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The barrel and the monkey: application of auteur theory to digital games designers

ABSTRACT

With the increased exposure and popularity of digital games over the last two decades, growing interest in those who make and design them has begun to develop within the games journalist and enthusiast communities. While the role of developers within games design and production is hardly a revelation, this new found public fascination with the creative men and women behind the game has seen widespread impact across the games industry, particularly within the areas of games production, distribution and advertising. In many respects, what seems to be emerging parallels the widespread recognition of directorial influence on film production through the works of Truffaut (1954) and Sarris (1962): an unearthing of games industry auteurs.

While many similarities in terms of station, responsibility for project completion and subsequent marketability exist between cinematic directors and games designers, the means and processes by which these two create are fundamentally apart, as are how these might be read as an expression of an individual artistic vision or style. This article therefore explores the notion of auteur theory as a valid form of critical discourse within the particular context of the games development industry through the work prominent games Peter Molyneux (22 Cans, formerly Lionhead Studios).

KEYWORDS

digital games
auteur
designer
Peter Molyneux
agency

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal piece ‘The birth of a new avant-garde: La camera-stylo’ (1948), Alexander Astruc writes ‘the cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all other

arts have been before it... a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel’.

Beyond simply relating this discussion to the then emerging trend towards the production of experimental, avant-garde cinema, Astruc contends that technological shifts in the production of cameras (making them lighter, portable and more affordable) would place them in the hands of a more diffuse population of potential authors (Cook 2007: 390). In addition, and crucially to this article, Astruc marks a pivotal moment in cinematic critique, that would see a growing interest in the exploration of film as the expression of an artistic, authorial voice. In observing recent developments within the video games industry, a number of interesting parallels can be drawn to these conditions.

With the increased viability of digital distribution platforms, for example Steam, Xbox Live, Play Station Network, establishment of independent funding services like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, and relatively accessible development tools such as Game Maker, RPG Maker and Twine becoming more commonplace, the prohibitive barriers to entry to what has historically been a highly technical and exclusive creative industry have been considerably lowered. As a result, the video games industry has seen a relatively recent influx of smaller, independent developers that, through experimental and niche market projects, challenge traditional models of games creation. Significantly, as noted by Anna Anthropy in her manifesto *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (2012), as these factors have made game development accessible to those without formal training or technical expertise in programming, this allows for the generation of highly personal and idiosyncratic content seldom found within commercially released titles (Anthropy 2012: 3). The recent proliferation of such projects has served to establish potential markets for lower budget titles, in which project scale and mass commercial viability of content are of significantly lesser importance to the process of creation.

In the last five years with the release of a number of smaller, independently produced titles garnering both critical and commercial success (for example Jonathan Blow’s *Braid* (2008), Team Meat’s *Super Meat Boy* (2010), Polytron’s *Fez* (2012) and that game company’s *Journey* (2012), developers within the video games industry are finding themselves the focus of increased attention and curiosity. This attention, more than simply an appreciation of any individual game, extends to the creative design practices and paratextual presence of designers (for example through interview and documentary materials, developer blogs and so on), and the signature style exhibited in their work through these relays (Lukow

and Ricci 1984: 29). As film scholar David Bordwell would put it, the ‘biographical legend’ of the designers themselves (cited in Watson 2007).

Rather than being an incidental occurrence bound strictly to the emergence of a new wave of independent designers, in review of recent examples of games coverage and advertising of major, blockbuster equivalent ‘AAA’ titles, similar patterns can be observed. For example, during the period leading to its release in March of this year, *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013) (the third in the critically acclaimed *Bioshock* franchise helmed by creative director Ken Levine) heavily emphasised lengthy interviews and recorded discussions between Levine and members of the enthusiast press regarding his creative process throughout the design of the game and the direct outcomes found in the final shipped product (Polygon 2013; Giant Bomb 2013). Another useful example can be found in the forthcoming game in the *Batman: Arkham* franchise, *Batman: Arkham Origins*, in its change in development team from original franchise developers Rocksteady Studios to the newly formed Warner Bros. Games Montreal. Pre-release advertising material for this game, including interview materials and behind-the-scenes production updates, directly addresses this change in developer, to allay growing fan concerns that this would impact upon the quality or style of game they had come to expect from a Rocksteady developed Arkham franchise game (Game Informer 2013). By addressing the consumer audience in this way, these examples indicate an industrial acknowledgement of not only the interest from consumers in those behind the development of games, but increasingly, a loyalty that transcends franchise content and genre specificities; a fandom of the artists themselves.

Additionally, the paratextual material surrounding these two major studio releases indicate that while perhaps catalysed by a growth in independent games production, the intensified focus on the developer or designer is not merely the product of fanatical, esoteric, sub-cultural obsession. Rather, this seems to evidence an ever increasing, industry wide approach, actively shaping how games are created, advertised, discussed and engaged with by consumers.

It is argued here that this increased focus on the process of creation of video games is emblematic of changes occurring within the video games industry, that position it on the precipice of seismic shifts that parallel those observed in the film industry in the 1950s and 60s (Cook 2007: 411). Much like film before it, this shift would seem to indicate a desire to move away from considering games as merely a commercial entertainment product, and towards a broader recognition of video games as a legitimate, artistically expressive medium.

Given the relative importance of individual authorial intent in the process of establishing film as a legitimate art form (Cook 2007: 388), auteur theory serves as a crucial framework for the discussion of current trends across the entire video games industry.

This article therefore aims to provide a basis from which auteur theory may be applied to digital games designers, establishing the groundwork for a critical methodology which incorporates principles of games studies (both narratology and ludology) and design practice. Through examining the creative works of influential games designer Peter Molyneux (22 Cans, formerly Lionhead Studios) this will focus on establishing a single core design philosophy for the designer (defined here as a particular interest or focus in design practice), exploring how this influences all aspects of his approach to games design and is therefore representative of his individual auteur style.

PETER MOLYNEUX AND *FALSE 3*

Molyneux has often stated that a key feature of the games he creates is the idea of player driven experiences (Critical Path Project, 2012). Specifically, this relates to the player feeling a sense of ownership over the story or narrative of the game as it unfolds with their personal preferences and actions taken into account to manifest tangible outcomes during their game play experience. It is Molyneux's belief that by allowing players to feel this sense of ownership, they can be part of an experience that is far more immersive and emotionally evocative than would otherwise be possible and that in this sense of immersion lies the true value of interactivity in a storytelling medium (Critical Path Project, 2012). This core design philosophy will be the focus for the discussion throughout this article.

While the mechanical and narrative ways in which Molyneux has realised (and importantly, as developed later, failed to realise) this concept of player driven experiences vary between games and genres, there are a number of key elements which reoccur throughout his games that help facilitate this sense of player agency. Predominantly, these emphasise the player's feeling of power, control and having not only freedom of choice, but that choice having actual consequence to their game play experience. *Fable 3* (2010) represents perhaps the most coherent and well realised version of these concepts that Molyneux has produced.

Set during the industrial revolution in the fictional land of Albion (a deliberate reference to the archaic name for Great Britain, in keeping with Molyneux's frequent references to British culture and humour), *Fable 3* has the player take the role of the prince or princess. The sibling to a tyrannical king, the player is tasked with gathering sufficient

support from the people and leaders of Albion to revolt and overthrow their brother, earning fealty through the completion of tasks or quests. Once complete, the player returns to their home to supplant their brother as king or queen, ruling over Albion in their stead and steer the country, for better or worse, towards the game's ultimate conclusion.

Fable 3 presents a rather typical overarching plot construction of the role playing game (RPG) genre, closely following the structure of the monomyth as described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 1949). *Fable 3* starts the player living a life of sheltered privilege. Soon, however, the player is suddenly spurred into action by the tyranny under which his or her people must live and the death of their first potential love interest. Slowly building in strength and fellowship by overcoming trials, the player (or more appropriately, protagonist) may fall in love and marry, face the temptations of wealth and power, and ultimately transcend the bounds of the ordinary by becoming powerful beyond measure. Finally, the player triumphs over evil and then returns to rule over the country as king or queen, bringing with them the knowledge and skills they acquired over their journey to share with their subjects and aid in this task. More than being a loose retelling of this structure however, Molyneux follows this model so strictly that it directly influences the composition of the world design and character progression mechanics. Perhaps the best example of this is 'the road to rule'.

Campbell's monomyth has the hero meet a stage during their journey after the point of accepting their quest which requires them to overcome a series of trials or feats in order to prepare for their final goal. Campbell refers to this stage as the 'road of trials' (Campbell 1949: 81). In *Fable 3*, rather than being a figurative or metaphoric road, this is represented in game by a physical road located in an alternate, ethereal realm. The passing of each trial on the projected literal pathway to the castle in which the player begins and must inevitably return is marked by a gateway, each representing the completion of a significant moment in the plot. These gateways are guarded by a blind, female seer, taking the role of Campbell's threshold guardian (Campbell 1949: 64). Through the completion of the road, Campbell's hero gains valuable knowledge for what is to come at each step in preparation for their final goal. In *Fable 3*, the passing of each gate unlocks access to abilities that the player may purchase with experience points gained for performing tasks and felling enemies during the last section of the game. Other examples abound within *Fable 3*.

While *Fable 3* contains perhaps the most direct example of Molyneux's use of the monomyth as narrative structure, with the exception of *Syndicate* (1993), *Theme Park* (1994),

Hi-Octane (1995) and, *The Movies* (2005), all Molyneux's games draw upon this basic narrative structure to some extent. Considering that the monomyth as a formula has a very particular, linear construction, Molyneux's emphasis on creating player driven experiences might seem somewhat questionable. Undoubtedly, the monomyth is a narrative arc that deals directly with the notion of power and attainment, something which Molyneux favours greatly in his design ethos. But under this construction there seems to be little room for player agency.

While the majority of this choice and agency can be found in the customisation and development of the player character and the game mechanics and systems, as will be discussed later in this article, Molyneux's focus on modular narrative structure achieves much of this feeling of player agency from a story perspective. Taking *Fable 3* for example, the game has an overall linear narrative structure that must be adhered to. The player will always begin in the same location, particular events in the plot will always occur regardless of the decisions made by the player and the player will always return to Bowerstone castle and reign as king or queen. These events can be thought of as markers or points of narrative convergence, mirroring in a sense the gateways on the road to rule, or the different stages in Campbell's monomyth.

Between these points however, the player is free to explore the expanse of the game environment, with only certain sections locked away at any given time to function as set pieces and enacted plot points. This free exploration, which can potentially make up the majority of the player's experience with the game, allows the player a far greater degree of control and choice within the overall linear framework through the use of what Janet Murray would describe as procedural narrative affordances, or Henry Jenkins' model of emergent (Jenkins 2004: 10) and embedded (Jenkins 2004: 9) narrative architecture. Through traversal of the varied in game environments (forests, deserts, caves, cityscapes etc.), the player is exposed not only to the spatial narrative of Albion, but also to characters that inhabit these areas. This might be simply by listening to scripted dialogue sequences as the non-player characters interact with one another, or through direct interaction with these characters. The nature of the character interactions tends to be fairly abstract, reserved to single lines of dialogue that provide shallow characterisation and mimetic gestures. Lacking an in-depth development of incidental characters through scripted dialogue, Molyneux instead invites the player to fill in these gaps themselves, prescribing their own meaning for the largely symbolic interactions to add narrative subtext.

Additionally, *Fable 3* presents many side quests and small narrative sequences that can only be found through exploration. Functioning generally as self-contained vignettes, these sequences embedded into the game environment serve to further develop the tone and living history of the world in which the player is cast. This embedded narrative functions as a form of *mise-en-scène*, further establishing the narrative framing of the main story. More importantly however, as many of these moments do not directly influence the primary plot, they often heavily emphasise player agency in the navigation of the situations presented. For example, the player frequently encounters beggars in their travels. Presented with these characters, the player may choose to give them money, ignore them, sell them to a work house, visit violence upon them and so on. As all are viable options, this provides the player with many narrative opportunities that fall outside the critical path of the monomyth and through interaction with the world allows them to engage in any number of potential narrative arcs, effectively crafting the story they wish to experience.

While *Fable 3* is just one example of this modular form of narrative structure, the majority of Molyneux's titles feature some form of it. This in part owes to the genre in which they were created. More than half of these games are of some variation of the simulation or strategy genres, which by their design feature a more self-contained, mission based structure. The few exceptions to this design are *Populous*, *Powermonger* (1990) and *Theme Park* (1994), which rather than presenting a binding narrative arc that takes the player through a predetermined number of sequences, instead randomly generate a particular mission at the request of the player, offering a more non-linear style of game play.

Molyneux also employs the use of game mechanics and emergent narrative to develop the concept of moral choice for the player. This concept is one that appears frequently in his games, originating in a rudimentary fashion in his first commercial and critical success, *Populous* (1989). The first of several Molyneux games to cast the player in the role of a god, *Populous* grants the ability to alter the physical landscape of the game play environment, raising it or lowering as they choose. This allows the player, for instance, to level surfaces upon which the denizens of the world may build structures, or lower the ground beneath said structures to submerge them in water, destroying the buildings and killing their inhabitants. While there is no compelling narrative or gameplay reason to do this, as there is neither explicit story presented nor reward provided through the game for behaving in such a way, it affords the player choice in setting themselves as either a kind or malevolent deity, based solely upon the way they choose to interact with the game mechanics. While this direct

moral dichotomy is most evident in the *Populous*, *Black & White* and *Fable* franchises, similar emergent narrative opportunities in most Molyneux titles.

Thus, Molyneux offers the player a number of narrative options throughout the course of his games, allowing them the freedom to develop their protagonist into one of depth and complex, sometimes contradictory motivations. However, this range of choice in navigation presents something of a complication in the conclusive chapters of Molyneux's games. Specifically, if the player is allowed total freedom of choice, how then can these choices be reconciled with what is a fixed narrative conclusion? This disconnect between designer *a priori* and player *posteriori* narrative generation is appears regularly in Molyneux's work, with the meaningful integration of player choice often remaining functionally unresolved.

While representing a departure in both genre and immediate player perspective, the influences of Molyneux's continual development of player positioning can be seen in the execution of *Fable 3* and indeed the entire *Fable* franchise. As described above, *Fable 3* is a variation of the RPG genre called 'Action RPG', wherein fast and fluid combat mechanics are emphasised through play. Unlike the strategy genre for which Molyneux is perhaps best known, RPGs do not necessarily need to adopt any one form of perspective in order to function, as the genre is categorised more by persistent player character *mutability* and advancement. *Fable 3*'s third person perspective therefore can be seen as an expression of two related factors that relate to both Molyneux's core design philosophy and his continuing experimentation with perspective to reinforce these ideas. The first is that the third person perspective places the player's gaze in close proximity to their in game representation at all times, reducing the alienating affect that is generally produced by the top-down or isometric perspectives. While operating somewhat as passenger rather than agent, this still allows the player to feel drawn into the game environment, while providing a greater degree of spatial awareness than the first person perspective can provide. Second, the third person perspective allows the player character to be wholly visible at all times during play allowing them to be viewed by the player as characters within the game environment would see them, a subject of their awe.

Many of the key game play mechanics that directly represent Molyneux's core design philosophy are directly observable within *Fable 3*. In general, these mechanics serve to compliment and reinforce the ideas of player agency, control, choice and immersion that are the focus of Molyneux's approach to game design. While not as immediately obvious to

the player, other mechanics and rules that further serve to emphasise this sense of agency for the player are recurrent in many of Molyneux's works.

For example, character mutability and progression through game play frequently appears in Molyneux's games in a linear fashion, with certain abilities and upgrades to the player's toolset being accessible at key points of the game, regardless of the path of progression the player has chosen to take (good, evil or otherwise). While this may imply that the player has little control as to how these skills develop and become available, Molyneux's emphasis is not necessarily on locking a player into a specific pathway of character development. Rather, by allowing them to remain fluid in their experimentation with the myriad mechanics, rules and abilities written into the game space, Molyneux provides the player freedom to express themselves as they see fit with the repercussions for their decisions, such as they are, felt as a result of how they choose to employ them.

As a result, Molyneux's titles generally feature game play characterised by Gonzalo Frasca's definition of *paidia* (Frasca 2007: 39), focusing on free form exploration of game rules and mechanics in order to define the experience of play. For Molyneux, this can be evidenced by their loose narrative structure that heavily emphasises emergent architecture, where engagement by the player with the systems and mechanics that exist in the game world serves to progress their personal narrative development. Thus, these games tend to exist more as digital playgrounds than as a cohesive, well-paced narrative experiences. While in the *Fable* franchise, Molyneux has opted to construct games with a more linear focus and finite teleology, operating more from the *ludus* end of Frasca's typological spectrum (Frasca 2007: 39), these too feature large portions of free form exploration and mechanical interaction. Ultimately, it is these moments that drive the player's core experience of the game (Hunike, LeBlanc & Zubek 2004).

Molyneux's narrative architecture can be thought of then to be in service of the player's engagement with the world he has crafted, being of only secondary importance. Instead, his focus is on allowing the player to develop a sense of immersion through the feelings of control, power, choice and consequence, not simply of the narrative, but the very world itself.

While not always successful in his application of his ideas, Molyneux's consistent willingness to challenge traditional player interface and control, and experimentation with human interaction illustrate the consistency of his commitment to the dissolution of the barrier between virtual and real spaces, and of game and player and thus his auteur style.

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