely derivative action plots, and, wisely: no attempts at metaphysical themes" (Aarseth 2004). In Lev Manovich's theoretical framework, a new media object can be considered as an interface to a database [4]. The interface represents the syntagm, while the database is the paradigm. By forcing the player to go through the same, inevitable disaster several times, *Max Payne* defies this logic of traversing a database: Instead of letting the player choose between alternative paths with different outcomes, the player is forced to endure several paths through the same event with identical outcomes, played in linear sequence. In Roman Jakobson's terms, the paradigmatic dimension is projected on to the syntagmatic – which is how Jakobson described the process of turning ordinary language into poetry [5]. I am not arguing that the dream sequences in *Max Payne* are poetry, only that they are interesting attempts at expressing metaphysical themes in a pop cultural, new media setting.

## ENACTMENT AND MOCK AGENCY

Perhaps one can say that the makers of *Max Payne* have discovered a way of translating techniques of poetry into game design. The reason that I find this particularly interesting is that it may shed some light on another question which seems to lie behind much of the writing about computer games: The question of “serious games”. How can the new media be used to create art of a new kind – art that is both different from the old media and which succeeds in incorporating metaphysical themes, artistic expression and social criticism? [6]

I believe that the concept of enactment can shed light on a number of interesting games that are discussed in a recent article by Shuen-Shing Lee [7]. Games like *September 12<sup>th</sup>* [8], *Kabul Kaboom!* [9], *New York Defender* [10] and *Adam Killer* [11] all work with a kind of estrangement that is achieved by breaking the conventions and the roles generally offered to players of computer games. Playing a computer game normally provides the player with a peculiarly strong experience of agency. The game situation is a situation in which, unlike trite and boring real life situations, the player is constantly faced with making important choices with clearly defined alternatives. According to Sid Meier, a game is a series of interesting choices. However, when the tools provided by the game are not appropriate for solving the problems presented, this experience breaks down, and the potential for meaningful gameplay is denied. This is a kind of mock agency; a broken promise of agency. If this situation is appropriately contextualized, the result may be more than just an annoyed and frustrated player; it might create the distance that is necessary for contemplation and reflection on serious themes.



**Figure 1:** *September 12<sup>th</sup>*.

*September 12<sup>th</sup>* is probably the most well-known of these games. The game screen shows an animation of a middle eastern town, with a lot of unarmed figures representing civilians, and a few armed ones representing terrorists. With the mouse the player can launch rockets at the terrorists, but because they are surrounded by civilians it is practically impossible to kill only terrorists; and killing civilians only recruit more to the terrorist cause. The more rockets that are

launched, the higher the number of terrorists; however, if the player stops launching rockets, the number of terrorists slowly falls back to its original level. Clearly this game is meaningless to play with for a long time; the only action available to the player only worsens the situation. The player expects agency but gets none. Presumably it is in order to prepare the players for this that the designers have chosen to call it not a game, but a simulation. But I believe the effect is the same: An experience of estrangement which may create a distance for reflection.

In the *Half Life*-modification *Adam Killer* something similar is taking place. When starting the game, the player is greeted with the simple instruction “Kill Adam!”, before she is launched into a white, rectangular space filled with figures modeled on the artist’s friend Adam. The only actions available to the player is to let her avatar walk around among these figures, and to fire the gun in her hands. Adam is an easy target; he doesn’t try to either run away or attack the player, and with one shot he is down, blood splattered all over the white surface. However, since this is the only action possible, a player who has acquired the game and presumably wants to explore it, has to indulge in the violence, at least for a while. But unlike in most first person shooters, there is nothing that either rewards the violence, or makes it meaningful or justified. Instead it comes across as pure, unprovoked aggression. Even for someone who has played many violent computer games before, this is a disturbing experience, and one that can give a powerful sense of estrangement from one’s own actions in the game – precisely because the design of the game forces the player to enact the situation, rather than just witness it.

Games like *Kabul Kaboom!* and *New York Defender* create an effect that is related to that in the dream sequences of *Max Payne*, by letting the player fight a hopeless fight against an inevitable tragedy – that of a mother and a child hopelessly trying to escape the bombs falling over Afghanistan, and an anti-aircraft gunner trying to stop the passenger jets from crashing into the WTC buildings, respectively. This is also not so unlike the game of *Tetris*, of course. There are two simple differences: Firstly, the tragedy of *Tetris* is not all that tragic, whereas the two first games are connected to large, real-life narratives that give the games a meaning beyond the simple situation of the gameplay. Secondly, and more significantly, in the first two games there is no scoring system that can create a sense of achievement and immersion for the player. I want to suggest that this experience of an inevitable, anti-immersive game is another way of creating a sense of mock agency, and hence an estrangement effect.

The idea of the estrangement effect is of course something I have borrowed from Bertholt Brecht’s theory of theatre. Ideally, through the creation of this effect in the games I have discussed, the player can come to view herself in a situation similar to that of the figures in many plays of modern theatre, such as plays by Samuel Beckett, Jean Paul Sartre, Bertholt Brecht etc, where the characters are robbed of agency and alienated from their surroundings; a situation with distance and space for contemplation and criticism. I believe that further exploring mechanisms such as the ones I have discussed above is one approach that can bring us closer to seeing the potential for serious artistic expression in computer games – as well as providing us with better tools for analysis of computer games with a strong emphasis on narrative.

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