

A Response to *A Mind Forever Voyaging: A History of Storytelling in Video Games*

Holmes begins the book by outlining the general history of video games and touches on the methodology behind choosing to focus on a mere thirteen games among the thousands that have been created. The description immediately draws parallels to my own, albeit less contextually focused, work for this class. A clear, comprehensive, and relatively concise outline of the entire book to come.

The first real chapter begins with a personal anecdote about *The Secret of Monkey Island*, with Holmes experiencing the narrative at a young age through a babysitter acting out the dialogue (Holmes, Page 9-10). References are made to earlier games in the genre utilizing text parsing and point and click elements that would go on to define *Monkey Island's* gameplay, as well as the game's cinematic approach. I am inclined to agree with Holmes' characterization of *Monkey Island's* three types of dialogue: exploratory, false choice, and decision-making. It's concluded that linearity in an increasingly nonlinear industry, as well as jumping the shark (the example given being "creating a fake moustache by placing masking tape over a hole in the wall and chasing a cat through it") ultimately led to the downfall of Adventure games, though digital distribution has allowed a niche market to thrive (Holmes, Page 20-22). I would also like to note that the influence of Adventure games remains apparent through the dialogue trees of many modern game.

The second chapter contrasts the previous chapter's graphical adventure about pirates with a jump back to 1983 for *Planetfall*, a text adventure about an interstellar janitor. *Planetfall* is described much like a novel would be with descriptive language that fosters the player's imaginations to imagine what the world would look like. It's also incredibly punishing, having 41 different ways to die over the course of the game, requiring the player to eat to avoid starving, and a plague that in effect puts a timer on the entire game (Holmes, Page 29). Holmes also mentions Floyd, a robot in the game that happens to

be one of the earliest Non-Playable Characters in gaming. Floyd is portrayed as sympathetic and likeable, so when he's killed in the later portions of the game the player has an emotional reaction, "not only could a computer make you cry, but it could sometimes do so more effectively than a page or projector" (Holmes, Page 35). This proves the effect character and writing can have on a player's gaming experience, and how it can potentially outshine the gameplay itself.

Chapter three focuses on *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* and questions of morality in the context of gameplay. The game requires the player to become the Avatar, which is achieved by following a moral code dictated by virtues such as only killing "evil" creatures, not stealing, and showing humility (Holmes, Page 45-47). I agree with Holmes' assessment that modern games utilizing morality systems, such as *inFAMOUS*, "uniformly ignore judgement of the player" in favor of a more simplistic binary (Holmes, Page 48). However I disagree on the assessment that this is to avoid making the player feel uncomfortable, while that may be a part of it, I think a binary is simply easier to create from a narrative and development standpoint.

The fourth chapter brings us back to the 90's with *System Shock*, a first-person action RPG largely credited as the spiritual predecessor of *Bioshock*. The game marks a departure from the previous titles by having a less traditional narrative structure focusing on finding text and audio logs to piece together what happened to its setting before the player arrived. The concept of diegesis is brought up, the dichotomy between whether or not something is happening inside the fiction of the world, or outside of it simply to create an effect with the audience (Holmes, 56). Realism and immersion are important aspects of storytelling, but I prefer believability and internally consistent logic over what is commonly thought of as "video game realism."

Chapter five is the big one, perhaps the most well-known and loved role-playing game ever made: *Final Fantasy VII*. The stage is set by describing players typically used to platformers with little or

no dialogue now encountering a game with a 120,000 word script (Holmes, Page 64). *Final Fantasy VII's* opening is illustrated as a microcosm of concepts that would go on to shape narrative focused games for decades to come such as emulating cinema and seamlessly transitioning from cutscene to gameplay (Holmes, Page 67). The rest of the game largely separates narrative and combat as two distinct entities, but Holmes posits that although sloppy in terms of cohesion, the combat serves to break up the monotony that would ensue from simply reading text boxes for the entirety of the game's 40+ hour play time (Holmes, Page 70). I agree with the premise of Holmes' conundrum of how to make the player truly responsible for their actions in a scripted narrative, and I think this notion could use more industry discussion. Holmes' points about Aeris's death being impactful because it represented both an emotional and gameplay loss, and sequels/prequels creating a "correct" canon that overrides player choice also struck a chord with me (Holmes, Page 75-77).

Chapter six details *Metal Gear Solid* and the rise of cutscenes and their occasional overuse, as director Hideo Kojima is quoted: "I consider myself seventy percent film" (Holmes, Page 81). Cutscenes loaded with exposition, political intrigue, and fourth-wall breaking abound throughout. Holmes takes the opportunity to mention the merits and drawbacks toward the game's multiple endings; while Snake's torture scene gives the player the choice of allowing Meryl to live or die, it's the only narrative choice in the game and ultimately rendered meaningless by her reappearance later in the series (Holmes, Page 90-91). The question raised about "how much is too much" when it comes to cutscene implementation in video games is a worthwhile pursuit that likely varies depending on narrative context and genre.

The seventh chapter details *Half-Life* as something of an antithesis to *Metal Gear Solid*. It avoids standard cutscenes in favor of providing the player with freedom of movement and camera control. The scene plays in front of the player and they are free to interact with that scene however they choose. Holmes describes the slippery slope of realism from the game environment reflecting player

input in some regards, such as smashed crates, and bullet holes on the walls, but not in others such as that same wall remaining intact after being shot with a rocket launcher (Holmes, Page 102-103). It's clear to me that Valve as a whole are more concerned with technical aspects like physics than narrative per se, as evidenced by the Source Engine and lack of a proper conclusion to the *Half-Life* story.

Chapter eight brings us the cult-classic *Shenmue*, notable for its attempt at a "living world." The guiding principle of *Shenmue* according to creator Yu Suzuki is "FREE" or "Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment" meaning that the player could interact with everything in the game (Holmes, Page 110). The focus is on the details from the interactive environments, to the pseudo-real time progression, to the daily schedules of NPCs. It's in this free and open approach that players often felt lacking a sense of direction, the dramatic necessity of Chekhov is largely sidelined (Holmes, Page 116-118). My takeaway is the importance of narrative focus, the complaints against *Shenmue* mirror a number of the complaints levied against the highly-detailed, but narratively deficient *The Order: 1886*.

The ninth chapter brings *Deus Ex*, a *System Shock* successor with an emphasis on choice. Unlike the binary choices presented by other games, *Deus Ex* opts to make every action (or inaction) the player makes a choice with consequences, creating situations where for example the player can kill a captured suspect, let their partner kill the suspect for them, or kill their partner to allow the suspect to live (Holmes, Page 122-123). This created "emergent gameplay," in which the game's systems help shape different playstyles, allowing players to choose completely different approaches to playing the same game, some of which the designers may have never even intended (Holmes, Page 127). The complexity of the game systems required for meaningful emergent gameplay causes most games to opt for a more simplistic and linear approach.

Chapter ten brings back the *Metal Gear Solid* series for perhaps its most controversial entry: *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*. The game was something of a revelation for games criticism because

while all of the technical aspects typically given the spotlight such as graphical quality, interactivity, and overall gameplay improved, the narrative and its place within the series' canon dominated much of the discussion about the game (Holmes, Page 134). After an extended prologue with Snake, players were suddenly in control of Raiden, and he was the actual protagonist of the game, the game's title screen even changes to reflect the new character (Holmes, Page 138-139). The gaming public felt like they were trolled, and they were, but Snake isn't out of the picture, what we have is actually a perspective shift and a complex metanarrative. Holmes states: "MGS2 provides a narrative that is about a character that is the player, but denies the player the ability to control that narrative: Kojima is the puppeteer, the unwitting player the marionette" and if that isn't a milestone in gaming narrative I don't know what is (Holmes, Page 143).

After an interlude describing the changes in the gaming industry following the turn of the millennium from genre consolidation to ballooning budgets, Holmes highlights the first of two indie games: *Façade*. The player is thrust into the shoes of a close friend visiting a couple with a troubled marriage and through their actions able to reconcile the pair, or drive them apart. The game is described as a "short one-act play" and its setup reflects that being very reminiscent of a black box theater (Holmes, Page 152). Holmes describes this interactive drama as more of a proof of concept than a compelling experience in and of itself, and from his account I'm inclined to agree (Holmes, Page 158).

The twelfth chapter boils video games down to the minimalism many art forms inevitably reach with *Dear Esther*. As the poster child of the "walking simulator" genre of experimental narrative experiences, *Dear Esther* aims for an unconventional player reactions. Instead of fun, the game tries to evoke unhappiness (Holmes, Page 165). The ambiguous nature of the experience has led many to question whether or not it can even be considered a "game," but perhaps that's what it truly means to push boundaries. I agree with the sentiment that these short-form games are a key area of growth and experimentation in video games and video game narrative (Holmes, Page 168).

The final chapter highlights interactive cinema with *Heavy Rain*. The game influenced by cinema to the point that the gameplay consists almost entirely of button prompts and cutscenes, but the game in many ways opts for the antithesis of Hollywood convention. "If the edit is cinema's core feature, then *Heavy Rain* does the opposite: it lengthens rather than abridge...linger[ing] on the mundane instead of cutting to the consequential" (Holmes, Page 175). Holmes goes on to describe the choices in *Heavy Rain* as similar to rewriting the individual chapters of a book to create narrative context. Many of the choices have little far-reaching consequence, but in creating the context "the player is the dramaturge, defining its meaning" (Holmes, Page 178). I'm conflicted on the point about death in video games, on the whole I agree that it doesn't hold the dramatic weight it should in most games, but I'm not sure the example of Nathaniel holds the weight Holmes seems to think it does. By Holmes' account, Nathaniel was in an armed standoff with a police officer, dropped his weapon, and then made the sudden move to pull something out of his pocket as he was being arrested, resulting in Holmes' instinctively pulling the trigger and killing him. This read to me as emotional manipulation on the part of the developers, especially since that object was a crucifix. The weight of the death of this NPC is pure projection from our likely Christian author killing an innocent Christian that poorly handled a police encounter.

On the whole, I agreed with many of Holmes' points throughout the book, it can be a little tricky when the subject is a game I haven't personally played, but the writing is descriptive enough to understand the main points. Video game narrative can be complex and multifaceted, but as a general overview of over thirty years of gaming history, this book manages to be surprisingly comprehensive with its selections.

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