Playing for the Plot: *Blade Runner* as Paradigm of the Graphic Adventure Game

By Susana Pajares Tosca

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Abstract

Adventure games form a genre of their own, and are direct descendants of the first text-based adventures that can be said to have inaugurated digital narrative. The puzzle solving and plot development were afterwards combined with the powerful visual element evolved from action games and others, first incorporating moving images and then videos and 3D landscapes to the story-driven games. These games present a new challenge to literary studies, as their acknowledged aim is to let the user "live" a story. She solves enigmas, participates in dialogues and makes the argument advance, so that the result is very similar to a traditional genre fiction (mystery, sci-fi or fantasy) story, where the user has played the main character. (Game developer Jane Jensen makes this explicit by writing books that follow her adventure games in the Gabriel Knight series word by word). But adventure games are not only narratives at the end, because the player is aware of the storytelling process unfolding before her all along. What kind of stories are these? What are their conventions? Are they really interactive?

This article takes one of such games, Blade Runner, to explore the relationship between adventure games and narrative, and to see how the genre could evolve towards a more participatory exchange between the reader and the text. Blade Runner is at the same time a paradigm and a contradiction, as it draws on some of the more explicitly marked genre conventions and at the same time wants to go a "step beyond" towards narrative interactivity providing a "constantly changing plot" (from the game´s package). How does it try to achieve this? Does it succeed? Is this a revolution in storytelling?

Introduction

The digital medium has an increasing significance in the cultural panorama of the end of a millennium whose advances have been measured in terms of first written and then print documents. Computer games are a lively corner of the electronic arena, and both their economical success and the widening of their audience suggest that their influence will go beyond the mere entertainment role where some literati seem glad to cast them.

Adventure games form a genre of their own, and are direct descendants of the first text-based adventures that can be said to have inaugurated digital narrative. The puzzle solving and plot development were afterwards combined with the powerful visual element evolved from action games and others, first incorporating moving images and then videos and 3D landscapes to the story-driven games. These games present a new challenge to literary studies, as their acknowledged aim is to let the user "live" a story. She solves enigmas, participates in dialogues and makes the argument advance, so that the result is very similar to a traditional genre fiction (mystery, sci-fi or fantasy) story, where the user has played the main character. (Game developer Jane Jensen makes this explicit by writing books that follow her adventure games in the *Gabriel Knight* series word by word). But adventure games are not only narratives at the end, because the player is aware of the storytelling process unfolding before her all along. What kind of stories are these? What are their conventions? Are they really interactive?

This article takes one of such games, *Blade Runner*, to explore the relationship between adventure games and narrative, and to see how the genre could evolve towards a more participatory exchange between the reader and the text. *Blade Runner* is at the same time a paradigm and a contradiction, as it draws on some of the more explicitly marked genre conventions and at the same time wants to go a "step beyond" towards narrative interactivity providing a "constantly changing plot" (from the game´s package). How does it try to achieve this? Does it succeed? Is this a revolution in storytelling?

Games and narrative

Here, hauntingly familiar faces are joined by a rogue´s gallery of fresh characters and situations, as you try to pick your prey -the armed and dangerous Nexus-6 replicants- out of the swarming crowds. They could be anyone: the guy dishing out the noodles... last night´s warm body... hell, for all you know, you could even be a skin job yourself. In this world, the ground never stays still beneath your feet and the storyline changes with every move you make.

WESTWOOD´S *BLADE RUNNER* GAME OFFICIAL WEBSITE

"Games as Narrative" was the title of the third module of RE:PLAY, an online forum about electronic games held during July and August 1999 at http://www.eyebeam.org/replay/. I have substituted the conjunction to avoid the instant identification of the two concepts, an issue that generated endless discussion in the four modules of the forum. From those who thought that all games were somehow narratives to those who complained of the poor narrative component in the most successful games, all the developers, professors and experts could have been said to agree in a fundamental point: the digital medium is transforming our perception of narrative. MUDs and MOOs, hypertext, games and other hybrid electronic forms question notions like authorship, interactivity, genre, narrative and linearity; and their already massive presence in society makes them a cultural influence to take into account together with more established media like television, cinema or print fiction itself.

Games and stories are not the same thing, yet they have features in common. In his article "I Have No Words & I Must Design", game designer Greg Costikyan has given a very useful description of games, listing their characteristics and opposing them to other objects that are usually mistaken for games. According to him, games:

- are interactive (as opposed to puzzles, that are static)

- have goals (as opposed to toys, that don´t have any)

- are non-linear (as opposed to stories, that are linear)

- demand active participation (as opposed to traditional artforms, that play to a passive audience)

- force the player to make decisions according to relevant information

He therefore concludes that "a game is a form of art in which participants, termed players, make decisions in order to manage resources through game tokens in the pursuit of a goal." He gives various examples to illustrate his definition, and considers "other things that strengthen games", although they are not strictly necessary, like diplomacy, color, simulation, randomness, position identification, roleplaying, socializing and narrative tension.

I agree with Costikyan´s analysis, except for his too narrow conception of "story". After decades of literary avant-garde, reader response criticism, postmodern critical theory and even hypertext (as Costikyan himself acknowledges), it´s difficult to treat literary texts as well defined, self-contained finite objects that require a passive audience for their consumption, (although it´s obvious Costikyan does this for practical reasons). It´s true that hypertext is not completely interactive, (as the story doesn´t really respond to the reader´s actions, but merely allows her to traverse its text nodes following different paths), but neither is then a game like the aforementioned *Gabriel Knight I. Sins of the Fathers*. In this game, the player must

always solve certain puzzles and the action has only one possible outcome. *Gabriel Knight I* is an adventure game. I´ll examine this genre in the next section, but it already seems that these games are not like the others, in fact, following Costikyan´s definition, they wouldn´t be games at all since they have such a heavy narrative component.

For Janet Murray, games and stories are not necessarily opposed. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* she says: "A game is a kind of abstract storytelling that resembles the world of common experience but compresses it in order to heighten interest. Every game, electronic or otherwise, can be experienced as a symbolic drama" (Murray 142). According to her, we engage in meaningful dramas even when we play pure luck games, like lottery, or abstract games such as *Tetris*. Games and narratives also share a common early ground, since both spring from the idea of contest between oponents, or *agon* (Murray, 145). And as Murray and Costikyan both point out, the biggest objection to comparing games and narrative may be the difficulty of combining player agency with narrative coherence, (Murray 151, Costikyan). How can we let players choose paths and endings without compromising the "quality" of the resultant tale? Why are the "losing" endings of *Myst* more dramatically satisfying than the "winning" ending?

The RE:PLAY forum discussed this question at length. Chris Crawford rejects the belief that interactivity and narrative cannot be reconciled:

> The error here lies in identifying one particular plot with narrative in general. Yes, if Macbeth bumps off Lady Macbeth, then the result isn´t Shakespeare´s *Macbeth*, but does that mean that it´s ruined? There are countless variations on the basic storyline that remain true to the overall theme. This does not mean that we must permit dramatically destructive behavior on the part of the user. Giving him choices doesn´t require us to give him stupid or boring choices. We can still confine him to dramatically interesting options. (Crawford)

The important thing wouldn´t then be the concrete actions, but their relationship with a general theme or ethos. This takes a lot of work, and forces designers to think beyond mechanical puzzles or spectacular inmersive graphics, which seems to be all that the game industry means when they talk about interactivity.

This is not to say that all pleasure in games comes from narrative tension. There are many different kinds of pleasure, from the mastering of a joystick to the solving of complicated puzzles or the simple realization that your actions have some effect on the general development of the game. For a more detailed study on games from the psychological point of view (pleasure, learning, problem solving, etc), see Estallo, and about the socio-psychological signification of digital environments see Turkle.

I think narrative can help understand games in general, specially adventure games. This doesn´t mean that the old theoretical tools should be applied to the new object without a second thought, or that the two media should be compared to say "which one is best". To my mind , this is a completely useless approach that doesn´t broaden our understanding of games or narrative at all. We don´t yet have a critical language to speak about games, and many of the misunderstandings in the field arise from our lack of a common terminological starting point. This is where concepts like genre, plot or character can help, (although they are far from being dead subjects in literary studies), since they are clear enough to start the discussion. Of course we shall adapt them to our object and devise new terms for new issues.

Adventure Games

The term "adventure game" is applied to games where the user participates in an unfolding story, as opposed to action games (where the narrative content is minimal, like in a "shoot´em up"), simulation games (like a flight simulator) or even roleplaying games (like *Diablo*). Roleplaying games share a narrative interest with adventure games, but they concentrate more on the creation of a personalized character and the accumulation of points much in the way that the first *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop roleplaying game was played. Curiously, the last generation of tabletop roleplaying games, in the *Whitewolf* style, insist more on storytelling and less on dice rolling, so that in a way adventure games could be said to correspond to this interest.

The first adventure games (*Adventure*, *Zork*...) were textual, and the players typed orders that would then have consequences narrated by the program. They established the basis of puzzle solving and mysterious plot that characterizes the genre, and are still regarded by many fans as superior to their graphic followers.

Espen Aarseth complains of the utopian exaggerations of some critics when talking about textual adventure games, and of the neglect of others who have examined these games from a literary point of view, implicitly considering them inferior objects, (for example "forgetting" to mention *Adventure*, the first textual adventure game, and spreading the idea that the first was *Zork*). (Aarseth 106-107) Another common mistake is to apply reader response criticism directly to these games, concluding that the "user´s participation is a filling in of the gaps in the narrative provided by the text." But the difference is huge: "In the adventure game or determinate cybertext, far from moving toward a story by means of a plot with significant gaps, it is the plot that is narrowed down, by a designifying of the gaps." (Aarseth 110-112) If the player doesn´t understand what is going on, the plot won´t advance, because she won´t be able to figure out what to do next. Unlike in a novel,

the player here is *inside* the plot (although Aarseth wants to avoid the word "plot" for adventure games and proposes "intrigue" instead).

I have used "plot" in the title of this paper to make a connection with Peter Brooks well-known book, where he stresses the human need for plots as a logical instrument to understand our lives and to explain them through narrative. Literary speaking, "plot" is usually discarded as synonym of low entertainment; nevertheless people appreciate narrative in novels, cinema, television and other media. Plots are not only static organizing structures, "they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving" (Brooks 3-12).

The meaning of a plot constitutes itself through temporal succession. Brooks, following Todorov, thinks that this is specially evident in the detective novel, where the detective´s investigation reveals the story of a previous crime:

> The detective story, as a kind of dime-store modern version of "wisdom liter-ature", is useful in displaying the double logic most overtly, using the plot of the inquest to find, or construct, a story of the crime which will offer just those features necessary to the thematic coherence we call a solution, while claim-ing, of course, that the solution has been made necessary by the crime. (Brooks 29)

Of course, it is not the same to read about a detective´s work than to play the detective´s role, in a way *to be* the detective. Most adventure games cast the player in a detective´s role under various guises: the detective of *Deadline*, the mistery-writer "Shattenjäger" of the *Gabriel Knight* series, the curious traveller of *Myst*, the journalist of *The 11th Hour*... Something has happened (usually a crime, assault, disappearance or any mysterious deed the programmers can think of), and the player must investigate it in order to learn what. She must *look for a plot* behind the apparently meaningless terrible acts in order to reconstruct the story from clues that she finds at the crime scenes and the interviewing of the non-playing characters. The main character/player usually has a motivation: to find a lost girlfriend, to free somebody, to write a book, etc.

Games don´t give an ellaborated finished plot that we can read about, instead they force the player to get involved in the process of making meaning out of the elements the designers have laid out. We want to know who used voodoo rituals to kill people in *Gabriel Knight I* and why, or we want to find the hidden books and know why the brothers are imprisoned in *Myst*. Unlike in novels, where we want to know "what happened", in games we have to make things happen, to do something so that the plot advances. Of course we don´t only "play for the plot", and there are other elements that can interest us, like the exploration of engaging 3D worlds or the solving of the puzzles, but the narrative component is the strongest force of motivation in adventure games, I suggest. This is what makes them different from other games: they are a sort of hybrid between games and stories. Thinking of

Costikyan´s definition above, adventure games would be games whose goal is storytelling (and not winning or losing), even though some of these adventure games are quite linear: there is only one possible outcome of the story unless you die along the way. Blade Runner claims to be different in this respect, as we´ll see in the next section.

There is theoretically no fixed order as to interviewing characters, finding clues or solving puzzles, but only to a certain extent, because these games are usually divided into "chapters" (also called "acts" or "days"), so that the revelations can be carefully orchestrated to provide a certain dose of suspense even while allowing for some free movement within a "chapter". For example, the player doesn´t know that she should interview a certain suspect until she finds his name and address on the dead man´s notes; this way, the finding of the clue will always go before the interview, and so on.

Finally, another main feature of adventure games is probably their close relationship to the fantasy, mystery and science-fiction genres. The themes and ethos of this kind of stories are so well known that it is very easy for the players to inmediately understand the game-world and to feel at home in an environment they´ve just started exploring. For example, every player knows that she has to enter the haunted house where the evil doctor lives, interview every person in sight in a town where a crime has been committed or use the magic sword to attack the bloodthirsty orcs. Adventure games are not only intertextually related to literature, they also rely on the players´ knowledge of game mechanics, so that hardly any player needs to be told anymore that she has to pick up every visible object or click on the non-playing characters until they start to repeat their sentences. This means that adventure games are quite an established genre, and that they are theoretically appealing to the wide genre fiction audience. Nevertheless they seem to remain the less economically profitable of computer games.

If textual adventure games were quite popular in the early eighties, visual and action games seemed to have pushed them out of the market until the enormous success of *Myst*. *Myst* allowed players to get immersed in an incredibly compelling world where they didn´t have to kill anybody or search for objects to complete an inventory. Exploration was the important thing in a game with amazing graphics and a thin but attractive plot about a magician´s family and their fantastic creations. (About *Myst* and digital space in relationship to computer games, please see Karin Wenz's "Narrativität in Computerspielen"). The imprisoned magicians ask the player to look for the books (=keys) that will take them out of the magic dungeons they have been confined to. To find the books, the player must explore different depopulated worlds and solve intriguing puzzles. After *Myst*, no other adventure game has sold very much, and that has made producers wary of investing too much resources in this genre.

The problems of the genre were discussed in the RE:PLAY forum, where the experts couldn´t agree on the reasons why "adventure games (are) doing so poorly". Bernie Yee suggested that people don´t want to spend a lot of money (typically $30-80) "on a game they can only play once." Others like Christophe Berg, Greg Costikyan and Tomas Clark think that the problem with adventure games are the useless puzzles that don´t have anything to do with the story and whose solutions are always complicated and idiotic.[1] People get tired of having to look up on the Internet or to buy cheat books looking for solutions to the puzzles, and they lose all interest in the unfolding story. It is also clear that puzzles have become the distinctive feature of adventure games, so how to replace them? As Costikyan said:

> Puzzles are where interaction in adventure games occurs. Everything else is just going down characters´ conversation trees and navigating a 3D space. If you take the puzzles out of *Grim Fandango*, for instance, you´re left with good dialog and cute visuals, but you´ve also got a product that will take you a mere couple of hours to play, and won´t provide a sense that you´ve actually contributed anything to Manny Calavera´s ultimate triumph. (See note 1)

Puzzle solving makes players feel they are contributing to the story, but nobody is certainly going to play a game twice in order to solve the same puzzles again. What would happen if we got rid of the puzzles in adventure games? Blade Runner does.

Blade Runner

Blade Runner is an interesting example of a story that has migrated from one medium to another without losing its internal coherence, even though the particulars may differ greatly in each case. The original Philip K. Dick´s 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* was turned into a film and released in 1982 with the name *Blade Runner*, and the film was turned into a game in 1997. The film is faithful to the novel in its deepest meaning; both question what it means to be human, as Scott Bukatman analyses:

> Philip Dick gives us two oppositions: Human/Android and Human/Inhuman. The first is ultimately unimportant, while the second is urgent. The division between human and android raises a central philosophical question: how do you *know* you´re human? The second opposition leads to a moral problem: what does it *mean* to be human? (...) *Blade Runner* performs an ingenious variation on the definitions of humanity that dominated science fiction film in the 50s: (...) humans simply have feelings while non-humans simply do not. *Blade Runner* denaturalises that division and subtly inverts it: *what has feel-*

> *ings is human*. Thus the film is as much about Deckards recovery of empathic response as it is about Batty´s development of such a response. (Bukatman 68-70)

Apart from the setting and many scenes directly inspired on the novel and the film, the game also shares this deep meaning with them, and the non-playing characters often ask the protagonist/player: how do you know you´re human?

> "You are Blade Runner Ray McCoy, engaged in an adventure uniquely your own. But what you don´t know each time you play is whether you -or anyone else- is human or replicant." (Westwood´s *Blade Runner* official website)

The game recreates the film settings so faithfully that all fans will be thrilled when they see the opening screen with the ficticious Los Angeles of 2019 and its immense towers with the fires burning against a very dark orange sky. This opening scene (and many others) are exact reproductions of those in the film, and the player even has the chance to talk to characters from the film (like Leon, Doctor Tyrell, Rachael or J.F. Sebastian). McCoy never crosses paths with Rick Deckard (the Blade Runner played by Harrison Ford in the film), but there are constant references to him that give the player the feeling that the game´s events happen at the same time as the film´s. The game has also borrowed a couple of scenes from Dick´s book, like the one where false policemen interrogate the player and suggest that McCoy may be a replicant, or the *kipple* idea, this term referring to a tremendous accumulation of trash in the city´s outskirts. The cutscenes are also quite sophisticated, and although they show the player who committed the crimes, she must still find out why. All this makes the game a remarkable immersive experience (aided by Vangelis´ powerful soundtrack), and as the player "sits" in her *spinner* with the control panel and the map of the city before her, she feels that she is a part of that world.

As a rookie Blade Runner, the player doesn´t have a lot of experience in the "retirement" business, and when the game starts she is assigned a case because nobody else seems to be available at the moment. It´s animal murder, a terrible crime in a time when the few living animals are dying out due to pollution. Sergeant Guzza thinks it might be related to escaped replicants, who else could commit such a heartless crime?

The game fits into the "detective story" schema we have discussed above. The player can use a "personal computer" to keep track of her findings, (where all the information about suspects, crime scenes and clues will be stored), and also has access to the main computer in the Police Station, where she can learn what the other Blade Runners have found (although this feature is not very helpful after the first crime scene). She also has an Esper device to analyse bidimensional photographs nearly turning them into tridimensional spaces, and a Voigt-Kampff test machine to measure emotional response during interviews in order to find out

if somebody is a replicant. The characters are "round" in a literary sense; they have their own agendas and the dialogue is witty and well acted out.

After the introductory scene the player goes to the first crime-scene -a pet shop-interviews the only witness and clicks around for all objects that make the cursor change color (the interface is simple: the cursor changes color every time there is an object or person with whom the player can interact, the rest of the screen is dead background and the player cannot use objects once she has them, they are only data). The new information directs the player to another location, where she must interview more people, pick up more things, explore the photographs with the Esper, maybe get to do a couple of Voigt-Kampff tests and so on.

This detective´s work is quite linear in the sense that most of the discoveries must happen so that the story advances. The player doesn´t have to do much with the information she gets by clicking around in every "green" point, because Ray McCoy uses it automatically (for example showing a photo to a suspect) when the program thinks it´s necessary and not when the player decides.

The dialogue with the non-playing characters is also quite rigid, as it merely consists of choosing the order of the same conversation topics until they are finished, and the player doesn´t even know what McCoy is actually going to say about the topic she´s choosing. And this only in the "user´s choice" mode, because there are four other modes where the player just listens to the dialogues without the chance of influencing them. These four modes are polite (Mc Coy will warn replicants without killing anybody), surly (he´ll Voigt-Kampff-test everybody), normal (sometimes Voigt-Kampff, sometimes not) or erratic (random), but they are not very advisable if the player wants to have the sensation of being doing something.

Apart from a couple of little puzzles (like when McCoy must think of a plan to get past a bouncer in a discotheque), the game has no traditional puzzles in the adventure games´ style : there is no chance to use objects on objects, to activate devices or to solve mechanical problems, and this is the main reason why many fans think that the game has failed as such and is only a beautiful piece of graphic art (with the exception of the excessively pixelated characters everybody complains about).[2]

But even without the puzzles, I think the game provides enough agency in Janet Murray´s sense. For her, agency is "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 126), and she prefers this term to the often confusing one of "interactivity". Agency is not only action, Murray gives the example of a tabletop game of roulette where players are constantly doing things: operating wheels, exchanging money and choosing numbers, but as the results of their actions are governed by luck alone, there is no agency. In *Blade Runner*, the detective´s gadgets help to the immersive experience by carefully reproducing those in the film, and their use is also embedded in the narrative so that

the player gets a satisfying sense of agency. The Esper machine (in the film it´s also a screen) tests the player´s patience by making her look for hidden information that will later prove relevant to the case, and even though the Voigt-Kampff test machine is not very interactive (it lets the player choose the "emotional intensity" of the question, but not the text), the decision of subjecting somebody to the test has meaningful consequences: the suspect may get angry with McCoy, run away, or attack him. Even the action game feature of the target practice exercises, where McCoy tests his reflexes shooting moving armed dummies and sparing those who carry babies, has later effects, because McCoy´s score will determine how good he is with his weapon and how easy it will be for him to shoot his enemies afterwards.

If *Blade Runner* was only this, it wouldn´t be very different from the other adventure games, because all try to integrate action and story to more or less successfully provide satisfying agency. *Blade Runner*´s most powerful sense of agency comes from the narrative decisions that the player must take at key moments.

Both the film and the game are based on a solid *Film Noir* background where there is no simple maniqueism of "goodies" and "baddies", and the protagonist detective is usually assaulted by moral doubts about his job and his beliefs. In *Blade Runner*, first Rick Deckard and in the game Ray McCoy must question their own identities searching for answers, and what starts with a "do I have the right to kill them? They only want to live...", ends up as "am I worse than them? How do I know I´m human?" As any "shoot´em up", the game starts with the assignment of "retiring" escaped replicants, but unlike in these narratively simple games, the player has the choice of hunting them, letting them scape or even helping them. There is no "right" thing to do to win the game, the final decision about what is best is left to the player. Indeed, the player´s decisions affect not only the behaviour of the non-playing characters towards McCoy, but also bring about different endings to the game.

This is a huge narrative leap in adventure games, for even if the decision points are not many, they are so significant to the ethos of the story that it truly feels as multi-linear, something that literary hypertext hasn´t yet achieved despite some critics claims. Marie-Laure Ryan addresses this problem in her article "Immersion and Interactivity in Hypertext", and relates hypertext and games in a very interesting interview also in *Dichtung Digital* (see references).

It is not the first time that an adventure game has different endings, *Myst* for example did it before, but while related to the game and what the player has seen about each of the brothers, *Myst*´s endings are too centered on winning or losing, so that there are two "bad" endings and a "good" one. *Blade Runner*´s endings have no winning/losing implication, but rather a moral one: you may escape with one (or some) of your replicant friends if you have helped them or if you believe you are a replicant yourself, or you may have killed them all and walk back to the city with Gaff or Crystal (other Blade Runners), or you may have killed Crystal as well and find

yourself alone. There are many permutations under the two main themes: replicant-friend or replicant-enemy, and they are a consequence of the player´s actions during the game. There are some endings in which McCoy escapes with his "chosen girl": Lucy, a fourteen year-old lolita; Dektora, a beautiful dancer and Clovis´s (the replicant leader) ex-lover; or, in the case of being a replicant-enemy, Crystal Steele, the cold and efficient feminine Blade Runner. The dialogue amusingly plays with the sexual attraction between McCoy and any of the three women throughout the game, a clear proof that it is oriented to masculine players. And while women-players may enjoy stepping into a masculine role for a while, they are really excluded from this part of the story, as there is no possibility of playing as a woman Blade Runner and "living a romance" with Clovis or another masculine character. This is not a flippant complaint; sexual attraction between the Blade Runner and the replicants is a very important issue in the book and the film, because it arises deep doubts about one´s feelings and identity. In the game, women and homosexual players can´t get involved in this sense unless they really turn into McCoy for some hours. There is nothing wrong with roleplaying, but it is always women who must play the transvestite using masculine characters and not the other way round.

All endings try to reach a satisfactory narrative climax "closing" the story in a Hollywood style. For example, when McCoy escapes in the moon bus with the replicants, his chosen girlfriend (Lucy/Dektora) speaks the last sentence: "And this time our memories will be our own" [3], a reference to the implanted memories that all replicants have; Gaff sees the moon bus fly away and leaves a little origami tiger on the floor (in allusion to the Blake poems that Clovis quotes through the game). In fact, in every ending where McCoy has killed all the replicants except for Clovis and steps into the moon bus, Clovis lies in a bed and dies while reading a poem aloud in an allegory of loss and sadness, then McCoy gets out and talks to Gaff, who says a line from the film: "You´ve done a man´s job, sir!", and lets McCoy pondering about his own humanity after he has given him an origami dog that reminds him of his pet Maggie. In the endings where McCoy escapes in a car with either Lucy or Dektora, they don´t know how much time they have left (if McCoy hasn´t found the ADN information in Tyrell´s laboratory) but they will "live each day as if it was a whole life"; then we can see a dead Clovis in the moon bus and an origami tiger on the floor.

None of the endings is so open and disquieting as the director´s cut film ending with Deckard (Harrison Ford) and Rachael (Sean Young) in the elevator and the doors slamming shut with an ominous noise. The disastrous sneak previews forced Ridley Scott to shoot another ending in which both characters can be seen escaping in a car through a beautiful forest landscape. This "happy ending" is the one that was released in 1982, and it was substituted by the original one in the 1992 *Director´s cut*. (See Sammon for a story of the film´s making). If the 1982 film audience wasn´t ready for such a pessimistic and uncertain ending, the game audience of the 90s certainly isn´t more prepared for experimentation in a medium that is not yet as ripe

as cinema. But this is just as well for the moment, as the game´s endings are not simple or childlike, and the player´s sense of completion depends greatly on the coherence of her actions during the game and their final consequences that she sees reflected on the ending.

Is McCoy a replicant? Scott Bukatman jokingly remarks that the question whether Deckard is a replicant has "generated more discussion on the Internet than the existence of God" (Bukatman 80). For him, the ambiguity is crucial, the question being more important than the answer, and he thinks that the film has a double reading so that the definition of what it means to be human stays open for the viewer to solve (Bukatman 80-83). The game also leaves the question open; there are some hints that suggest that McCoy might be a replicant, like the conversation with Sadik and Clovis where they call him "brother", the moon bus photo where McCoy appears behind Clovis, the encounter with the "false policemen", etc. But none of these hints is definitive, and it is in fact the player herself who decides about her status: helping the replicants will sometimes mean that you are one of them (other times you are just a replicant sympathizer), and killing them will make you the toughest Blade Runner in town despite Gaff´s dog origami.

If a computer game´s ultimate question is: "am I human?", something has changed from the times when the question was "how many points can I get killing them?" There are other adult themes in the game: the extinction of animal species, the emotional interaction with the dog, the emphaty of the replicants for one another and their sense of being a "family", the amorality of some technological advances, political corruption, paranoia, the possible sexual abuse of young Lucy by Runciter and Early Q. or the disturbing love affair of McCoy himself with 14 year old Lucy...

Westwood´s advertisement had insisted on the game being the first "real time adventure game" and had talked about its "constantly changing plot" that make it "interactive storytelling", and many players were disappointed when they found the game was something else (see note 2). Both claims are exaggerations, specially the first, as time has no impact whatsoever in the way the story unfolds; it doesn´t matter if it takes the player ten minutes or three hours to find Lucy´s photo in the first crime-scene so that she can proceed to the next scenario, nothing will happen until she does. The "constantly changing plot" refers to a few random options in the game, for example who out of six of the non-playing characters will turn out to be a replicant, or if the player will find a box full of scorpions in a shop. This certainly introduces changes, but it wouldn´t be enough to ensure a replayability value if the player´s decisions on whom to kill and whom to help weren´t as important as I have explained above.

It is true that it is is the first adventure game worth playing more than once, but this game is no revolution. Westwood is in the right direction with the multiple meaningful endings and the concentration on the deep ethos of the story, but from

that to "interactive storytelling" there is a long way to go. The plot has some inconsistencies, no doubt due to the openness of the story to allow for different combinations, and the linearity of the dialogues is quite frustrating when the decision points have achieved such satisfying agency.

The important thing is that *Blade Runner* is a first step in the development of adventure games towards adult themes and real agency. Both are possible with today´s technical means, the usual alibi when adventure games are too linear or boring. *Blade Runner* shows that managing plot branching is not only possible, it also provides a more gratifying involvement in the story than spectacular graphics or complicated puzzles.

The challenge of this genre will be to overcome the linearity of the interaction between playing and non-playing characters, and towards this aim strive the experiments with artificial intelligence that are being carried out in universities and gaming companies. This seems to me the real participatory narrative of the future. In the twenty-first century, we won´t only want to be told stories, we´ll want to live them.

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Notes

1. Christophe Berg, Greg Costikyan and Tomas Clark gave their opinions on the subject "Adventure Games" responding to Bernie Yee´s question (or mail message that started the discussion) and whose reference can be found under "Yee" in the bibliography.

2. I read many reviews by critics and players alike, some of these sites (accessed in August 1999) are:

   Games Domain http://www.gamesdomain.com/gdreview/gdr.cgi?zones/reviews/pc/jan98/brunner.html),

   GameCenter (http://www.gamecenter.com/Reviews/Item/0,6,1295,00.html),

   Electric Games (http://www.electricgames.com/reviews/bladerunner.html),

Gameslice (http://www.gameslice.com/review/blade/blade.html),

Mecca World (http://meccaworld.com/gamesdb/b/blade_runner/),

GamePower (http://www.gamepower.com/games/html/1619main.html), and

Gamespot (http://www.gamespot.com/adventure/bladerun/index.html).

3. I translated the quotes from the game into English from the Spanish version, they might differ a little with the exact American quotes.