

## Playing Producer: An alternative perspective on video games as film

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### Abstract

This paper proposes a perspective on analyzing video games as film by comparing the interactions of the player with those of a producer or other member in the film-making process. This contrasts with existing methodologies which focus on formal characteristics or narratology. This proposal also provides a method for combining the interactivity of games with the storytelling capacity of cinema without encountering the narrative paradox.

### Keywords

cinema; interaction; production; interactive movies; narratology; narrative paradox

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## Introduction

On the screen, a small village in a verdant, mountainous landscape appears, smoke rising ominously from its core. The scene changes abruptly. Battle and chaos reign in the village. Up close, a warrior with long braids and thick armor plunges her sword into the chest of a charging monster just before receiving a blow to the head. There is a pause in the action. It replays again but this time the frame has expanded, the lighting of the scene has darkened, and the character is a male figure in robes... This scenario could be action from a video game or a moment in a film editing process, or perhaps even both.

Given film's similarities to games, it has been a useful and popular lens for developing and analyzing video games as an audiovisual medium. However, studies considering the two tend to focus on either formal or narrative aspects; how games borrow from or incorporate film techniques or how games can be films with alterable storylines. A marked difference between the two media is the interaction that games embody and films lack, particularly with regards to narrative progression. Yet, a contradiction and limitation lies in attempting to reconcile the agency and interaction inherent to games with narrative in film. This emphasis on narrative, however, is on spectating, a passive way of interacting with the medium. Participants witness but have no effect on what happens before them on-screen. However, the making of film is an equally vital aspect in the medium that involves active roles and decision making. This involvement broadens ways of understanding conceptions of cinematic video games and incorporating the interactivity of games with film.

Considering *Dragon Age: Origins* as an example, this paper proposes a way of understanding games through film that acknowledges agency in both game playing and film making. *Dragon Age: Origins* is the first of a series of third-person fantasy role-playing games developed by BioWare in 2009. The game was well received and noted for its traditional but original fantasy world Ferelden, and thorough range of characters, lore, and narrative choice. The game also has distinctive elements and mechanics through which players can make influential decisions independent of the storyline. Films consist not only of stories and the audiences who consume them, but also of creators; directors, producers, designers, actors, technicians, and more. While players typically act as either viewers of or characters in the narrative, games can also give them the opportunity to act as cinematic producers of the narrative.

## Games as Film – Classic Mode

Comparisons between video games and film abound as both media are formally similar. They create experiences through sight and sound, and the latter has influenced the development of the former in both practice and

scholarship. "Formal characteristics... in which sounds and images are organized on the screen... include the use of point-of-view structures, the framing of onscreen action, visual motifs and styles and the use of sound effects and music" (King & Kryzwinska, 2006, p.112). Games adopt these formal techniques or even incorporate cinema directly, in the form of cut-scenes. Interspersed throughout gameplay, these are portions of pre-rendered content that "follow the framing and editing conventions of mainstream film" and that players digest as if watching a film. (King & Kryzwinska, 2006, p.115). These cinematic snippets often deliver major plot points and character development as well as notable graphics and effects that are unfeasible during live gameplay.

Games which have a fixed narrative can similarly be considered cinematic (Veale, 2012). Cinema is noted for "the audience's lack of ability to alter events unfolding within the film's diegesis," or the way the plot develops in the story (King & Kryzwinska, 2006, p.122). Narrative games have also followed movies regarding content, adopting genres such as horror and fantasy. Many movie franchises such as *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) include video game adaptations; digital versions that inject gameplay into the film and allow players to embody the main character.

*Dragon Age: Origins* (hereafter *Origins*) can be considered a conventional cinematic game according to these characteristics. It draws heavily from the fantasy genre that the likes of *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954), *A Game of Thrones* (Martin, 1996), and *Eragon* (Paolini, 2003) inhabit, successfully creating the traditional but original world of Ferelden. Rich with cut scenes and orthodox cinematography, *Origins* embraces the field of film. Its cut scenes range from a few seconds to entire short films and are key to the progression of *Origin's* story, presenting major plot progressions such as the player's induction as a Grey Warden or Loghain's hand in the death of King Cailan. The cinematic clips here are not supplementary to the gameplay; they are where the action and narrative of the game happen.

Additionally, *Origin's* overarching plot is fixed - the player's character becomes a Grey Warden charged with gathering an army and defeating the darkspawn and the Archdemon. Despite the choice offered in the game, major narrative events occur regardless of the player's decisions, and, like film, aspects of the medium proceed with or without player input. During gameplay, members of the party hold side conversations with each other even if the player does not initiate any dialogue. While the gameplay of *Origins* does not grant players the ability to set or alter the narrative, elements of its game mechanics do give players the power to determine the attributes of the narrative. It is able to incorporate player agency through filmmaking processes, such as determining framing or character development.

## Incorporating Interactivity

The most acknowledged difference between video games and cinema is that games demand interaction and active participation. Films progress without audience input while games allow and need their audience to contribute, act, or react; "the player takes part in the act of embodiment" (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p.127). Interest in bridging this gap, "of bringing together the pleasures of stories and 'interactivity'" has produced the genre of interactive movies or varieties thereof (Frasca, 2003, p.228). Bryan Lowell's developing interactive drama aims to "[combine] the high interactivity and immersion of many computer games with the strong story and characters of traditional linear stories" and "no other multimedia product came closer to crossing the threshold that separates the world of film and video games" than interactive movies which can be traced back to the nineteen seventies and proliferated into the nineties (Loyall, 2004, p.2; Perron, 2003, p.237).

If film is distinguished by its fixed narrative and games by their audience input, then the interactive movie is characterized by "decision-tree branching gameplay" with "directing of the story by the audience" (Perron, 2008; Murray, 2004). In a choose-your-own-adventure style, players watch film scenes and then are presented a menu to decide how the story should proceed in the subsequent film clips. This form had its critiques; notably, its stop-and-go rhythm where action scenes are "interrupted in order to make more of the gamer's decisions" and the "illusion" of story-telling agency when, in reality, players are choosing from a limited number of carefully pre-determined storylines (Perron, 2008).

The genre, like many investigations into merging the ludic and cinematic, focuses heavily on narrative, and many movements in game studies have endeavoured to move away from this path. Eskelinen, in describing "The Gaming Situation" explicitly calls attention to the "qualities that set it apart from dramatic and narrative situations, both of the latter being rather well-studied constellations" (2001). In games, "the narrative paradigm still prevails... [limiting] our understanding of the medium" (Frasca, 2003, p.221). In addition to being a highly developed area of study, narratology in games also leads to the narrative paradox, where "the linearity of a story is going against the nonlinear nature of a game" (Perron, 2003, p.239). The tension between choice and pacing between gamer and storyteller arises because "narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power" (Adams, 1999). The paradox is well-recognized and work has been done to try and circumnavigate it. Sandy Louchart and Ruth Aylett, for example, examine role playing games to suggest a structure in which players' decisions are influential in the story outcome (2000). A "Game-Master" responds to those decisions and thus retains narrative control of the overall story direction.

Kevin Veale, in “‘Interactive Cinema’ Is an Oxymoron, but May Not Always Be,” also recognizes the contradictions of interactive story-telling and promotes the significance of “affective experience” generated by the player (2012). Player involvement does not alter the story line but is nonetheless key in imbuing meaning in the game; “someone watching the game being played would have a fundamentally different experience of the text than the person playing it” (2012).

This paper acknowledges that, in addition to narrative and affect, film consists of a production process that involves active decision-making and engagement. It proposes another perspective on how the experience of a film-based video game can be impacted by player choices without relying on the narrative component. Interactivity and film can coexist without disrupting or reducing either. Interactive cinema traditionally only considers how players can alter storylines, the creation of film entails more than just the story. Decisions are also made in role-casting, wardrobe, mise-en-scene (how a scene is composed on camera), dialogue and script, sound and music, and more, all of which impact the style of the story (Schmidt, 2013). A player can have agency in these comparable aspects in a story-driven game without conflicting with the prescribed narrative. By considering player participation in games via the interactive production side of film, games can better integrate the ludic and cinematic.

This concept of player as creator rather than character is not unique. In Gina Bloom’s paper “Videogame Shakespeare,” she discusses what she calls “theater-making games” which “turn their players into creators of theater (actors, dramatists, theater managers, or designers)” (2015, p.115). She distinguishes these from “drama-making games,” in which the player, as in interactive movies, “becomes the character usually to change its outcome in a dramatic plot (Bloom, 2015, p.115). Her work illustrates that there is value in role-playing and story-telling games that go beyond designating the player as a character. Evidenced by the success of the *Roller Coaster Tycoon* series and its siblings in which players deal with the design, finances, and operation of a theme park, games of management that give players an oversight of the action can be just as enjoyable as games that put players in the action itself (Chris Sawyer Productions, 1999). This raises Roger Caillois’ “mimicry” category of play in which “the pleasure lies in being or passing for another” (Caillois, 1958). Yet *Origins* is not a game about filmmaking nor does it claim to make players cinematographers; it simulates without being literal. Its likeness to film lies not in its formal or content qualities, but in the way in which players contribute to the game.

### **Player as Producer in *Dragon Age: Origins***

As previously described, *Origins* is easily comparable to a film with its heavy narrative focus and cinematographic techniques. A closer

examination of the game's mechanics will reveal how its similarities to movie extend beyond story and form. The player is not only the audience or the character within the story but also the producer - directing, casting, scripting, and designing aspects of the story independent of the overall narrative.

Before the story even begins, players jump into the filmmaking process, taking on the role of casting director. They select the race, class, skill set, and appearance of their main hero, and every detail can be adjusted, from the hero's voice to the color, pattern, and intensity of the tattoos. A player can easily spend hours exercising their aptitude as costume and makeup artist while they customize the hero. While certain selections such as race and skill have slight bearings on the game's advancement, the vast majority of these design choices are minutely detailed and have no ultimate consequences on the story. Their effect is rather to give the player agency in the style of the game. The innumerable combinations of character look and feel make each playing of *Origins* a unique creation despite predetermined plot outcomes.

Relationships with supporting characters also have no bearing on the narrative of the game but are a major part of gameplay. Players can build deep personal, even romantic, connections between their hero and other characters that join the party, and the intensity of these relationships is measured via an "approval" meter, a bar spanning the spectrum from "rival" to "friend." Both extremes have their benefits but the status will affect subtle details such as the tenor of dialogue between the hero and character throughout the game. An entire recurring segment of gameplay is devoted to fostering relationships with party members at base camps, where the game's story and action is frozen in time. Characters are stationed significant distances from each other and the player as the hero can converse individually with each through extensive dialogue menus for as long as they choose. Conversations and gift exchanges at camp are driving forces behind approval and highly encouraged. Pop-up tips frequently remind players of the benefits of gifting and assure them that conversations within camp are private from other party members, further emphasizing the weight given to this non-narrative aspect of the game. This feature grants the player agency in shaping the script and temperament of the game while the overall narrative remains intact.

Players can also fully control the other characters in their party as if they were the original hero, even the dog. This equal treatment among all game characters creates distance between the player and their primary avatar. In most games, the player and the main hero become one, and the player inhabits the game through that hero. *Origins*, however, works to diminish the dominance of the original avatar and invoke player investment in all of

the characters by providing them all with comparable capabilities and in-depth personalities. These layers of choice and the detachment of the player from characters allows the player to extract him or herself from the narrative itself. The player transforms from an actor in a story to the director of an entire cast of characters.

In addition to interacting as casting director, costume designer, make-up artist and script writer, players choreograph actors and storyboard scenes. In *Origins*, players can pause during battle scenes while still being in game. Pausing in typical games often pulls up a menu to access meta-game settings such as saving or adjusting the volume, ultimately stopping the play and removing players from the game space. On the other hand, pausing during *Origins* is an integrated and critical mechanic in the game where players plan character placement, queue attacks, and modify inventory while all characters and enemies are still. Though the action stops, every other aspect of the game is still accessible, giving players the ability to edit a scene's blocking, execution, and props before playback or recording continues. Should players want to script battle scenes even more, they can assign "tactics" to each character which programs and automates their method of fighting under different circumstances. With this feature, players can then sit back and watch their battle scene unfold. Active battling is a common focus in videogames, yet *Origins* lets players experience and enjoy battles as cut scenes without actually cutting them out of the game. Players furthermore function as photography directors, exercising control over camera angles, perspectives, and movements. During character customization, they can adjust the position and camera angle of the avatar thumbnail, much like a photographer capturing headshots. Gameplay also easily switches between first and third person, from an on-the-ground perspective at the level of the hero to an aerial view. Alternating between the two not only affects how one plays the game but also how the action and story are consumed. For spectators, the camera perspective helps define how close to the action they are. A zoomed out shot of a battle, for example could imply viewers are witnessing the action from a cliff top or that the director does not intend for the audience to feel the frenzy of the fight. For producer-players, the ability to switch between perspectives is akin to being able look upon a scene from the outside as a director and then to step in as an actor. As they pan, orbit, and zoom freely, they are editors searching for and selecting the best angle.

## Conclusion

Each of the distinctive features and mechanics of *Origins* allow the player to make inputs to the game in other roles beyond narrative. Considering players as producers of, rather than just characters within, a game allows for greater interpretations in interactive cinema beyond narrative. It also opens up ways in which players can participate with a game beyond directly

inhabiting it. A game need not be movie-like in appearance in order to be like a movie if the way in which players interact with it speak to the way in which participants of film interact with their medium.

This method also opens up how players can contribute to or control the socio-cultural messages of a game. Like any story-telling medium, narrative games convey messages about society. Without giving up control of the story completely, games that allow players agency in production decisions also allow them to affect the societal message. Camera angles make all the difference in whether a narrative is interpreted as a documentary, a news report, or a thriller and who the main character is impacts the cultural implications of the entire story. Without changing any plot points, every tale of *Legend of Zelda* would feel different if Princess Zelda was the one in search of Link. *Grand Theft Auto* missions would read differently if racial and socio-economic attributes of characters were altered.<sup>1</sup> When players can interact as producers in a game, they stop being mere actors and interpreters of prescribed narratives and become participating producers in the game's socio-cultural message as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard, D. J. (2006). Not a Hater, Just Keepin' It Real The Importance of Race-and Gender-Based Game Studies. *Games and Culture*, 1(1), 83-88. is a good piece on the implications of race and games.



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