Monkey Island as a Theme Park Going Beyond Hyperrealism: Ron Gilbert's Auteurial Style and Thematic Concerns

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Until April 1st, 2022, no-one expected that the iconic flagship of adventure games, the Monkey Island series would receive a sequel after Telltale's 2009 venture into the franchise with *Tales of Monkey Island*, much less that original designers Ron Gilbert and Dave Grossman would be at the helm, producing *Return to Monkey Island* (Terrible Toybox 2022). A direct continuation of *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* (LucasFilm Games 1991), it aimed to resolve the memorably surrealistic ending of the second game, wherein protagonist Guybrush Threepwood emerged with his archnemesis LeChuck from the catacombs under Dinky Island as young children, soon to be chastised by their parents for getting lost in the pirate-themed amusement park. The ending has left both players and future narrative designers contributing to the Monkey Island series guessing as to the precise meaning of the sequence, and also speculating about the true secret of Monkey Island.

This contribution seeks to untangle the manifold influences that helped Ron Gilbert and his development team conceive of Monkey Island, to comment upon the auteurial style of Ron Gilbert with references to his other ludic output, in particular, *Thimbleweed Park* (Terrible Toybox 2017), and to situate it in the context of postmodernist and metamodernist theories of culture. The contribution also serves as a sounding board for ideas for the author to be crystallised in a longer monograph devoted to a detailed hermeneutic analysis of the six Monkey Island games.

The main research questions motivating the contribution are:

1. What do the strong intermedial connections between the Monkey Island games and Disney theme parks imply about the narrative construction of the Monkey Island universe, and how do the intertextual connections shape the interpretation of the modern intrusions into the storyworld?

2. How does the diegetically "half-real" (Juul 2005) nature of the pirate world fit into Ron Gilbert's oeuvre and his auteurial conception of the artificiality of the computer game as a medium? How do metamedial gestures contribute to the estrangement effect of finishing the games?

3. In what ways do postmodernist and metamodernist discourses influence the vision of entertainment exhibited in the games? How did these strains of thought contribute to the diegetic conceptualisation of The Secret, and what theoretical consequences can we derive from their narrative execution?

The major theoretical and hermeneutical claims of the paper are as follows:

1. The sustained ruse of Guybrush's adventures in the Age of Piracy is strategically disrupted by the anachronistic elements of the storyworld to keep players in doubt about the ontological nature of the storyworld. Numerous instances of modern-day entertainment and pop culture, most memorably, the series' continued references of theme park architecture and rides, are evoked not merely as an homage to Disney or Tim Powers' *On Stranger Tides* (1987), but it is also a coherent argument about the virtual reality of the theme park as a physical "constitutive outside" (Butler 1993) to the digital artificiality of the computer game medium.

2. Ron Gilbert's shocking endings to *LeChuck's Revenge* and *Return to Monkey Island* can be thematically connected to the ending of *Thimbleweed Park* (and by allusion, to *Maniac Mansion* (LucasFilm Games 1987)), in which the constructedness of the game world is exposed as being generated by servers at the Pillowtron factory. The "fourth wall"-shattering ending creates a moment of self-reflection for the player, who must grapple with the constructed nature of the game-world in a move reminiscent of metadramatic performances. The exposure of the world of Monkey Island as a theme park storyworld wrought by Stan to entertain flooring inspector Guybrush is severely disillusioning, and it can be traced back to throwaway comments from the first Monkey Island games. The artificiality of the computer game medium is a lifelong concern for Gilbert, who pokes fun at it (to the disappointment of his players) in the narrative games he is most famous for.

3. The skilful merging of influences, such as Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean ride or *The Princess Bride* (Goldman 1973) into the fictional Caribbean of the Monkey Island series can be directly related to major postmodern theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard (1994 [1981]) or Umberto Eco (1986), who have extensively commented upon the hyperreal nature of theme parks and American popular culture. Additionally, the Monkey Island games twist standard postmodernist concerns about what is real and what is fake by making the player genuinely emotionally invested in the pirate fantasy of Guybrush, and the threat of reality shattering the illusion is mitigated by the multiple endings to *Return to Monkey Island*, including visual references to *Inception* (Nolan 2010), which also keep the ontological status of the fictional world perpetually in limbo. The desire to satisfy different fan theories of the nature of Monkey Island results in an amalgamation of aesthetic goals that betray a strong adherence to metamodernist ideals of culture, which is palpable in other, equally "fourth wall"-breaking games (Backe 2022), and Guybrush's attitude about how to behave in the pirate world of the amusement park is one of "pragmatic idealism" (Vermeule and van Akker 2010).

Thus, the ambitions of the research program (and future manuscript) is threefold. First and foremost, to situate the Monkey Island games as not just part of the adventure game or wider video game canon, but as a significant contribution to interactive art and a commentary upon the pervasiveness and the affective resonances of contemporary popular culture because of the extensive intellectual commentary upon postmodernist concerns with the ontological status of reality. These concerns are deeply engaging with then-contemporary critical theory and the emergence of rising and firmly established juggernauts of American culture, namely, Disney and Lucasfilm, which eventually merged and allowed Gilbert to reacquire the rights to the Monkey Island IP. It also seeks to establish Ron Gilbert as bona fide *auteur* with recognisable stylistic and thematic concerns, while not neglecting the collaborative nature of computer game

storytelling, most notably in Dave Grossman and Tim Schafer's essential contributions. Finally, the paper and the manuscript intend to highlight the narrative worldbuilding and aesthetic value of the Monkey Island games as artistic pinnacles of the video game medium, which reflect upon the artistic sensibility of the (post-)postmodern era.

My claims about the theoretically significant merits of artistry present in the MI games are supported by several interlocking strands of design choices, namely: a.) the knowing and metareferential room design that skilfully evokes crucial theme park rides throughout the series, which highlights the medial affinities between adventure games and theme parks; b.) the constant ambiguity of the ontological status of the pirate world until the very ending of *Return to Monkey Island* and the hermeneutic uncertainty of what constitutes "the secret," which emphasises the mediatised nature of the computer game experience in ways not usually present in adventure games of the 1990s; c.) the cross-pollination between the Monkey Island series and other works of Ron Gilbert, which tap into the continued self-referentiality of the culture they sprang from in a way reminiscent of literary works from the postmodern period, most notably John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" (1967) and Julian Barnes' *England, England* (1998).

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