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2007

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17704>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Johnson, Matthew S. S.: Combat to Conversation: Towards a Theoretical Foundation for the Study of Games. In: *Dichtung Digital. Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien*. Nr. 37, Jg. 9 (2007), Nr. 1, S. 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17704>.

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Combat to Conversation: Towards a Theoretical Foundation for the Study of Games

By Matthew S. S. Johnson

No. 37 – 2007

Abstract

In "Combat to Conversation," I first conduct a rhetorical analysis of representative examples of video game scholarship in order to reveal that much of digital game studies lacks the close-readings of individual games necessary to establish viable video game theory. I then provide an example of the type of close-reading that can be done – specifically on the adventure game *Indigo Prophecy* – which I argue illustrates a form of gameplaying and storytelling that resists easy classification by either ludologists or narratologists.

1. Combative Rhetoric

Stuart Moulthrop (2004), artist and critic well-known for both his creation and study of hypertext, comments that 'cinema has had its Eisenstein, de Lauretis, and Deleuze, literature its Derrida, Foucault, and Cixous, but with a few notable exceptions, the study of games as a cultural form has yet to begin' (62).

I would argue that these notable exceptions include Espen Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca, and Moulthrop himself. Yet the tone that recent digital game theory often takes is troubling for both theoretical and practical reasons. Through analysis of several important essays that examine electronic games – such as those in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan's ground-breaking anthology, *First Person* (2004) – I first hope to show that the narratology/ludology debate has followed its course; David Ciccoricco, in this issue, briefly comments on the binary opposition's usefulness in kindling a new discipline, but also points out that persistence of treating these approaches as oppositional is now 'particularly unproductive'. In addition, I argue that not only is the debate weary, but that it has actually begun to stand in the way of valuable scholarship. Much of digital game studies research lacks the close-

readings of specific games necessary to establish viable video game theory. I then conduct a close analysis of the adventure game *Indigo Prophecy* in an attempt to illustrate the type of reading for which I am arguing. This essay, then, is part rhetorical analysis, part argument, and part a call to action.

Let me first briefly introduce the “tone” about which I am concerned. Espen Aarseth (2004:45) claims of ludology and narratology that ‘a controversy rages’, that there is currently a ‘great stake-claiming race’, a competitive ‘land rush’, and ‘fight for academic influence’ going on. Markku Eskelinen (2004:36) comments that computer game studies is ‘very open to intrusions and colonisations from the already organized scholarly tribes’ and that ‘resisting and beating them is the goal of our first survival game’. Other examples of this martial tone are easy to come by, as a cursory look at *Game Studies* or *Ludology.org* will reveal. Yet I am skeptical of the military and colonial metaphors being brandished about, and even more so of the “circle-the-wagons” mentality that it provokes. Many ludologists are overly protective – aggressively so – of digital games as an object of study: ‘Are games texts?’ Aarseth (2004) asks,

[t]he best reason I can think of why one would ask such a crude question is because one is a literary or semiotic theorist and wants to believe in the relevance of one’s training. (47)

What is troubling about this rhetoric is that half of each of these essays is devoted to immediate, reactionary criticism against other scholars: *scholars who all agree that games are culturally and theoretically rich objects of academic study*.

It is not the academic work that such theorists do that is problematic: Eskelinen’s (2004:38-42) definitions of ‘the gaming situation’ and ‘aspects of time in computer games’ are quite useful in developing digital game theory, as is Aarseth’s (2004:52-53) notion of the ‘art of simulation’. These are smart concepts from the same essays from which I have taken these rhetorically questionable quotations; however, questioning the ‘relevance of [literary and semiotic] training’ (Aarseth 2004:47) and defending games as the sole domain of ludologists spurs me into making observations, as I read these scholars’ otherwise interesting, productive texts. For instance, Aarseth (2004:53) refers to Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Eskelinen (2004:38) to Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, if we accept Aarseth’s claim, then are his and Eskelinen’s references to books squarely in the literary theorists’ domain and therefore inappropriate for their essays? Perhaps we can excuse Marie-Laure Ryan’s (2001) reference to Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, as she is in the narratologist “camp”, but again, Aarseth’s argument makes clear that such a comparison is not productive in developing video game theory. Ultimately, it is hypocritical for self-declared ludologists to discuss examples of literature as potentially ludic if they seemingly discount narratologists when they discuss games as potentially narrative. Furthermore, Aarseth (2004:52) and Janet Murray (2004:4) (whose neo-

Aristotelian approach is a favorite – and not totally unfounded – target of some ludologists) both refer to *Groundhog Day*, which is a film, not a game. Not recognizing games as texts – or at the very least criticizing even the question itself as “crude” – does little but set up willful blindspots. These scholarly blinders and unfair attitudes toward scholars in neighboring fields (I prefer the phrase “neighboring fields” and its positive connotation to Eskelinen’s negative ‘intruding and colonising tribes’) will ultimately impede careful and open evidence-gathering which itself can lead to sound theory.

Use of such rhetoric awkwardly slams doors on avenues of inquiry for an object of study which, while being available for examination for forty-some-odd years now, is just emerging as a “legitimate” object of study. The road to legitimacy has not been easy. On the one hand, when talking about computer games at academic conferences, I have spent time dispelling some prominent computer game myths: they are not just violent; all gaming platforms are not alike; gaming is not the exclusive – nor even overwhelming – domain of adolescent males; and there are many more games (despite what many academic circles or mainstream media might imply) than just *Doom*, *Myst*, *The Sims*, and *Grand Theft Auto*. Unlike just a few years ago, computer gaming is now appearing at academic conferences in the humanities with greater frequency, and, I assume, greater understanding. On the other hand, I question scholars who *do* understand computer games, yet practice theory-building with rhetorical gun-muzzles ablaze, ripping into contrary theory as if playing a first-person shooter – as if the academic conversation is a mere game itself, with definitive winners and losers.

Scholars have certainly commented explicitly about this language and topic. Considering the reasoning behind the conflict, Moulthrop (2004:62) offers

[w]hat seems merely a professorial turf war may in fact embody a more profound generational conflict. The turn from narrative forms such as plays, novels, and films to ludic forms such as games and simulations marks the emergence of a younger cohort who acquired their orientation to language as much from dynamic systems as from Aristotelian or even modernist genres.

I hope I have not come across as treating Moulthrop’s ‘younger cohort’ as childish; scholarly concerns about traditional narratology’s (in)applicability to games are not unfounded. I do not see much of a narrative in *Pac-man* or *Tetris*, either, ‘which are about’, as Murray (2004:2) claims, ‘winning and losing, casting the player as the opponent-battling or environment-battling hero’. Eskelinen (2004:36) is right on the mark when he comments about the importance of looking at games as games, and not always in terms of narrative structure: ‘[i]f I throw a ball at you I don’t expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories’. In trying to point out narratology’s potential shortcomings, I may have chosen a different rhetorical route, but I also

understand this reaction when confronted with Eric Zimmerman's (2004:162) description of *Ms. Pac-Man* as

[a] narrative about life and death, about consumption and power. It's a narrative about strategic pursuit through a constrained space, about dramatic reversals of future where the hunter becomes the hunted. It's a narrative about relationships, in which every character on the screen, every munchable dot and empty corridor, are meaningful parts of a larger system.

Both ludologists and narratologists, it seems, choose their evidence imprecisely. If I am going to talk about character development (in the storytelling sense) in computer games, I am not going to choose *The Sims*, as Frasca (2004:91) does, declaring its characters 'generally flat'. Of course they are: deep characters are not a focal point of the game. Frasca's main claim here is about simulation, for which *The Sims* serves him superbly. But why, then, bring up "character"? Likewise, if I am going to analyze 'story-game hybrids: the adventure game genre', I will not choose *Myst*, as Aarseth (2004:51) does, as my representative example. 'Nice video graphics', he says, 'shame about the game. [...] In *Myst* there were no characters at all, except for in a few static video sequences'. All true. But then why choose *Myst*, if one really wants to discuss dramatic ambition? If a scholar wants a dramatically ambitious adventure game with good story and character, I might suggest games that are better suited to that purpose: consider *The Longest Journey*, *Syberias I* and *II*, or better yet, tackle a role-playing game such as *Planescape: Torment* or *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, in which there are multifaceted characters and storytelling. Too often, the debate has led us to choose evidence that fits our theories, as opposed to allowing complex evidence to shape our actual claims.

There is valuable purpose in Aarseth's (2004:53) choosing *Tristram Shandy* and its experimental construction to illustrate "play" in literature. Choosing representative examples is one foundation for good argument-making and theory-building. Ludologists and narratologists alike need to be conscious of the evidence they choose for their arguments, especially because "video game" can serve as an umbrella term under which numerous genres of games fit (Mark J. P. Wolf [2001] breaks computer games down into forty-two distinct genres, and while there is overlap – there is in any generic categorization – there are none that I would think subtle enough to eliminate). In other words, if a scholar wants to look at narratives in games, there are plenty of games that function as narratives; I confess that I do not see the reason for selecting *Ms. Pac Man* as one of them.

Considering another possible symptom of the conflict, in her online article "Cyber|literature and Multicourses: Rescuing Electronic Literature from Infanticide" – the title itself is telling – N. Katherine Hayles (2001: n.p.) comments on the 'fighting for critical turf' that scholars do, which threatens to 'orphan' electronic literature. Hayles uses violent terminology in order to comment on it. It is important to

remember that heated academic contention has led to constructive scholarship. Within my own field of composition-rhetoric, scholars have entire patterns of inquiry that were sparked by and continued to be referred to as single debates. For instance, a quick mention of the “Tate/Lindemann Debate” to composition-rhetoric scholars may succinctly summarize nearly fifteen years of discussion about literature’s place in the composition classroom. Briefly refer to the “Bartholomae/Elbow Debate”, and a decade’s worth of academic- versus expressivist-discourse is productively condensed. Yet these debates are rarely simple binaries. To think of them as such severely limits our thinking and significantly and unproductively oversimplifies complicated questions. The ludology/narratology debate functions no differently. Bulldozing “the other side” (although I will argue here that all good academic debates are wholly multifaceted, not just two-sided) of the debate threatens to take away our valuable time and (sometimes scarce) venerated publication space which might otherwise be better dedicated to advancing scholarship. Sarah Sloane (2000) comments,

[t]he computer’s very novelty today has distracted important theorists like Landow, Bolter, Murray, Haas, and Aarseth from accounting for the ways in which computers change reading and writing in particular genres. Intelligent, thoughtful analyses of computers and their historical contexts offered by these writers do not sufficiently differentiate among the genres computers support, not the diverse reading and writing practices different kinds of people bring to this tool. (9)

Objects of study such as digital fiction or video games are complex enough that an interdisciplinary approach will aid in our understanding of the objects themselves, their shaping of literacy practices, or their influence on our greater culture. Should scholars criticize (in the academic sense), challenge, and discuss a theory? Yes. Should they wholly discount one as unproductive at best or disregard it as useless at worst? No.

I have proposed what not to do. What then, do I suggest we *should* do? The main, glaring problem with electronic game theory-building on both sides – radical ludologists and scholars applying established theory to new objects of study – is that it is missing thorough detail work. ‘After forty years of fairly quiet evolution’, Aarseth (2004) says,

the cultural genre of computer games is finally recognized as a large-scale social and aesthetic phenomenon to be taken seriously. In the last few years, games have gone from *media non grata* to a recognized field of great scholarly potential, a place for academic expansion and recognition. (45)

Aarseth does not mean that the evolution was ‘quiet’ because it was a quiet industry – certainly in commercial, political, and gaming circles, participants were quite noisy indeed. He means from a scholar’s point-of-view: the conversation was quiet

because academics largely ignored it. We now have a flurry of scholarly activity. Perhaps we are striving to catch up. Eskelinen (2004:36) claims that computer games 'are under-theorized'. I don't think so. The theorists are basing theory on theory and begetting more theory. Theorists are over-compensating for that forty-year, quiet evolution of digital games. What is missing from those forty years is the careful, academic evidence-gathering that is necessary to initiate constructive theory-building. I do not think games are under-theorized. Rather, games are under-*close-read*.

For example, Celia Pearce (2004:144), otherwise a voice of reason, says regarding the 'debates [that] have been raging', 'it seems only natural that people who have considerable expertise in other narrative media would seek to bring their own knowledge to bear in this argument', and yet she classifies as massively-multiplayer online games – along with *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest* – *Baldur's Gate* and *Diablo* (148). These latter two are simply *not* massively-multiplayer, but rather stand-alone computer role-playing games with substantially less sophisticated online components. On the back flap of *First Person*, a screen shot on the book's front cover from *The Sims* is described as 'build mode in *The Sims*' when the screen clearly depicts "buy mode". Of course these are minor errors, but in a new field that wants to be taken seriously by a larger academic community, such carelessness can have a negative effect. I hope this symptom does not reveal a more significant underlying cause – that experts are exposing a basic unfamiliarity with games (narrative in *Ms. Pac-man?* Character and drama in *Myst?*). Carelessness would exacerbate any problems inherent in attaining academic "legitimacy", especially with so many scholars for whom digital games are still totally alien. We need to be accurate. Jesper Juul (2004:132) claims that 'game theory is best built not so much by plainly importing assumptions from other cultural forms, as by examining actual games'. I could not agree more, and Juul develops theory about 'game time' (131) admirably, but 'examining actual games?' (132). He briefly mentions twenty-five games in a ten-page article sprinkled with screenshots and figures. There is simply no textual space for *examination of the games themselves*.

More damaging than simple errors and omissions are the claims that drastically over-simplify computer gaming: Aarseth (2004:48) says that

[t]he dimensions of Lara Croft's body [. . .] are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently. When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it.

Details, details: the gamer *does* see Croft's body, both in cut scenes and during gameplay (if a gamer sees *past* Croft, then her body must be on the screen). The gameplay itself may not be different (Aarseth's actual point), but the gameplay *experience* certainly would be. Regardless, the depiction of Croft *is significant* for players and readers alike, if we accept arguments that Croft's body objectifies

women or depicts an unattainable bodily form, or that Croft herself is a powerful female protagonist; whatever hermeneutic we set up, the game plays differently in our minds, if not on the screen. Similarly, Aarseth (2004:48) claims that 'knowing *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* will not make you better at playing *Pod Race*'. His use of the term 'better' is exceedingly narrow. Knowing *Phantom Menace* will enrich the gaming experience. He says that '[i]n *Doom*, there is no moral dilemma resulting from the killing of probably innocent monsters' (48); . . . well, perhaps he's right, here – there isn't in *Doom* – but I felt emotional pangs every time I had to shoot a German Shepherd in *Castle Wolfenstein*. The point is that when developing digital game theory, if it is to be useful, researchers need to think about close reading computer games, discuss online gaming communities, examine the gamers themselves – their styles of gameplay, the impact their player-characters (their gaming personae) have on their biological selves, the texts that they produce (FAQs, walkthroughs, blogs, journals, websites, forum postings, and so forth). We need to examine game advertising, the manuals, and other goodies that come in the boxes. We should, to a certain extent, allow our study of the games themselves to beget the theory that so many of the game studies scholars seem to want to rush into.

Aarseth (2004:45) says that '[o]ne side argues that computer games are media for telling stories, while the opposing side claims that stories and games are different structures that are in effect doing opposite things'. I hope I have reshaped this binary something like this: by either insisting on games-as-narratives or games-not-as-narratives, we make the same mistake with the same result. The absence of close examinations of specific games and the often too casual evidence-selecting in computer game scholarship results in diminishing the richness of the games as cultural artifacts. I can approach games productively as a composition scholar or as a rhetorician or as a gamer. Even between areas as different as composition-rhetoric and game studies seem to be, there are strong bridges. But more importantly, the overall scholar in me sees through all of these lenses simultaneously, embracing ludology and narratology and cultural studies and other loosely compartmentalized schools of thought, for the purpose of gathering as much information and evidence as I can to make the smartest arguments and conclusions – however ephemeral – that I can in order to further the field in theory and practice. That scholar also says, "I don't feel like *debating*. I feel like *studying*, to get some real work done".

Computer games, I would argue, are complicated and sophisticated enough that they will require the full collection of theoretical and rhetorical tools at the disposal of numerous scholars in multiple fields. Both games and the storytelling in them are at their most interesting when approached from multiple directions, when the object is allowed to be interdisciplinary, where a researcher sees a computer game as a storytelling vehicle, but also as a rule-based system. In fact, recognizing the two not separately, but rather as *inseparable* may prove more valuable still. Below, I

investigate the storytelling that goes on within games and illustrate how that story can be told through gameplay; I also want to address how the gameplay itself can be motivated by the desire for additional story, creating a hybrid of storytelling and computer game-playing that, while encompassing aspects of both, is its own unique activity and endeavor.

2. Narrative Immersion in Gameplay

Ludologists have a point when criticizing analyses of narrative in digital games: the storytelling in gaming is not “mere” *storytelling*. A story is not so much being told as being unfolded by the reader, or in this case, gamer, by interacting with the “text” (apologies to Aarseth for using such a term, but even if one makes the argument that games are not texts, they can certainly be read as such). The gamer’s interaction initiates and directly influences the story. That interaction can potentially change the story drastically in stand-alone computer games (those for which gamers interact with the computer, and the programming controls the non-player characters) from play-through to play-through, or in the case of massively-multiplayer games (those for which gamers interact not only with computer-controlled characters, but also other gamers), play-session to play-session. In fact, in massively-multiplayer games and even some stand-alone games, there really is no “final” end to the game at all.

This impact on storytelling is a major focus for many scholars interested in narrative in digital games: Murray (1997, cited in Moulthrop 2004:59) comments that

electronic closure occurs when a work’s structure, though not its plot, is understood. This closure involves a cognitive activity at one remove from the usual pleasures of hearing a story There is no emotional release or perception of fittingness, just a sense of going from the unknown to the known. This is very different from and far less pleasurable than our more traditional expectations of closure, as arising from the plot of the story and marking the end point of an action.

Contrary to Murray’s argument, there certainly is ‘emotional release’ in computer gaming and furthermore, such release frequently occurs while ‘marking the end point of an action’ – quite literally, in fact. Any casual gamer knows that after an intense action sequence, there is the emotional release – an exuberant, verbalized “YES!” after success, substantial curses and accusations of unfairness for failures, or perhaps a contented sigh to mark the completion of a challenging and trying sequence. But the emotional reactions gamers may have to action sequences can be much more sophisticated. Consider *Indigo Prophecy*, a story-based adventure

game in which gamers switch player-character viewpoints. The gamer begins by playing a man, Lucas Kane, who early in the game commits a murder, but cannot remember the incident distinctly and does not believe himself responsible. The perspective then switches to two police investigators, Carla Valenti and Tyler Miles, who pursue Kane as the primary murder suspect. This switching is actually quite unique storytelling in itself, as the gamers' actions as Kane – how well they cover his tracks, for instance – directly affect the investigation when the gamers play the roles of Valenti or Miles. Commenting on his desire to create video games, David Cage (2005:2), designer of *Indigo Prophecy*, says that he 'felt like a pioneer filmmaker at the start of the 20th Century: grappling with basic technology, but also being aware that there is everything left to invent – in particular a new language that is both narrative and visual'. He continues:

To be honest, the ten years that followed didn't satisfy my hunger. I was under the impression that video games were only exploiting a tiny part of their amazing creative potential, because they concentrated on "Action" and totally neglected a fundamental element of all human experience – emotion. [. . .]
Indigo Prophecy is my contribution to the transformation of video games into a true form of expression that conveys emotion.

My initial reaction to Cage's commentary is that he was not playing the right games – for two-and-a-half decades there have been story-driven games that have not been particularly action-oriented. Also, I really do not know what a 'true form of expression' might look like. But upon further thought, what Cage (2005) says about *Indigo Prophecy* has merit. He says of his own game that 'it shows that it's possible to tell a story and play a game without sacrificing either the interactivity or the narrative' (2). What he means is that his storyline and his characters can convey emotion as effectively as those he has seen in film; if I were to offer a brief evaluation, I would say that the story was fairly engaging and the characters interesting, even if they were rather archetypal (which is not necessarily "bad", in that archetypes, of course, can be useful storytelling tools).

What Cage succeeds in doing, though, is combining the emotional aspects of the game with the characters themselves, and in an unconventional way: he combines the heightened emotion of action-style play with the characters *as* they experience the action (and not merely the gamer reacting to frantic thumb-twitching, although this aspect of gaming helps, too). Cage uses the Physical Action Reaction (PAR) system in which players have to echo with the keyboard certain combinations of sequences at certain times overlaid on the action taking place. The system is used for anything from *Matrix*-style action to basketball or boxing matches, from ballroom dance steps to guitar playing. In one sequence, players have to control the breathing rate of the investigator, Valenti, as she conducts research in the police station basement: research may not sound emotionally draining, but knowing that she suffers from claustrophobia makes the dark, closed space of the basement

particularly eerie. Pressing a series of keystrokes with a steady hand and rhythm keeps her calm. Too fast, she panics and runs out of the basement. Too slow, and she stops breathing altogether. While my hands controlled Valenti's breathing and the computer emitted the disturbingly realistic breathe-in, breathe-out sound effects, I found that my own breathing matched the character's. New media theorists and ludologists alike are critical of the term "interactive", given its often haphazard use. It can be used to describe the gamers interacting with their computers or gamers interacting with gamers in multiplayer environments. As illustrated by the example, above, in *Indigo Prophecy*, the gamer is connecting *mentally and physically* with his or her player-character on the screen, while that character is conducting a particular action. As Valenti completes her research and is able to leave the shadowy basement of the police station, a gamer cannot help but feel – to return to Murray's commentary – an emotional release marking the end of an action. This particular form of interactivity, a characteristic unique to computer game narratives, is what makes the storytelling within *Indigo Prophecy* so integral to its gameplay.

3. Narrative Motivation in Gameplay

Storytelling in *Indigo Prophecy* also serves as motivation for thorough gameplay, a claim that simultaneously supports and refutes ludologist and narratologist arguments. Critical of Murray's claim about 'electronic closure', quoted above, Moulthrop (2004) argues,

[a]t least in the kind of narrative Murray champions, the reader's primary 'cognitive activity' consists of interpretation. Our ritual release of pity and fear arrives when we fully understand the relationships among the characters and the pattern of causes that constitute a plot[.] [. . .] Our engagement with the text is driven by the desire to apprehend the structure in its entirety. As Eskelinen points out, we expect readers to study every word of a literary work, but web surfers, Multi-User Domain dwellers, game players, and others involved with ergodic texts come under no such obligation. Indeed, gameplay often involves limiting engagement with the work, avoiding irrelevant or distracting details. (59)

The PAR interface is overlaid on the screen while the story sequences advance. These sequences are graphically-intense, and sometimes fast-paced. When I referred to the *Matrix*-style action earlier, I certainly meant the film, which was innovative in its special effects and action sequences: it was without question *designed to be watched*. So too are the scenes in *Indigo Prophecy*, yet the PAR interface is directly in one's line of vision, and the concentration necessary to echo

the flashes on the screen with one's hands on the keyboard is certainly distracting. In this respect, Eskelinen is accurate – gamers are certainly under 'no such obligation' to 'study every word', but does this mean that they do not want to? Does it mean that they are not capable? The gameplay from *Indigo Prophecy* itself is helpful to address these questions.

Throughout the game, players can find objects – golden-cards – that when picked up provide bonus points. They are not necessary to complete the game, nor do they affect the unfolding story. In fact, their purpose does not become clear until after the story has concluded: they are used after the game to "unlock" movies of the action sequences. When spent, the bonus points allow the gamer to watch the movies without the interface overlaid on top of the videos, and without the distraction and intensity of the gameplay. What is significant about this innovation is that it indicates gamers' desire to watch the story in its entirety. They want to 'study every word', as it were, in order to maximize the narrative potential of the game. *Indigo Prophecy* allows gamers this opportunity in a distinctive way – by rewarding *dedicated gaming*. The cards from which gamers receive the bonus points are placed in out-of-the-way areas: in cupboards, down alleyways, or otherwise hidden in the gaming world. A particular style of gameplay that I have observed widely among avid gamers (and, I will admit, practice myself), is to explore every facet – every pixel – of the game, including its story, gameplay, and interface. This sort of dedicated gameplay is rewarded not with additional gaming, necessarily, but with a more comprehensive version of the story. To offer another example, in *Dungeon Siege*, the player is confronted with a seemingly endless desert in which every direction looks more or less identical. This endless desert (or maze, or forest, etc.) is an example of a game-design convention. In an effort to make games seem more boundless, designers – even in text games and the first graphic adventures of the early 1980s – integrate programming loops that would display the same graphics or sequence of screens in order to disorient gamers and make their player-characters hopelessly lost. *Dungeon Siege* rewards the dedicated style of gameplay that I have described and challenges gaming conventions by making the desert only *seemingly* endless. If the player is keen to listen to subtle rumors of the virtual world's inhabitants and start off into the desert in the direction that those rumors allude to, then – with a little faith and a lot of patience – the player will encounter massive, ancient pyramids based on those on the Giza Plateau, with rooms to explore and treasures to acquire. Here, committed gameplay is motivated by the mere prospect of additional story.

A close look at *Indigo Prophecy* (as a representative example) reveals that the story and the gameplay of sophisticated computer games are intertwined, where the gameplay serves not just as a vehicle to advance a particular storyline, but also enables emotional and even physical attachment that biological gamers may have with their digital player-character counterparts. The investment that gamers have in

their player-characters and the experiences they have within the story inspire careful and dedicated gameplay, motivated by the prospect of a more complete story.

4. Conclusion

Aarseth's (2004:45) 'raging controversy', and 'fight for academic influence'; Eskelinen's (2004:36) 'intrusions and colonisations from the already organized scholarly tribes' that ludologists must 'resist and beat' for 'survival'; Hayles's (2001: n.p.) 'fighting for critical turf'; and Moulthrop's (2004:62) 'professorial turf war' seem to indicate that storytelling is different, and perhaps radically so, in digital games: without significant divergence, there would not be such theoretical chutzpah. But perhaps we can address computer-mediated storytelling in general and computer-game-mediated storytelling in particular, from another perspective. At its core, storytelling has not *changed*. Rather, what I hope that I have illustrated is that through the interactivity of gamer and player-character and the desire for additional storytelling, we instead have something new. What has changed instead is the theory that we might employ to approach this new cultural artifact, both by recognizing the applicability of "traditional" narrative theory to story-driven digital games, but also by being willing to recognize its shortcomings when confronted with gaming elements and gameplay interfaces inherent to story-driven digital games. Labeling digital games as "hybrid" is a start, a technique that will also soothe the debate (and leave more room for progressive scholarship), but analyzing the unique characteristics that hybridity elicits will help us to develop the productive theory that digital games scholars are so anxious to employ.

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