

## **Spectacle of the Deathmatch: Character and Narrative in First-Person Shooters**

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Since the advent of the CD-ROM in PC gaming and Sony's PlayStation in the mid-1990's there has been a promise from the gaming industry that "interactive movies" are just around the corner. Much of this was due to the CDs offering game designers hundred of megabytes of storage previously unavailable at little cost. Until that point games had been stored on floppy disks or on chips in plastic cartridges. Sony's initial response to this development was to include music on their PlayStation CDs, but it was soon followed by the addition of full motion-video scenes to games intended to add value to the gaming experience and to exploit the storage capacities of the new consumer gaming medium. Games such as *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger* (Origin/Electronic Arts, 1995) began to feature hurriedly filmed and badly acted scenes which introduced games, and provided context, plot and characterisation between gaming levels. This innovation carried novelty value but tended to interfere with the flow of gaming.

The difficulties of managing PC-based video content were claimed to be "teething problems" and it was said that developments in hardware and software would improve until high levels of interactivity were achieved. This would increasingly make the boundaries between films and games blurred, the player being totally "immersed" in the narrative as they played the new

interactive films. The hype and excitement suggested that this new multimedia, hypertextual technology hybrid was to be the future of entertainment. As Rouse (2000) points out, games developers were starting to develop "movie envy".

Links between the computer gaming and film industries exist on number of levels. At the most superficial there is the crossover from games to films. Films such as *Super Mario Brothers* (1993), *Double Dragon: The Movie* (1993), *Street Fighter: The Movie* (1994), *Mortal Kombat* (1995), *Wing Commander* (1999), *Tomb Raider* (2001), *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001) and the forthcoming titles *Resident Evil: Ground Zero* (2002) and *Duke Nukem: The Movie* (2002) are all based on computer games. Similarly, games have also provided the thematic starting point for films such as *Tron* (1982), *The Last Starfighter* (1984), *The Wizard* (1989), *Joysticks* (1993), *Brainscan* (1994) and *eXistenZ* (1999) (see Sullivan, 2001).

There has also been a corresponding reverse crossover. Video games based on film licenses are now relatively common and include titles from *Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine* (Lucas Arts, 1999) and *Terminator: Future Shock* (Bethesda Softworks/Bethesda Softworks, 1995), to the strategy game *Starship Troopers* (Blue Tongue/Micropose, 2001), and the excellent and wonderfully "transtextual"<sup>1</sup> (Genette, 1997, 1998) First-Person Shooters (FPS) *Aliens vs. Predator* (Rebellion/Fox, 1999). George Lucas's *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) directly spawned at least four games on a variety of platforms,<sup>2</sup> most produced by Lucas Arts itself. This crossover is so prevalent that, according to Screen Digest/ELSPA (2000), more than 40 per cent of best selling games are based upon licensed themes. The link between film and games is further highlighted as computer games increasingly exist as video footage before they ever reach the retail shelves.

This chapter seeks to examine the convergence of cinema and computer games in terms of aspects of the design process and the orientation of the audience to the two forms of media. It looks specifically at the first-person shooter and the way it draws increasingly on the cinematic spectacle of films such as *The Terminator* (1984) or *The Matrix* (1999) while maintaining an ethos of audience involvement and construction of the final text often found in independent or community film making. It argues that while there may be some level of convergence between these two media in terms of technology and their production and marketing, there are still sufficient differences between the experience of viewing films and playing games to question the extent to which the realisation of the interactive movie is possible.

An examination of the evolution of the 3D FPS games is provided (using the highly successful and influential titles produced by id Software as an illustrative example) in order to build a contextual and historical backdrop to an analysis of the relationship between playing computer games and watching films. To facilitate such analysis, the chapter focuses on an examination of aspects of narrative, interactivity, spectacle, game aesthetics and author/audience distinctions.

### **The First-Person Shooter: a short game history...**

The FPS is fast approaching its first decade of existence. During its lifetime technical and creative innovations have allowed the development of more complex game narratives, game environments and varieties of game play, as well as an expansion in support for multiplayer and online gaming (for example, *Unreal Tournament* [Epic MegaGames & Digital Extremes/GT Interactive, 2000] and *Quake III Arena* [id Software/Activision, 1999]). Further, developments in the genre and game texts have facilitated a new

ways of gaming and an evolving sense of character, immersion and narrative development.

In any examination of recent developments and innovations in computer gaming, it is impossible to ignore the importance of a series of games developed by the Texas-based development company id Software. Although they no longer have a monopoly on the FPS genre, with developers such as Valve (*Half Life*, 1998), Interplay (*Descent*, 1994), Gathering of Developers (*Kiss Psycho Circus*, 2000), Electronic Arts (*American McGee's Alice*, 2000), and Epic Games (*Unreal*, 2000) producing their own visions of the ultimate FPS computer game, the impact of id on PC gaming and developments in consumer computing is hard to overestimate.

The FPS story begins for the PC with id in 1992 when *Wolfenstein 3D* was released by Apogee. Although not truly 3D, this first FPS differed from previous games by providing the gamer with a vanishing-point perspective of the playing environment, directly mediated by player input.<sup>3</sup> Through their onscreen avatars players could negotiate a world that had similar physical rules to those of 'real life'. Movement in the *Wolfenstein 3D* game environment proceeded across the monitor in a similar manner to that of platform games, but also allowed movement up and down "through" the screen. There were also corresponding changes in object size and resolution according to player movement around the game space. Since its release, *Wolfenstein 3D* has been viewed as the game that characterised a new format and since then a series of highly innovative FPS games have developed. Each new game contributing to a transformation of this genre by offering increasingly complex narrative levels, supporting a variety of different game-play features and contributing to the development of many online communities.

In 1993, id released a game which has become a legend among gamers everywhere: *Doom*<sup>4</sup> (id Software, 1993). Developments in game play allowed progression between different game levels through the finding of a 'key'. However, the greatest innovation was the utilisation of game graphics, sound and physics to create an atmospheric game environment. One of the reasons *Doom* was such a massive success was the sense of unease and anxiety created as the gamer's character travelled through deserted corridors. *Doom* was also the first FPS to support multiplayer options via Local Area Network (LAN) or modem connections. This allowed 'deathmatches' - violent and frantic games in which the aim is to score the greatest number of kills or "frags" to win. Gamers could now compete against human opponents rather than just artificially intelligent adversaries as in previous games.

Given that John Romero, id's co-founder and lead designer, comes from a hobbyist programmer background in which there is an ethos of sharing code within the gaming community (Laidlaw, 1996), it is not surprising that *Doom* was released initially as a shareware product meaning that it was available on the internet as a free download or for a small fee from retailers. When *Doom* was released the games development and publishing industry was increasingly establishing itself as a professionalised business and building up credibility after the mid-1980s crash of the games market. However, the method of initial release for *Doom* represented recognition that exploiting new methods of distribution and user involvement were essential to market success. It demonstrated that although a rapidly growing industry, games development and distribution was a business that could not be divorced from the interests and activities of gamers. It marked the continued blurring of boundaries between producer and consumer in the gaming community. Later, id went even further when they released the source code for *Doom* which enabled players to modify the game to suit their own tastes. Such practices, as well as the game itself, practically guaranteed the commercial success of

*Doom II: Hell on Earth* (id Software/GT Interactive, 1994) when it was released as a retail product.

Id Software went a step further with the release of *Quake* in 1996. This game marked the development of an impressive new graphics engine, which produced a fully 3D rendered game environment but placed significant demands on many home PCs. The overall look and playability of this game, together with its support for up to 16 players competing against each other, quickly established *Quake* as the benchmark FPS. It also facilitated web-based gaming for up to eight players, and allowed access to the Quakeworld network. This, together with the customisability of the game controls and the ability to send messages to other players during the game, contributed to the overwhelming popularity of the game, as highlighted by the growth of online communities of fans and modifiers of the *Quake* series. This community grew even richer when id released the Quake C language which allowed players to even more power to change the game by altering existing levels and creating new ones.

While *Quake* was technically innovative, it was the sequel, *Quake II* (id Software/Activision, 1997), that marked a break from the format of previous FPS games. The game offered a progression from the linear game play that characterised its predecessors to a more open level structure. Another important development in *Quake II* was the variety of models and game characters available to players. The game provided choice between male and female characters, and allowed the application of "skins", permitting gamers to customise existing characters, for example, into those from other games, film/TV or real life. The online option was improved by the ability to use *Gamespy* - a piece of software used to locate servers supporting *Quake* gaming, the names of players using the servers, and the ping rate at any given time.

Drawing on the successful format of the first two games in the *Quake* series, *Quake III* (2000) is largely characterised by improvements to graphic representation of the game environment, game physics and facilities for online and multiplayer gaming. While previous versions of *Quake* have been converted for use on gaming consoles, the difference in the port of *Quake III* to SEGA's Dreamcast and the Sony PlayStation is the development of facilities for online gaming that aim to be compatible with PC gamers.

Throughout the ten year history of this format the increasing sophistication of graphics, narrative, and game-play have created conditions that increasingly allow the gamer to feel part of the unfolding and increasingly spectacular narrative. This format has also become particularly important to the development of both multiplayer and online gaming.

## **Game aesthetics**

In some respects it is possible to claim that games are increasingly becoming more "cinematic". Links at the level of game design and development suggest some level of confluence between game and film aesthetics. In the following sections computer games are considered in relation to narrative and realist cinema and Hollywood blockbuster films, an examination of spectacle, aesthetics, narrative and interactivity.

The production of spectacle has a long history in popular entertainment, contemporary forms having roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Darley describes the spectacle of this period as a form of popular entertainment in which the "emphasis was on performances which were designed to elicit intense and instantaneous visual pleasure, the production of

image and action which would excite, astound and astonish the audience" (40). Spectacular entertainment aimed to provide a visceral thrill, something highly physical and although many areas of film have developed a greater emphasis on the conventions of story, plot and characterisation, the entertainment power of spectacle is still clearly visible in many large-scale, mainstream films.

Although narrative has asserted itself a central position in contemporary cinema it has been challenged to some extent within the Hollywood blockbuster - an important part of contemporary cinematic entertainment (Darley 56). For films such as *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991), *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Con Air* (Simon West 1997) or numerous other blockbusting successes it is not character development, introspection and social discourse which is most prominent in the film but the size, frequency and breath-taking excitement of the on-screen spectacle.

There are historically similarities in the genesis of both film and computer games in that both media have moved from the status of illegitimate offspring of other forms of art (whose origin owes more to technology than art) to being respectable and economically important forms of entertainment in their own right. For both media the technology allows the placement of moving images onto a screen and its continued development has made increasingly bold and believably realistic spectacle possible.

From the introduction of the CD as a medium for storing gaming software, games producers increasingly included film sequences in games in an attempt to add context, narrative and spectacle. The fashion for these full motion video (FMV) bridging sequences soon waned and now games like *Half-Life* (CS Team/Valve/Sierra, 2000) put exposition within the game itself rather

than between levels. Similarly, *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* (Core/EIDOS, 1999) attempts to blend narrative development with the gaming action as does *Max Payne* (Remedy/Gathering of Developers, 2001) with its combination of graphic novel and Mickey Spillane/Mike Hammer-style approach. Indeed much effort has been put into minimizing the high visibility of level changes, so that the game, like television, has a sense of *flow*<sup>6</sup> (Williams). Rather than the episodic experience of level-orientated game structure that finishes each level with a boss before loading the next part of the game these games aim for more seamless collection of elements. The games become less a matter of an interactive movie in which the film stop as plot decisions are made at marked crossroads but a spectacle designed to be not only to be watched but to develop character, narrative and causality and improve the experience of the game narrative. Increasingly, the FPS is attempting to create an immersive experience in which the gamer feels involved on a more or less continuous basis.

To heighten this effect, games have begun to borrow heavily from cinematic styles and aesthetics. *Max Payne* uses the vocabulary of film noir as well as the action thriller *Dirty Harry* (1971) and the work of John Woo. It includes effects drawn from the work of the latter such as the ability to invoke slow motion action sequences at the press of a mouse button. Covering the game's exhibition at E3, *Gamespot* pointed out that the development team had implemented

a very movie-like technique that involves action sequences (usually featuring guns) being slowed down. Jump sideways while firing a gun and the sequence goes into slow-mo while you're in the air - bullets pumping, muzzle flashing and the bad guy doing the dance of death as the lead bites him. Then you hit the ground and the pace instantly picks up again.

This movement into “bullet time” allows gamers more than the joy of the cinematic spectacle; the “shoot dodging” manoeuvre rapidly becomes an essential part of the game play in the trickiest of confrontations. Similarly, although still in the development pipeline, id's latest sequel, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, (Grey Matter/Activision, 2002), draws inspiration from World War II propaganda films and Hollywood movies including *The Dirty Dozen* (1967).

With the increased borrowing from cinematic technique, games have experimented with differences in the use of perspective and point of view. Players of a FPS have a proxy view the gaming world from behind the eyes of their onscreen characters rather than watching them travel as would be the case in a platform game or a third-person shooter (TPS). These contrasting perspectives play as important a role in games as in films, offering different relationships between player and character. The decision of whether to employ a first-person or third-person perspective alters factors such as whether we watch a more distanced character within a developing narrative or play from within a character with whom we have a more immediate relationship.

In the *Quake* series our perspective is that of our gaming character. It has a film parallel in the early scenes of *The Terminator* in which audience sometimes sees the world through the eyes of Arnold Schwarzenegger's cyborg as he explores his new surroundings and acquires clothes, shades, motorcycle and weapons. It is the perspective of the combatant that is given preference here: gamers are given the illusion of inhabiting the same space as the avatar and see what they see. During *Quake* there are no panning or aerial shots, no cuts to close ups or reverse shots from the perspective of the

enemy. Instead, the view remains solidly first-person. This never-changing perspective heightens the sense of “being there” and immersion in the gaming narrative.

*Quake* has spectacular delights (mostly concerning violence and high speed action) but these are not the same as those offered to the gamer by the third-person perspective on Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series. *Tomb Raider* allows the gamer to look upon Croft, enjoying the rendered spectacle of improbable agility and impossible figure. The gamer is in the position of both being in control of the onscreen avatar and able to watch it. This perspective permits an highly sexualised focus on the female form that differs from the way Max Payne is presented, despite the fact that both are experienced in the third person. As gamers we bring to each of these characters a set of scripts and semiotic encoding that help us understand who they are, their role and their motivations. These, of course, are character specific, and are drawn from our own literacies in other forms of culture whether they be film, comic book, novels, advertising etc. This difference in gaze and the objectification it encourages means the gamers watch and control Croft and Payne rather than “sit inside” on the screen as they might with their own character in *Quake*.

Decisions about character and gamer’s perspective and other the basic tools of cinematography<sup>7</sup> in games has been accompanied by the growing maturity of the use of sound and music in this genre. Again, the origins of the use of sound and music can be traced back to *Doom*. Unlike its gaming predecessors, *Doom* did not just have electronic sound effects such as the feedback beeps found in *Pong* (Atari, 1974) or the threatening “Dum, dum, dum, dum” of *Space Invaders*. With its atmospheric rumblings and the slow build up of tension in the music by Bobby Prince<sup>8</sup>, *Doom* was effectively the first major computer game to have a film-like soundtrack. This soundtrack

was integral to the accumulation of tension for players travelling the eerie mazes of the game, constantly awaiting attack. As well as music, the game featured low breathing sounds, suggesting that enemies waited around every corner. It further raised the standard with *Quake* by commissioning Trent Reznor from Nine Inch Nails to produce the music and sound effects. More recently, David Bowie, along with Reeves Gabrels, has written gaming music through his involvement with *Omikron* (Quantic Dream/EIDOS, 1999).

The use of complex modelling and rendering technology, similar to that used in action movies, adds visual excitement to the game environment and illustrates how aesthetic techniques from one media may crossover to inform production in the other. The use of special effects technology to give movement in the game environment comparable with that of action movies illustrates how aesthetic techniques from one media may crossover to inform production in the other.

The continuing development of graphic sophistication and life-likeness has been fundamental to games production, and visual realism has been claimed to be an important marker of the success of computer games (Darley 29-30). This includes the attempt to create more life-like game environments and characters. A specialism in its own right, game physics is increasingly sophisticated and vital in order to make objects and the physical characteristics of game characters behave in a realistic manner. Characters' hair, clothes and body parts now sway, move or bounce in life-like fashion or indeed in a fetishised or voyeuristic manner.<sup>9</sup> As such, it is no surprise that most of the innovations in *Quake III* centre not around changes in game-play but on improving the graphics engine. This enabled the game to display curved objects in a less "blocky" fashion and to allow fog, fire and water effects to be used to heighten the atmosphere in the game's arena and to allow game designers to control these in real time.

Although both reviewers and gamers often comment on the realism of gaming graphics and the spectacle they create, there is a gaming trade-off: increases in graphics quality mean higher demands on the gaming hardware and, generally, slower gaming. But how important is realism in gaming? Warm (2000) found that playability and pace were more important to gamers' enjoyment than realism or stunning graphics. Indeed the notion of realism is a problematic one at the best of times: are we really supposed to consider the characters, settings and narratives of games as "real" as those of science fiction, period drama or a soap opera?<sup>10</sup> Demands for realism in game environments are likely to be secondary to the requirement for spectacle as the backdrop for competitive game play.

While the notion of realism in games is complex, as it is elsewhere, it is possible to accept as "real" the experience of gaming and the creative activities associated with it. This is why it is important not only to explore the connections between computer gaming and film through textual comparisons, and exploration of influence or industry alliances, but also look at the gamers and their active role in experiencing, creating and recreating gaming texts. Through this it is possible to see how aspects of FPS games have encouraged a new type of player/audience involvement, and how technological and textual developments have facilitated and encouraged gamers to create their own narratives, characters and gaming communities.

### **Game narratives and gamers as authors**

One important issue to consider when examining the convergence of film and games is the extent to which computer games have narrative structures comparable with those of films. The development of game narratives can be traced in relation to the development of FPS games. At its most basic level, the aim of *Wolfenstein 3D* (and the FPS games that followed) was not

particularly different from that of previous games: to move around a virtual space, kill enemies and avoid being killed. This basic action-narrative can be traced back all the way to the very first distributed computer game, *Spacewar*, created by Steve Russell in 1961. Although there were elements familiar to platform games such as the collection of items for points (in this case Nazi gold), what made *Wolfenstein* so different was that, although somewhat crude by today's standards, the world looked "real": when you shot people they would recoil and splatter blood. Further, you would be faced by enemies with a referent in the real world; that is they were not imagined spacecraft, aliens, or geometric oddities like the *Pacman* ghosts (Namco, 1980) but Nazi soldiers, their dogs and a fierce collection of weapons.<sup>11</sup>

But more than this, *Wolfenstein* had a story. The events had a context and the gamer played a real-time role in moving the narrative towards its dénouement. According to publicity on the 3D Realms' web site (<http://www.3drealms.com/wolf3d/>):

You're William J. "B.J." Blazkowicz, the Allies' bad boy of espionage and a terminal action seeker. Your mission was to infiltrate the Nazi fortress Castle Hollehammer and find the plans for Operation Eisenfaust, the Nazi's blueprint for building the perfect army. Rumors are that deep within the castle the diabolical Dr. Schabbs has perfected a technique for building a fierce army from the bodies of the dead. It's so far removed from reality that it would seem silly if it wasn't so sick. But what if it were true?

The release of *Half-Life* (Valve/Sierra) in 1998 represented a quantum leap in narrative for FPS games by providing a complex plot and increased depth of game characters. Here the gamer does not just take part and develop the narrative by moving through walled mazes and shooting pretty much anything

that moves: the main character has a history and personality which affect his progress and the final outcome. The script for *Half-Life* came from the science fiction novelist Marc Laidlaw, one of the authors featured in Bruce Sterling's landmark cyberpunk anthology, *Mirrorshades* (1986), author of *Dad's Nuke* (1986) and *Kalifornia* (1992).<sup>12</sup> Influenced heavily by playing the free-form adventure game *Myst* (Cyan/Broderbund, 1994) as well as *Doom*, Laidlaw was intent on realising the storytelling potential of the FPS. The role created by Laidlaw for the gamer was one which attempts to "make a difference in Gordon Freeman's life", a task which "deepened their involvement in the game instead of booting them out of it," (Bergman, 1999). Unlike the protagonists in *Quake* and *Doom*, Freeman, the central character in *Half-Life*, is not a product of the John Wayne/Sylvester Stallone mould of action hero but rather a (fairly) run-of-the-mill assistant in a science lab. He is the accidental hero who battles not just with aliens but rival colleagues who are out to save their own lives at any cost.

The standard set by the *Half-Life* narrative, and the involvement of gamers with the characters and contexts of the game, is further demonstrated by the intriguing official add-ons that have become available to the main game. *Opposing Force* (Gearbox/Sierra, 1999) allows the player to take the role of a soldier sent into the lab to eliminate Freeman, whilst *Counter-Strike* allows you to choose to play either the part of a terrorist organisation or the anti terrorist squad sent to stop the alien invasion.

Game narratives such as those of *Wolfenstein* and *Half-Life* provide a context for the game and a rationale for game play (Darley 150-155), offering an indication of the manner in which computer gaming has started to mature as a creative industry. If games ever were *solely* about "someone getting killed, finding out why someone was killed, or taking over the world" (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield 51), to maintain that this is still the case either

underestimates the craft of games production and active gaming, or demonstrates a lack of familiarity with this gaming genre. Earlier games often had some sort of implied narrative associated with them; for example, *Space Invaders* makes no sense without the understanding that the gamer plays the role of defender against the attacking alien hordes.

There are, however, a number of fundamental differences between the narrative texts of computer games and those of cinema. It has been claimed that, because of the importance of spectacle in computer games, narrative content is “basic in the extreme”, secondary to game play and the rendering of the game environment (Darley 150). To a greater extent, the narrative content of games is comparable with that of the Hollywood blockbuster format, but the issue of interactivity and the performative nature of the engagement entailed with computer games suggests that game narratives might have a function different from those of contemporary cinema.

Recent developments have also allowed a move away from the linear progression in narrative through various levels that characterized early FPS games. As already mentioned, *Quake II* allows players to return to previous levels in order to complete aspects of subsequent missions and the development of more complex and non-linear game narratives have become essential to the experience of FPS gaming. This is apparent in the *Tomb Raider* series, where puzzle solving is crucial to progression in the game, and also in the latest breed of cross-format games, such as *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm/EIDOS, 2000) that combine traits from the FPS as well as role-playing and strategy games.

In films, the narrative progresses without the input of the audience member, whereas in games the player is crucial to the progression of the narrative and spectacle (Darley 56). While games such as *Duke Nukem 3D* may use

wisecracking or foot tapping characters to mark non-action, these highlight the fact that the game is not continuing and are, therefore, an interruption to game narrative and spectacle. Lack of action in a game of *Quake III* may lead to a fairly rapid termination of your involvement in the game as you are fragged either by your opponent or the computer, but the game will not normally continue during periods where the player is not actively involved. If a spectator/player stops playing a computer game, the game itself usually stops.<sup>13</sup>

This contrasts with the experience of watching a film in a cinema or broadcast television at home. The spectator of a sports match on television or the cinemagoer finds that the programme or film continues if they leave their viewing location. Goals or points may be scored in a sports match, players may be injured or the game might be won or lost during the spectator's absence; in film, crucial aspects of the plot may be revealed.<sup>14</sup> The difference between film and games is not only that the audience makes the spectacular happen in games but that they can make the spectacle itself.

The difference in narrative structure and content between computer games and films relates to the ability of gamers to actively engage in the modification of the game narrative and environments. Games such as *Half-Life*, *Unreal* and *Quake* have followed the tradition started by *Doom* of allowing gamers to create their own levels, characters and inventories for the games. In id games prior to *Doom* there had been a large amount of compression of files which made them harder to manipulate. This was changed for *Doom* and editors became readily available so that anyone with the time, inclination and dedication could create a new text for the game.

Such game modifications, or "mods", allow the creation of entirely new texts around the basic FPS engine provided as part of the official game. Authors

can experiment with the inclusion of new weapons in the game, from crossbows and grappling hooks to complete Jedi Knight or World War II arsenals. The ability to create “skins” allows gamers to bring in characters from other texts. Like the literature of sci-fi fans, creating narratives which experiment with the meeting of characters from different television series (Jenkins), mod authors have brought into their Quake worlds characters from *The Matrix*, Norse mythology, *South Park*, even *Wolfenstein 3D* or their own virtual clones.<sup>15</sup> Mod tools also allow authors to alter games physics so that “rocket jumping” (the combination of jumping and firing a rocket launcher at the ground at the same time) can be finely tuned, or that items to be picked up have real weight that slows the player down.

The ability to alter characters, environment and events within texts suggests that the gamer can become a producer in addition to being a consumer of the game. They not only participate in the gaming narrative but can also take control over its setting, characters and physical rules. This is not merely a matter of tinkering with the original product or playing around with authorial intention but a way of, in the hand of a talented mod developer, creating a substantially different text which can be distributed uncensored directly to a new audience. As such, we can argue that it marks an development in gaming which has more similarities to auteurism than complex hierarchies of Hollywood film making. Indeed, computer gaming has a long tradition of refusing to establish a clear line between author and audience. Even influential gaming companies such as Eidos are still not too distant from their histories as bedroom programmers. The growth of the gaming market, the level of money involved in production, and the growing professionalisation of computer gaming<sup>16</sup> has encouraged the creation of a produce/consumer divide but there is still an overlap between game producers and consumers. The difficulty in distinguishing the player from the producer continues today. Players are used as testers, bug finders, and generators of wish lists for

development companies; this, plus the reliance on core gamers as agenda setters for gaming purchases, means player input is vastly important to the industry.

This highlights a difference between computer game players and film audiences as they are often understood. Film audiences have a history of being viewed as gatherings of passive individuals who sit, in a darkened cinema, as the light and sound of the cinema projection pours over them. In this environment audience members are "passive" recipients of the narrative of the film:

Under the regime of the culture industry.....the film leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of its viewers...the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality.

(Adorno and Horkheimer, 1977, 353-354)

However, since the work of The Birmingham Centre for Study of Contemporary Cultural Studies in the mid 1980s (e.g., Morley, Radway), and work influenced by and built upon it (e.g. Ang, Jenkins, Stacey, Abercrombie and Longhurst), there is now little real doubt about the active nature of media audiences, including TV and film.

Ideas concerning audiences as producers are not specifically new (see Longhurst), but the computer gaming industry provides a very interesting and advanced example of this. As we have seen, games such as *Doom*, *Quake* and *Half-Life* represent only the start of the text's life rather than hermetically sealed entities. A similar, if more limited, approach to narrative has been seen in playfully postmodern films such as *Wayne's World* (1992), the text of which presents alternative conclusions but refuses to establish if any is definitive

(Rutter, 1998). However, the FPSs we have looked at surpass this interaction and approach a transtextual reading and recreation.

As the previous discussion has shown, game players or audiences<sup>17</sup> are more actively engaged than film viewers in both the narrative and other events within the game environment. The ability to modify both of these aspects of a computer game shows a level of interaction with the text that is not provided by traditional cinema or Hollywood blockbuster movies.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has examined the extent to which FPS games utilise the production and aesthetic techniques of cinema to create a sense of narrative and spectacle. It has argued that although the age of interactive movies has not arrived there is a level of convergence between computer games, specifically in the FPS format, and Hollywood blockbuster movies such as *The Matrix* and *Terminator 2*. Further, it has suggested that these similarities are to be found primarily in the creation and manipulation of aesthetics and narrative in games, along with audience/player involvement.

The similarity between these two forms of popular entertainment lies in the privileging of spectacle over narrative and the importance placed upon physical rather than intellectual responses. While we can see that games developers are increasingly recognizing the potential of narrative to enrich game play this remains largely a non-technical innovation. Indeed, while both blockbuster film and FPS games have narrative structures of varying complexity, it is difficult to claim that these are grossly similar to those of realist and emotional-realist cinema. In spectacular media narrative offers a brief rationale on which to hang visceral pleasures rather than as the driving engine of the text.

The heralding of interactive films as the future of popular entertainment has become a little stale as it appears that the development of such media has not been realised yet and there is a major question as to whether problems such as negotiating flow and interactivity will be successfully solved in the future. However, the increasing alliances between gaming and media companies (along with the embodiment of the two in organisations such as Disney and Lucas Arts), and the current realignment of computer and video games as “leisure software” and “interactive entertainment” indicate that the industry itself sees a viable future enterprise in interactive media.

What this future may be remains to be seen, but it is worth hypothesising that, rather than becoming part of an affiliation with narrative cinema, the future of computer gaming lies with its borrowing from, and developing of, the cinema of spectacle. However, what gaming continues to offer that Hollywood cannot is the intimate sense of the consumer as producer that computer games and the gaming industry provide. In gaming, texts are technologically and narratively left open so that gamers can create and manipulate their own add-ons and modifications. This happens in a way not available to Hollywood film making but perhaps has echoes in alternative form of cinematic production in which production and consumption is not so distant.

It is the interactivity and active participation in the game environment and creation of the game text and game community that distinguishes computer games from most films. This, along with gaming's requirement for control and kinaesthetic skills, closely link it to the visceral thrills of the spectacular forms of popular entertainment since the late nineteenth century and, ironically, marks gamers themselves—rather than any technical, industrial or market feature—as the main point of difference between film and computer games.

Of course, what these gamers will bring to cinema as it develops remain to be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> Genette describes transtextuality as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.” He presents a five-element taxonomy for understanding the way texts, such as books, refer to, quote from and comment on other texts (Genette, 1998, 8-12). As such it is similar to – but more encompassing – than the more commonly used idea of intertextuality.

<sup>2</sup> *Star Wars Episode 1: Jedi Power Battles* (Dreamcast, PlayStation - Lucas Arts/Lucas Arts, 2000); *Star Wars Episode I Racer* (Game Boy Color, PC, Dreamcast, N64 - Lucas Arts/Activision, 1999); *Star Wars: Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (PC - Lucas Arts/Activision, 1999) and *Star Wars Episode 1: Battle for Naboo* (N64 - Factor 5/Lucas Arts, 2001)

<sup>3</sup> Although *Wolfenstein 3D* was successful and influential, the title for first 3D FPS arguably goes to one of “the lost games of id,” *Catacomb 3D* (id Software/Softdisk, 1991), a fairly slow EGA (as opposed to VGA) game which is reminiscent of id’s later game *Heretic* (Raven/id Software, 1994). The first “true” 3d game for the PC was *Descent*. (Parallax/Interplay, 1994). Beyond the PC, Atari’s arcade game *Battlezone* (Atari, 1980) was probably the first 3D game and FPS precedents are found in *3D Monster Maze* (J K Greye, 1981) on the Sinclair ZX81, along with *Dungeon Master* (FTL/FTL, 1989) and *Bloodwych* (Image Works/Mirrorsoft, 1990) for the Atari ST.

<sup>4</sup> *Doom* is often quoted as the most successful computer game of all time but this is a hotly contested issue. The *Command & Conquer* (Westwood Studios/Westwood Studios, 1995) series is listed by the *Guinness Book of Records* as having sold over 10 million copies, however *Myst* (and its sequel, *Riven*) have sold a similar amount and the multi-platform *FIFA Soccer* series from EA has sold 16 million copies. This pales when compared to the Nintendo’s *Super Mario Brothers* (over 40 million copies) and the number of PCs that have *Solitaire* installed upon them. *Doom* is credited with 2 millions copies sold but it is estimated that something in the region of 20 millions copies of the shareware version have been installed worldwide.

<sup>5</sup> See Darley for a more detailed discussion of the importance of spectacle in early forms of popular entertainment

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams uses the term “flow” to describe the manner in which rather than being a collection of discrete units (programmes, adverts, announcements etc.), television is made up of *planned flow*. That is items have a sequence and place within the onward rolling of continuous broadcasting. (Williams 1975, 86)

<sup>7</sup> The ability to change from first to third person perspective or alter viewing position is similar to camera view options beginning to be offered in other

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domestic digital technologies such as football broadcast on some digital tv services and recent pornographic films on DVD.

<sup>8</sup> A collection of Bobby Prince's music from *Doom* can be found at <http://doomworld.com/music/index.shtml>.

<sup>9</sup> The *Dead or Alive* (Tecmo/Tecmo, 1997) series of beat-'em-ups featured the "breast physics engine" which produced highly stylised and sexualised movements of female characters.

<sup>10</sup> See Abercrombie and Ang for discussions of "reality" in television programmes.

<sup>11</sup> Even today *Wolfenstein 3D* is unavailable in Germany because of its narrative setting and content.

<sup>12</sup> This is not linked in any way to the 1993 film of the same name directed by Dominic Sena.

<sup>13</sup> This does not necessarily apply to multiplayer games such as online versions of *Quake III*. This is why the convention has been established that if a player's character stands facing a wall motionless they are recognised as being currently out of play. To kill such a player is considered within the Quake online gaming community as "unsporting".

<sup>14</sup> The ability to time shift viewing is commonly facilitated through videoing television programmes and watching them at a convenient time. Video permits rudimentary pausing, replay, and fast forwarding, the quality of which is being built upon with digital systems such as Tivo.

<sup>15</sup> The company 3Q is beginning to provide photo booth-style facilities which take three dimensional pictures of gamers and use the image to create models which are burned onto CD as personalised skins for use in games such as *Quake III* and *Unreal*.

<sup>16</sup> Organisations such as the CyberAthletes Professional League now attract sufficient sponsorship and advertising to permit a handful of world class gamers to live quite well off their skills.

<sup>17</sup> Research undertaken by the authors has demonstrated that vital to much computer gaming is the experience of playing as part of a group. As such, there is often an audience for individual games as well as the active players. This applies to domestic gaming as well as international competitions.