

# Playing with Film Language

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## Introduction

Computer graphics are evolving at a rapid pace. The original Playstation came out in 1995 and could render 300,000 polygons per second. The Playstation 2, due out in 2000, can render 16 million polygons per second - over 50 times more (Sheff 1999: 273). This is already near photorealistic quality, but it is important to see that it is only part of a continuing trend - if this rate of development continues (as seems likely) the Playstation 3 will render a staggering 800 million polygons per second. Videogames will shortly be photorealistic - that is to say that they will be indistinguishable from film. As Ken Kutaragi, designer of the Playstation 1 and 2, says (with characteristic understatement): “*We can create digital content that is like a movie, but is really a game .... I think that people will be impressed.*”

Film has, over the years, developed a highly sophisticated language aimed at telling stories in as clear and effective a way as possible - techniques such as camera placement, shot framing and editing have established conventions well understood by the audience. Thus, a shot looking down on a character signifies weakness, or a certain sequence of shots will show that one character is remembering their past, and so on.

As videogames have become more sophisticated, they have been able to borrow from this language and these conventions; games designers are using the computer screen not to provide a static view of essentially abstract action (as in games such as *Space Invaders* or *Tetris*), but rather as the view through a ‘virtual camera’ which they can move around to follow the action.

This paper analyses the *mise-en-scene* of videogames in the context of film theory and practice, concentrating in particular on the use of viewpoint in videogames. It forms part of an ongoing project (see Mitchell 1996; Clarke 1997; Mitchell & Clarke 2000). This project is born out of two beliefs. Firstly, we believe that the lack of a critical framework in which to analyse and discuss videogames - and interactive media in general - is an increasingly serious problem. Secondly, we believe that film theory offers a useful basis for looking critically at videogames.

We feel justified in making this second assertion because of the clear formal similarities that exist between film and videogames - the same similarities that have lead videogames to appropriate the techniques of film. They are both screen-based narrative media. They are both time-based media. They both tell their stories primarily through images, rather than through narration and dialogue. These factors make the use of film theory more appropriate than, for example, Brenda Laurel’s use of drama theory (in Laurel 1993).

We have concentrated on viewpoint for a number of reasons. It is an area in which there is a clear similarity with film and a clear crossover with film theory. Viewpoint also

provides the player's view of the action or the world, and therefore has important implications for the player's identification with their character in the game; again, this has a clear parallel in film, where a shot from the point-of-view of a character has a different meaning - and hence a different effect on the viewer - than, for example, a close up of that character.

Identification is important in videogames because it is a key component in the suspension of disbelief, which is necessary in order for the player to 'enter' the world of the game. Yet the player's relationship to their character in a game is different to the spectator's relationship to the protagonists in a film - this is why we cannot simply say that "games are like films", "games will become like films", or "games must be like films".

In film, identification is fluid. A film consists of a variety of shots - wide shots, close-ups, POV (point-of-view) shots, etc. - edited together, each with their own effect on the viewer; one shot on its own is not enough to tell the story, and even if a film is comprised of a single shot, the camera and the characters move, giving the effect of close-ups, wide shots, etc. Because of the changing viewpoint, the viewer's identification with - and sympathies for - the characters in the film will change though the course of the film, or even within a scene or a shot. This is aside from any change in identification which occurs through the course of the film as a whole as a result of the narrative. Furthermore, as theorists such as Laura Mulvey have described, the viewer's relationship to the characters is also in flux at a deeper level, being driven by conflicting desires and identifications (scopophilic, narcissistic, etc.).

In videogames, identification appears, at first, to be more straightforward: the player typically has one character throughout and sees this character from only one viewpoint. Yet in spite of this apparent simplicity and straightforwardness, the relationship between the player and their character within the game is highly problematic, being both more complex and more fluid than that in film.

It is more complex because there is the element of interaction. The fact that the player controls the actions of the protagonist raises questions with regard to 'identification with' and 'responsibility for' the protagonist, as well as the matter of empathetic relationships - 'caring about' the protagonist. The player is 'outside' of the world of the game, watching the character in the game, but they are also controlling the actions of that character, adopting their goals, fears, strengths and weaknesses, and accepting the conventions of their world: in a very real sense, the player must 'be' the character and be 'in' the game.

Yet while the player's direct control of their character enhances their identification with it, there are other aspects of games which detract from this identification by fragmenting the continuity of the action and/or the continuity of the player's experience. During the course of the game, the player's character repeatedly 'dies' and is 'reborn'; the game can also be saved, left, and restarted, or replayed (either in whole or in part). The game is not a continuous, linear, experience for the player, nor does it present a continuous, linear, narrative.

## Viewpoint

We will look at three of the most used viewpoints in videogames and consider their implications for player identification and narrative. These are not the only viewpoints used in videogames, but they are the most common. Furthermore, we can regard these as the fundamental ones, and others as being just variations on these. The side-on scrolling view used in games such as *Super Mario World* can, for example, be regarded as just a variation on the third person tracking viewpoint discussed here.

### 1. First Person Viewpoint

Games such as *Doom*, *Quake* (and their clones) and *Myst* adopt a first person viewpoint - that is to say the player sees the action through the 'eyes' of their character. This constant first person perspective has precursors in film, most famously *The Lady in the Lake*, made in 1946 by Robert Montgomery. Shorter point of view shots are also used in every film. It is easy to achieve a sense of presence (i.e. a sense of 'being there') with a first person view - this is why it is used in film. The offscreen protagonist is a void, and it is easy for the player to put themselves in its place; it also causes no problems when there is a mis-match between the player's gender and that of the character.

The disadvantages of this viewpoint for games are obvious to anyone who has seen the film, *The Lady in the Lake*. As you can only see what is in front of you, it is difficult to generate and build suspense, or even just to tell the story. A film generates suspense by showing the viewer something that the protagonist can't (e.g. an ambush ahead); it also prioritises objects and actions significant to the story by showing them in close-up. Both of these techniques are impossible when the only view of the action is through the eyes of the character (as in games such as *Quake*). This viewpoint also places severe limitations on the type of interaction that can take place without interrupting the gameplay with menus, inventory lists, selection screens, etc.

### 2. Third Person Viewpoint - tracking camera

Games such as *Tomb Raider* and its clones use a viewpoint which we refer to as 'the third person perspective, tracking camera' - that is to say a camera continually following the player's character. There are film precursors for this type of shot as well. The over-the-shoulder-shot is an essential part of film language, and is rightly used in every film. There have also been attempts to shoot a film almost entirely with just a following camera, such as Samuel Beckett's *Film*, made in 1965.

The advantage of this viewpoint over the previous (first person) viewpoint is that the camera can be used in a more expressive way - it can start to 'tell the story' through movement and the moves can be used to enhance visceral effect. The wider view also means that certain actions (such as jumping over obstacles) are easier than with the limited view provided by the first person viewpoint.

Its disadvantages are that the player has less sense of 'being there'. On one hand, they are no longer placed in the position of their character, seeing the action through their eyes. Yet on the other, the player only sees their character from behind and this makes it impossible for them to identify with the character *as a character* (in the sense that we

identify with a character in a film not only through looking through their eyes, but also through seeing their reactions).

### **3. Third Person Viewpoint - Static Camera**

The third viewpoint is a third person view, but with a static camera. It is relatively uncommon in games, but is used in the *Resident Evil* series, as well as in the *Clocktower* series.

This perspective is interesting from the point of view of film theory in that it uses edits. There is no need for continuity of viewpoint or action, and so the games designer can start to tell the story through how they position the camera. The editing also allows them to integrate expositional material (such as video, etc.) into the game more easily, and so drive the narrative forward.

This viewpoint results in something that is very much like watching a film, and the player has a very strong sense of watching a character in a narrative as well as controlling that character. The disadvantages of this technique are, like the other third person viewpoint, that it creates distance - there will always be a weaker sense of 'being there' with this technique.

We can see a trend here in that the first person perspective offers the strongest sense of identification, and that this sense of 'I am the character' gets progressively weaker in the other two viewpoints. The effect of the tracking third person perspective is more one of 'I control the character', while that of the static - edited - viewpoint is 'I am watching a character'. There is of course, some overlap between these descriptions - for example, the player with the static view still has some sense of controlling and being the character - but nevertheless we believe that the distinctions outlined above still remain valid.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Summary: Identification**

- First Person
  - Strong identification: 'I am the character'
- Third Person, Tracking
  - Weaker identification: 'I control the character'
- Third Person, Static
  - Weakest identification: 'I am watching the character'

We can also see a second - opposing - trend in these various viewpoints, to do with narrative. The player in the first person perspective has little sense of being part of a narrative - because of their viewpoint, their experience of the game is one of exploring. There are two likely causes for this. The first is that because the player is at 'ground level', it is difficult for them to see the 'big picture' (i.e. the over-arching narrative). The second cause, as we pointed out, is that it is difficult for the designer of the videogame to tell a narrative - by prioritising objects and actions, generating suspense, etc. - with this viewpoint. The static viewpoint provides a stronger sense of narrative. One of the main reasons for this is that the editing is film-like, with establishing shots, cuts and close-ups,

etc. and allows other storytelling elements, such as video and text, to be more easily integrated into the game.

### **Summary: Implications for Narrative**

- First Person
  - Little sense of narrative:  
'I explore the world (and kill everything)'
- Third Person, Tracking
  - Stronger sense of narrative:  
'I control a character in a world'
- Third Person, Static
  - Strongest sense of narrative:  
'I control a character in a narrative'

In games, identification and narrative are in opposition: the stronger the identification, the weaker the narrative (and vice versa). This contrasts with film, where characters *are* narrative - that is to say, the narrative comes from the conflict between characters or is expressed through the personal development of the characters (ideally with the development of the characters paralleling the development of the narrative).

It may appear, therefore, that the first person perspective is the best for games, but this is not the case. It is true to say that the first person perspective is strongest for games, in that it provides the most easy and complete player identification and the greatest sense of immersion, but as we have pointed out, it has serious problems with regard to both the type of interaction that is possible to the player and the narrative that the designer can impose on the game.

As a result, the first person perspective is only good for the *Doom*-type games, where it is 'just wander around and kill everything that you see' or virtual reality, where it is 'just wander around'. Whilst there is a very strong visceral thrill attached to first person perspective, there are also severe limitations on the type of gameplay that can be had, and these shortcomings will become more apparent as games become more complex and sophisticated.

It is important to realise that the photorealistic games of the future will not be the same games that we have now, only with better graphics. Photorealism allows for more realistic characters and non-player characters, with more detail of expression and greater ability to convey emotion, but the things that we go to the cinema for - being involved with the narrative, being moved by the characters, etc. - are not the result of a threshold of realism having been reached (after all, black-and-white movie and cartoons also have the ability to move us). In stead, they are a result of how the stories are presented.

As videogames become more photorealistic, they will inevitably become more cinematic in their techniques. Yet as we have said before, photorealistic games will not be movies and will not replace movies. In stead, we will see the emergence of something in between, something which draws on the strengths and conventions of both media.

Although there may occasionally be cutaway “inserts” in games such as *Tomb Raider*, the tracking viewpoint that they adopt presents continuous action in a continuous shot. It is, to quote David Mamet on directing, “following the actors around” (Mamet 1992:3). So what is the effect of the sustained use of this angle in film, and what can we learn about this for games?

The sustained tracking shot has two main effects beyond its ability to provide temporal and spatial continuity. The first is that it can be used to represent a ‘watcher’ in the narrative (this use is common in horror movies). The second is that it draws attention to itself, often self-consciously, through its length.

These two points are related. The first deals with a spectator in the narrative and makes the spectator of the film aware of their voyeurism. The second draws attention to the viewing camera - and by implication to the process of filmmaking - and this too makes the spectator of the film conscious of their role.

These observations are supported by Beckett’s comments on his movie *Film*. He has said that in his script for *Film*, he split the character into two: The character (Buster Keaton) is ‘O’ (for ‘object’) and the camera is ‘E’ (for ‘camera eye’). The camera ‘E’ only sees ‘O’ from behind. Straying more than 45 degrees from directly behind will, he says, cause ‘O’ to experience the “anguish of perceivedness”.

There are clear parallels here with the way in which the ‘camera’ is used in games such as *Tomb Raider*. Here it also obeys strict rules about how far it strays from directly behind. We can therefore ask whether same relationship is set up in the game as in the film. Does the games designer (either knowingly or instinctively) not want the player to experience the “anguish of perceivedness”? Does the player think that ‘I am that character’, but not want to be seen in that role?

## Conclusions

We can draw the following conclusions from our analysis of viewpoint:

### **1. It is necessary to be ‘out of your body’ to have a story told.**

Because of the opposition between narrative and character identification that we saw in our analysis of the three perspectives commonly used in videogames - and the constraints that each of these viewpoints impose on the games designer - we believe that it is necessary for the player to be partially detached from the character of the game in order for storytelling to work. That is to say that games need some third person perspective.

### **2. The character must be a ‘void’.**

The third person perspective offers an on-screen protagonist as the target for narcissistic identification. Games must present an onscreen character for identification, yet this character must not be too ‘autonomous’ or filled out, otherwise the player cannot say “I am that character” - it must be left partly as a ‘void’ or an ‘enigma’ to allow the player to put themselves in this place.

### **3. The character must be separate from the player.**

The character is viewable and (psychically) separate to the player. This means, for example, that the player can control a character of the opposite gender without having to 'be' that character. The game should not draw attention to the player (e.g. by addressing them directly) or make them aware that they are playing a role.

On the basis of these observations and conclusions, we can begin to see how games are likely to develop with regard to viewpoint. Our predictions are that games will adopt a combination of all viewpoints edited together. They will use the tracking camera and first person perspective for the increased sense of player identification that they have, and for the visceral thrill that the camera movement can provide. Yet they will also use cuts, close ups and inserts to tell their narrative and to break the continuity of time and space. These edits and close-ups will be rendered live, rather than being partially pre-rendered as in *Resident Evil*.

With live rendering the camera can be anywhere at any time. The single viewpoint of a game like *Tomb Raider* is therefore only a convention, and it seems curious that in spite of their use of film techniques and film language, games have not yet discovered the close-up. We believe, however, that it will not be long before the advances in games technology force designers to become more sophisticated in their use of visual language.

### **Works Cited:**

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#### <sup>1</sup> **Note:**

We have looked in greater detail at the relationship between viewpoint, identification and narrative in our paper *Screen Play: Film and the Future of Interactive Entertainment* for the Digital Content Creation conference, to be held at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford, UK. in April 2000. There we make the necessary distinction between immersion and identification, and describe a triangular relationship between immersion, empathy and narrative, rather than the linear relationship here between identification and narrative.