

Synergy of Computer Games and Films

Computer games and films have had a complicated history together. While some see them as purely separate forms of media and entirely different, others see them as intertwined in both their narratological developments and their ability to enthrall their respective audiences. Films have been around for over 100 years with the invention of the Kinetophonograph in the late 1880s [1] with 'talkies' (Films with sound rather than silence) occurring in the late 1920s. This has allowed films to have a long time to evolve and become more complex forms of media than the original silent films such as those of Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Films are now part of a much larger experience, allowing viewers an insight into various periods of history as well as various emotional states that actors can portray. They are also worth a huge sum of money with many film productions of recent years costing in the 100s of millions of dollars, and actors commanding fees of 10s of millions to star in the films. In comparison computer games are relatively behind on these developments. Having only been in mainstream culture for the past 30 years, and only to a particularly noticeable degree in the last 10 years, the game media has a lot of catching up to do. Crawford argued that games suffer from 'movie envy' [2] in their attempts at being the same as films. It is also arguable that most games have relatively simplistic storylines compared to some films but this will be examined in depth further on. An examination of the sometimes tenuous relationship between films and games will be conducted, as well as a look at techniques that both forms of media share.

The relationship between films and games

The links between films and games at its simplest level is associated with film tie in games. Arguably the first method that games were able to be connected to films in some way, involved developers acquiring licenses to popular films and creating games based (often loosely) around the storyline and characters of the film. These games often made a considerable amount of money as they were released at the same time as the film, meaning people were often caught up with the hype of the film and wanting to be 'part' of it somehow. Unfortunately due to often tight time constraints, with developers being forced to release games in time for the film's launch, many of these games were quite poor in quality. There are many possible explanations for this, one person explanation would be that due to the designer being constrained by the film's storyline, they were unable to use their own creative elements to produce a better quality game. Other more technical problems were due to some games simply being released unfinished, with various 'bugs' that the designers ran out of time to fix before release. One particular film game that had the potential to be great was that of the Matrix game: Enter The Matrix. This game was fully backed by the film's writers, the Wachowski brothers, with them producing a 244 page script for the game. A suggestion that finally there would be a seamless flow between films and games. Unfortunately the game was critically slated and deemed as extremely mediocre and a good opportunity missed. [3] Strangely perhaps, it still did reasonably well regarding sales figures, selling 1 million units in its first week of release. [4] Van De Walle does argue that 'as the gaming industry gets bigger, the way that deals are made is changing, allowing games to be developed more or less in tandem with

movies...’citing the Lord of The Rings games as examples of better movie games. This franchise of films seem to be one of the few to have mostly good games produced from it. [5] However, this franchise is an exception. In the past year games such as Open Season, Meet the Robinsons and TMNT have been released based on the films of the same name and have been for the most part average and extremely simple to play. TMNT earned a rating of 6.4 from Gamespot on release [6] yet managed to sell enough to gain the number one position in the UK All Formats Chart in April 2007, beating many superior titles such as Guitar Hero 2 and Command Conquer 3.

Films based on Games

In recent years the concept of tie ins between games and films have switched to films being made based on popular games. Again, similar things have occurred with many of them being distinctly average. Films such as Tomb Raider, Resident Evil and Doom did relatively well at the box office but were seen as rather poor in quality. Other films such as Mortal Kombat and Street Fighter failed both at the box office and at being an average film. The only exception research has been able to find by looking at The Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) is that of Silent Hill, a slightly less action packed and more cerebral game which was a third person adventure game, turned into a more psychological thriller than action film. It is interesting to note that games seem to be turned into action films, and the games used tend to be action based and violent. Considering there are more story based games such as Final Fantasy and Oblivion, it seems somewhat strange that the games turned into films tend to be action ones. CGI based films were created for Final Fantasy, The Spirits Within and Advent Children, but they failed to build upon the story set by the various Final Fantasy games. One argument for this failure is that games are unable to have as complex stories as films. Although comprising of detailed stories, they are simply not as deep or as emotional as in films. Juul suggests this in his article on games and narrative. [7] It is arguable that this is incorrect though and that stories within games can invoke emotion from the player, such as the famous death scene of Aeris in Final Fantasy VII. [8]

Connections between Films and Games

Besides games and films sharing tie in products, there are also a number of connections showing how they are both starting to share similar demographics. With the development of new technologies for viewing films such as HD-DVD and Blu Ray disc mediums, further expansion has been formed with the ability to potentially store both a film and a game on the same disc. In July 2006 Dreamworks, the major film studio associated with Steven Spielberg, declared their belief that in the future a game and movie can be put on one Blu Ray disc thus shrinking the gap between the two different ways of interacting with a story. [9] However they estimate that this won’t occur until the release of Playstation 4 at some undesignated future time, considering the Playstation 3 has only been released for the last month in Europe.

The release of the X-Box 360’s marketplace features have also enabled players to acquire films through their games console. As well as players being able to download

demos of games (including film tie ins such as Shrek 3), players are also able to download a selection of films and film trailers. Currently a player is able to download films such as Saw 3, The Departed and Babel. [10] Each new release film costs 480 points in HD resolution (Around \$6) or 360 points for a classic film in HD resolution (Around \$4.50). All films are also available in standard definition for a lower price. Currently this service is only available within the US but is a prominent sign of the shift of games and their consoles to become a more encompassing media centre and also making films and games relevant to the same audience. In a similar vein film review magazines such as the British publication Empire offer both film and game reviews in their magazine showing a convergence of similar tastes in both films and games for the audience drawn to such a magazine.

Machinima

There are also more obvious links between games and films such as the concept of Machinima. Machinima is the term given to films created through using a game engine. Most popularly used engines are from FPS games such as Half Life and Unreal Tournament. Some films have also been created using MMORPG game engines such as World of Warcraft. Film festivals have even been devised for this specific form of film, such as that devised by Machinima.com [11] which provided awards to certain films for such accomplishments as best picture, best series, best technical achievement and best music; much like in more conventional film awards such as the Oscars. The website also provides a number of tutorials on filming techniques and film theory to aid machinima directors in creating films through the use of computer animated characters already designed by game developers. As well as being inexpensive compared to arranging real people and cameras, a director simply needs to have the game installed and a few inexpensive tools to achieve the correct look; it also enables people to re-enact their own ideas through the use of their favourite game characters thus extending the game ideas into a virtual world created and enhanced by the director. While some of this machinima can seem slightly amateurish, others have become cult hits such as Red Vs Blue [12] a machinima science fiction series based on the Halo game engine which has become so popular the creators have made 5 seasons, comprising of 78 episodes, of the series. It has also been released on the X-Box 360 marketplace to download for a minimal fee. DVDs are also available from the Red Vs Blue site. [13]

Other machinima seeks to replicate popular films and scenes from films. One of the most well known pieces of machinima is that of A Few Good G-Men. [14] This machinima is based on the Half Life 2 engine, it is a re-enactment of the famous court room scene from the Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson film A Few Good Men. Uploaded to Machinima.com in July 2005 it has had 21,000 views and is also available on Youtube and Google videos.

In a similar fashion, recently a group of World of Warcraft players created a Warcraft version of the historical action film 300. [15] Requiring slightly less skill than the aforementioned piece due to the fact that all players can move without the need to program a script beforehand, it is still quite an impressive piece, if nothing else but due to its innovative idea.

These machinima while providing amateur film directors an opportunity to create their own stories do have some minor problems associated with them. Due to their nature they have a relatively limited audience for the most part, unless they are lucky to be noticed as well as Red Vs Blue. It is also arguable that they lose some human element to their stories due to the fact that computer animated and controlled characters are used, while they have some human interaction to them, they are still not 'real' which means the audience may feel slightly detracted from the plot.

Cinematic Video Games and Video Game Cinema

There have been some quite noticeable connections indicating movies paying homage to games and taking ideas from them. Most noticeably The Matrix in 1999 with its large amount of stylised violence shown in slow motion akin to the bullet time movements in the game Max Payne. One famous graphics card benchmarking program called 3d Mark 2003 even uses a graphics sequence of Max Payne re-enacting the famous 'Hallway' scene in The Matrix. There is also the 1998 German film Run Lola Run [16] in which the heroine has twenty minutes to pay off a gangster to save her boyfriend's life. The movie shows the same sequence three times but with subtle differences in each version the outcome becomes different. The film Time Code and the television series 24 uses a split screen narrative by showing a number of different characters doing different things at the same moment in time. As ELSIPA (Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association) point out in their 2003 White Paper 'The Cultural Life of Computer and Video games' [17], would these things have occurred in the films without the influence of video games on their directors? Has the dynamics of video games spread onto the big screen? Evidently the culture impact of video games can be quite far reaching in the world of cinema.

Besides these connections, in recent years there have been a number of games heavily borrowing from the cinematic feel of many cinematic masterpieces. Two prominent examples of this are the PC games Fahrenheit and Half Life 2. Fahrenheit is even listed under the Internet Movie Database [18], a site normally restricted to films and TV series. The game revolves around the character Lucas Kane who in a possessed trance kills a man in a New York diner. The player controls Lucas Kane while he attempts to work out what happened that fateful day and what greater forces controlled him to do so. Another story following the police investigation by a detective called Carla Valenti runs concurrently in a 24-esque style situation. The game is divided into a number of different chapters akin to a book but is extremely cinematic in the nature in which it is 'filmed'. Obviously the game is not filmed but it is created by the developers in a manner in which it looks like a movie. The game's end credits is similar to a movie's by ending with a long list of credits such as director, script writer, story writer and voice actors, this is displayed at the end of the game with music by Theory of a Deadman in the background, just like at the end of a film. The game even has its own tagline (Guilt is a chilling feeling) and its advertising is identical to that of a movie with trailers and film posters such as the one

below:



The 2004 PC game Half Life 2 was also acclaimed for its similarities in architectural style to the 1920s film 'Metropolis'. The architectural design and game mechanics behind the hit were so highly praised that a book, Half-Life 2: Raising the Bar - A Behind the Scenes Look: Prima's Official Insider's Guide, on the design of it was released shortly after the game. The Metal Gear Solid series of games on the Playstation One and Two were similar to Half Life with their starting sequences being identical to the start of an action film with a piece of action to draw the player in while the main credits rolled in front of the action.

Negative Elements of the Connections Between Games and Cinema

Some mainstream media critics would choose to define video games as a form of media that can not develop further than being only for entertainment purposes and certainly not as a tool that can be used creatively. The famous American film critic Roger Ebert being one of those. When reviewing the film version of Doom in October 2005 he wrote somewhat condescendingly about video games sparking a longer debate with readers of his. He stated:

'I believe books and films are better mediums, and better uses of my time. But how can I say that when I admit I am unfamiliar with video games? Because I have recently seen classic films by Fassbinder, Ozu, Herzog, Scorsese and Kurosawa, and have

recently read novels by Dickens, Cormac McCarthy, Bellow, Nabokov and Hugo, and if there were video games in the same league, someone somewhere who was familiar with the best work in all three mediums would have made a convincing argument in their defence.’[19]

In further articles he went onto explain that he is ‘prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful...’ but that the nature of the medium prevents it from moving ‘...beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art...’ [20] Perhaps video games’s biggest problem is its relative youth meaning it has not had the time to fully mature into the level that the cinema has reached. It has taken over 100 years for films to reach such a revered level in many cases, although still being able to produce ‘popcorn’ blockbuster films, so perhaps games need this long as well.

However there are some examples of newer games becoming increasingly cinematic in their nature. Two key examples are that of Gears of War and Final Fantasy 12. From personal experience both games seem extremely cinematic in style, they both have long intro movies and attempt to outline the story as the game continues through the use of a number of detailed CGI cutscenes. Gears of War upon its release even had a run of trailers shown before films at cinemas, initially it would look to the viewer that a film was being advertised until they realised it was a game. With the increase in high definition technology and improvements in CGI technology; games, particularly with their use of cutscenes, can increasingly tell a story as well as be an interactive experience.

Techniques shared between Games and Film

Finally one of the key elements that games and film continue to share is their use of techniques to produce computer animated graphics to forward a story. Companies such as Lucas Arts and Industrial Light + Magic have begun to share their knowledge and their skills in CGI development for films, with game development. Many of the applications used for one are used for the other development showing a correlation between development techniques. [21] Bell discusses CGI techniques shared amongst cybercultures. [22] He mainly looks at how it has enhanced films but these techniques are able to improve games and their storylines. Perron [23] looks at the concept of interactive movies which are perhaps the nearest to a converging media between games and films. He looked at games such as The 7th Guest, early pioneers of the concept of interactive films, mainly thanks to the development of CD-ROM technology at the time. This game was primarily a puzzle game with the story created through the use of a number of video cutscenes interspersed with the puzzles, making it a strange mix of the two and not flowing very seamlessly. Many games have attempted similar things with none quite achieving either an entertaining film or an entertaining game. Even with such games as The X-Files Game, based on the hit TV show, they have failed to achieve huge success.

Conclusion

Perhaps the core elements behind games and films increasing converging is how both game developers and film producers work together. Much like how some films are deep and involving and others require little thought and are instantly forgettable, so are some games. There will always be a market for thoughtless games that simply require 'twitch' reactions and no concept of studying the plot, while others attempt to create a deep plot requiring thought and emotion from the player so that they can fully interact with the experience that the game brings. The concept of similar CGI techniques being used within games as in films can aid the realism of a game in some respect but can never fully replace the experience of watching a film with real people in it. It is extremely possible that while films can never replace books, the same can be said of games and films. To gain a full experience of media, one needs all the different types to fully appreciate the knowledge they bring to us as a viewer, enabling us to experience things we would not ordinarily be able to encounter outside of films and games.

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