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22. Genre Profile: Interactive Movies

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The interactive movie as a genre holds a place in the history of video games for one main reason: its well-known failure. Made possible by the increased storage capacity of laserdisc and CD-ROM, the idea was to take “video game” literally by combining full-motion video of live-action footage and cinematic techniques with a gaming experience. Considered to be at the cutting edge of technology at the beginning of the 1990s and seen as the future of the industry (mainly by those who were making them), interactive movies were no longer made by the end of the decade, despite the introduction of DVDs, which had greater storage capacity greatly and improved the use of movie clips. They came to have a very bad reputation due to the limited possibilities of their branching structures, their lack of interactivity, the bad acting of their cast, and, in the case of the earlier interactive movies, their low resolution pictures and the dismal quality of their playback. Yet despite such a general discredit, we should not overlook this phenomenon.

Since we are referring to movies, it is in the genre’s best interest to be viewed in the light of the “cinema of attractions”, a concept introduced to better understand the specificity of the early cinema by comparison with the institutional narrative cinema that we are more familiar with.¹ The term “cinema of attractions” refers to the exhibitionist nature of early cinema, a cinema willing to display its visibility and to rupture the self-enclosed fictional world to get the attention of the spectator or, in this case, of the gamer. While the cinema of attractions was more interested in the film’s ability to show something rather than the telling of stories, the interactive movie was more concerned with questions of non-linear storytelling and photorealistic imagery than the development of innovative gameplay. During the early 1990s, full motion video (FMV) was a novelty in games, just as the cinema was a novelty at the end of the 19th century. It is thus understandable that interactive movies appeared at a particular period of technological progress. And some interactive movies had quite an impact at the time they were produced.

Although the genre came to be associated with live-action video, its first occurrence is an animated interactive movie now displayed in the Smithsonian Institution alongside the only two other video games there, *PONG* (1972) and *Pac-Man* (1980). *Dragon’s Lair* (1983) was the first analog laserdisc-based coin-op videogame to be released. The idea became clear to designer and programmer Rick Dyer at a 1982 coin-op trade show when he saw *Astron Belt* (which was finally released by Sega/Bally in 1984), the first arcade game ever created with a laserdisc generating the background footage (computer graphics were used for the foreground ship and lasers). Dyer then approached former Disney animator Don Bluth, who the previous year had created the acclaimed film *The Secret of NIMH* (and who teamed up with Gary Goldman and John Pomeroy for Dyer’s project), in order to create a game based on the new laserdisc machine. The production cost of *Dragon’s Lair* was ten times the average budget of the era (\$1.3 million), but grossed \$32 million in its first eight months. This was due to the 22 minutes of pre-recorded full animation that really stood out in comparison to the computer-generated graphics displayed on the screens of other arcade games. It was so impressive that it cost 50¢ instead of 25¢ to play, and some arcade owners even installed a monitor over the cabinet so people could watch the game as it was played. *Dragon’s Lair* wasn’t just another game; as Bluth said in September 1983, “We’ve combined the unique capabilities of both computer and animation and formed a new style of entertainment – participatory movies.”² The gamer was indeed invited to play his “own” cartoon, to embark in a fantasy adventure by becoming Dirk the Daring, a valiant knight gone to rescue the fair and voluptuous Princess Daphne from the clutches of Singe the Evil Dragon. His actual participation consisted of making decisions by using a joystick to give Dirk directions or hitting an action button to make him strike with his sword. If the direction chosen was good or the

“sword” button pushed at the right moment, the obstacle was overcome or the monster slaughtered. If not, Dirk died in horrible and funny ways. This decision-tree branching gameplay would attract a following and remains the basic design model of interactive movies. Indeed, the popularity of *Dragon’s Lair* saw the release of similar games like *Space Ace* (Cinematronics/Magicom, 1983), *Cliff Hanger* (Stern/Seeburg, 1983) and *Badlands* (Konami/Centuri, 1984). In the 1990s, Sega TruVideo Productions like *The Masked Rider: Kamen Rider ZO* (Sega, 1994) and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (Sega, 1994) even recreated a similar experience using footage from the popular TV series. Nevertheless, those games never achieved the same success. If *Dragon’s Lair* “proved to be a milestone in the history of videogames”, it’s because “its debut not only served as a window to the future of interactive entertainment, but also represented the industry’s last great hurrah before it came to crashing down in 1984.”³

Sport games, such as *Goal to Go* (Stern/Seeburg, 1983), which were composed of real sport sequences, were made at the same time as *Dragon’s Lair*.⁴ In the same vein as *Astron Belt*, 1980s arcade laserdisc games using video footage had also short lifespans, due to the unreliability of the technology. Shooting games akin to *M.A.C.H. 3* (Mylstar/Gottlieb, 1983) and *US vs. Them* (Mylstar/Gottlieb, 1984), and racing games like *Laser Grand Prix* (Taito, 1983) and *GP World* (Sega, 1984) gave more continuous control to the gamer. The company American Laser Games revived the use of live-action in the arcade at the beginning of the 1990s with its nine laserdisc games. A flyer underlines what distinguished its first-person shooters from the other ones made at the time: “The player is part of a true-to-life movie... combining laser technology with player interaction!” Formerly designed to train police officers, the games offered the player “realism never seen in the amusement game industry.”⁵ In games such as *Mad Dog McCree* (1990), *Who Shot Johnny Rock?* (1991), *Space Pirates* (1992), *Crime Patrol* (1993), and *Fast Draw Showdown* (1994) which was the first laserdisc game to film its imagery in “portrait” mode instead of the usual “landscape” mode, the gamer had first and foremost to draw his light gun before his rivals did. The plotlines of the games—rescuing the Mayor and his daughter from the lowdown dirty sidewinder Mad Dog McCree, trying to discover who shot Johnny, searching for energy crystals to save the galaxy, joining the force to fight crime, or competing to be the fastest gunfighter in town—were of course a pretext to stage many shoot-outs which took place in different locations. If the gamer stayed alive or did not kill an innocent bystander, he gathered clues and the story unfolded a bit more. If not, he lost a life and funny comments were made about his death. This was not very different from *Dragon’s Lair*.

It is really with the advent of CD-based home systems that movie-like gaming experiences arose. The introduction of the Multimedia PC (MPC) in 1990 and the release of the peripheral TurbografX-CD in 1989, the Philips CD-i system in 1991, the Sega CD add-on in 1992, and the 3DO console in 1993 marked the increased use of live-action video. Compared to cartridges, the amount of information the CD could hold allowed the storing of movie sequences (that were even called “cinemas” at the time). *Dragon’s Lair*, its clones, and the American Laser Games first-person shooters (available with a gamegun for the Sega CD and 3DO or a peacekeeper revolver for the Philips CD-i) thus made their way into the home. The laserdisc game *US vs. Them* (1984) had filmed cut-scenes of frightened citizens and military command personnel between missions, and many other games had such “cinematics” (the real-time strategy game series *Command & Conquer* from Westwood Studios, for instance, was known for its live-action cut-scenes). The attraction of cinema drove all types of games to be associated with the interactive movie genre.

Available only on CD-ROM (since it was too large for floppy disks), *The 7th Guest* (Trilobyte/Virgin Games, 1992/1993⁶) was one of the three “killer applications” that launched, according to Steven L. Kent, the multimedia revolution (along with *Myst* and *Doom* released in 1993). As a showcase for technology, it was, claimed Kent, “a masterpiece”.⁷ To Microsoft’s Founder Bill Gates, it was “the new standard in interactive entertainment”.⁸ Designers Rob Landeros and Graeme Devine formed their own company, Trilobyte, to create “the first interactive drama in a terrifying real virtual environment complete with live actors”, according to the game’s box. Inspired by the board game *Clue* and by David Lynch’s television series *Twin Peaks*, the game revolves around an investigation to identify an unknown guest that would join six ghostly visitors invited to a spooky mansion owned by the evil toymaker Henry Stauf. Through the eyes of Ego, a disembodied consciousness, the gamer moves in widescreen through the rooms of the

high-resolution pre-rendered 3-D house to solve puzzles that unfold in part the story. Although *The 7th Guest* is mainly a puzzle-oriented game, it was not meant to be only that. In the second version of the design document, Landeros and Devine stated: “We at Trilobyte have coined the phrase “Hyper Movie” to describe the medium in which we work.” The entire product was “to be regarded as one big audience-participation cinematic production.”⁹ Indeed, thanks to innovations in digital compression and full-motion video playback, the game is peppered with short film clips showing the actors superimposed over the 3-D image with a transparency and aura effect (due to a technical error that fortunately contributed to the look of the game). Contrary to their arcade game background (film footage based laserdisc games which used computer graphics in the foreground), it now became the norm to stage the actors in virtual settings. By solving the brainteasers, exploring the house, and clicking on objects, the gamer of *The 7th Guest* is rewarded with sequences which uncover the desires of the ghostly visitors, expose their relationships, and unravel their roles in Stauf’s malevolent machinations. As this plotline is puzzling, it also contributes to the overall appeal of the game.

The huge success of *The 7th Guest* saw the release of similar games and of a sequel, *The 11th Hour* (Trilobyte/Virgin Games, 1995) which was difficult to develop and did not sell as well. Landeros teamed up with filmmaker David Wheeler, who had directed the film parts of *The 11th Hour*, to produce two of the last interactive movies on DVD: *Tender Loving Care* (Aftermath Media/DVD International, 1999) and *Point Of View* (Digital Circus/DVD International 2001). The first, starring John Hurt, relates the weird links which form between a husband, his lovely but sick wife, and the sensual but devious nurse/therapist who comes to live with the couple in order to take care of the wife. The second tells the story of a young and reclusive artist named Jane who spies on her musician neighbor. The interactivity works the same in both cases. The movies are divided into chapters, and each chapter ends with exit poll questions about the action and the secret thoughts and desires of the player. The answers to those questions influence the way the following chapter will be selected.

While mature themes and some violence are found in *Tender Loving Care* (which had nudity as well) and *Point Of View*, the scenes were not that problematic at the end of the 1990s since the games were rated. But this was not the case at the beginning of the decade. For a start, many of the Sega games were based on live-action sequences. TruVideo Productions like *Fahrenheit* (Sega, 1995) and *Wirehead* (1995) exploited a decision-tree branching gameplay akin to *Dragon’s Lair* by putting the gamer in the shoes of a fireman rescuing people and of a father with a wireless controller in his brain who has to escape evil clutches. A company like Digital Pictures developed titles for the Sega CD such as the create-your-own-music-video series *Make My Video: INXS/Kriss Kross/Marky Mark & the Funky Bunch* (1992), the first person shooter *Corpse Killer* (1992), the rail shooter *Sewer Shark* (1994), the fighting game *Supreme Warrior* (1994) and the basketball game *Slam City with Scottie Pippen* (1995). Digital Pictures made *Night Trap* in 1992, one of the first live-action video games released on the Sega CD. Tom Zito, founder of the company, was thinking about merging movies and video games in mid-1980s. He believed, Steven L. Kent reports, that controlling real people instead of cartoons would give games impact.¹⁰ Although such an idea remains questionable, his game was indeed to become famous for the controversy it sparked. Inspired by the idea of an interactive movie based on the film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Night Trap*, shot on location in 1986 and starring the television celebrity Dana Plato, was not a typical video game. Playing an agent of the S.C.A.T. (Sega Control Attack Team), the gamer has to protect a group of five girls at a week-end house party from the vampires. By closely monitoring, through hidden cameras, eight rooms displayed at the bottom of the film screen, the gamer needs to capture the hooded intruders with traps concealed in the house and accessed with a code that could be changed anytime during the game. If the gamer clicks on an operable trap at the right moment, he captures an intruder. If he does not, the intruder leaves the room or a victim is attacked with a weird drilling device or hangs on a meat hook. Although the action is far from gory, the girls don’t run naked everywhere in the house, and the goal is to save, not to kill, the young ladies, *Night Trap* was, with the fighting game *Mortal Kombat* (Midway/Acclaim, 1993), at the origin of a Congressional investigation about violence in video games. Encouraged or not by Nintendo in order to undermine Sega’s commercial success, the December 1993 hearings were commissioned by Democrat Senator Joseph Lieberman. Along with the fact that

any young person could buy the game, a main concern of the first session was the realistic look of the live actors in *Night Trap*.¹¹ The hearings lead to the development of a ratings system, at first Sega's own Videogame Rating Council (VRC) in 1993, and the video game industry's Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) the following year. *Night Trap's* clone, "the cinematic mystery" *Double Switch* (Digital Pictures/Sega, 1993) was rated as a teen game (ages 13+) by Sega VRC.

As *Night Trap* came under fire, the release of Philips CD-i *Voyeur* (POV Entertainment Group/Philips Interactive Media, 1993/1994) did not bring as much political controversy. And yet the gameplay was similar and the content was adult-oriented enough to receive an "18" certificate by the British Board of Film Classification. *Voyeur* shows women in lingerie, simulates sex scenes right from the start, and has lesbian relationships. Living in front of the Hawke's Manor where family members and guests are gathering for a last weekend before the father decides to run for the Presidency of the United States, the gamer is contacted by the police at the beginning of the game. He is to spy on the Hawke in order to get incriminating evidence on video and audio tapes about the aforementioned father who wants to hide a secret which could compromise his political career. The gameplay consists of clicking on windows of the manor to read information, look at personal belongings, hear conversations, or witness some scenes between the characters staged in digital settings. Created by the Hollywood production company that made the film *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991), *Voyeur* was a "true hybrid" as it showed, and *Time Magazine* reported how this coming "attraction" had "real motion pictures on the screen while the player control[led] which of hundreds of twists and turns the plot [would] take."¹² The number of twists and turns is obviously not that many, but the game runs differently every time its one weekend game time sessions are played. *Voyeur II*, the sequel, banked on the same formula in 1996.

Interactive movies centered on mystery or detective stories are numerous, and are, as opposed to the voyeuristic distance of *Voyeur* that leaves the gamer out of the action, better described as adventure games where the gamer works along with the investigator. *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* (ICOM Simulations, 1991, three volumes were released), originally developed for home computer CD-ROMs, is the first of this kind and the earliest use of live-action video in a small window at the center of the screen. To solve (in the desired order) the three "Full-Motion Color Video Whodunits" (according to the box) introduced by Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, the gamer has to consult editions of *The Times*, to lean on the insights of the Baker Street Irregulars, and to look at Holmes' files. The gamer is mostly able to choose from Holmes's notebook or the London directory to travel to places so as to meet with the Regulars, the witnesses, and the suspects. The movie clips filmed with professional actors in real sets show the detective with or without his acolyte talking to people.

Whereas the exchanges of *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* occur without interruption, conversations are rendered interactively and the gamer is given a choice of answers through dialog boxes in the graphic adventure game tradition. The second of the five titles of the Tex Murphy series (Access Software, 1989-1998), *Martian Memorandum* (1991) had small, low resolution talking heads to answer questions. However, even if the gamer was supposed to "experience interactive cinema" (according to the box), it is with the third and classic *Under a Killing Moon* (1994) that the gamer would see the Philip Marlowe-type detective portrayed in live-action video. With this "interactive 3-D experience that [set] a new standard for realism" (according to the box), creator Chris Jones, who also plays Tex Murphy, reversed the idea behind the film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), so that the spectator is participating in the virtual world¹³ (an idea, predictably enough, shared by the other designers of interactive movies). This world, far from being realistic in regard to movie standards, is a 2042 futuristic San Francisco where the hardboiled private investigator has to accomplish nothing less than to save the world in seven days. A paradigm of the genre, the navigation in the 3-D computer graphic environment is made through a first-person perspective (to save production cost). Film clips come into view upon clicking on objects and by interacting with people through dialog boxes. *The Pandora Directive* (1996) and *Tex Murphy: Overseer* (1998, released on CD and DVD), with widescreen imagery, ended the series. Various adventure mysteries and detective movie games have been developed, such as *The Dame Was Loaded* (Beam Software/Philips Interactive Media, 1995), the singular

Psychic Detective (Colossal Pictures/Electronic Arts, 1995), *In the First Degree* (Brøderbund/Brøderbund, 1995), *Ripper* (Take Two Interactive/Take Two Interactive, 1996), *Spycraft* (Activision/Activision, 1996), *Black Dahlia* (Interplay/Take Two interactive, 1997) (with a record 8 CDs), *Dark Side of the Moon* (SouthPeak Interactive/SouthPeak Interactive, 1998) and *The X-Files Game* (Hyperbole Studios/Fox Interactive, 1998). As for the latter company, Hyperbole Studios made two early examples of “VirtualCinema movies”: *Quantum Gate* in 1993 and *The Vortex: Quantum Gate II* in 1994.

The attraction of live-action video inspired celebrated game designers such as Chris Roberts, Roberta Williams, and Jane Jensen to move in this direction. Chris Roberts’ *Wing Commander* series was successful right from the start in 1990, depicting a galactic war between a Confederation of human systems and the Empire of Kilrathi, a race of warlike, feline extraterrestrials. However, *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger* (Origin Systems/Organ Systems, 1994) became more than just a space combat simulation. Roberts made one of his dreams come true: he shot a (interactive) movie. (He later also directed the film adaptation of his series in 1999.) While all the games with live-action video were expensive, *Wing Commander III* was marketed as a multi-million dollar production (\$3.5 million) and, above all, as “professionally scripted and filmed in Hollywood” (according to the box). With a cast led by Mark Hamill (the Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars*), Malcolm McDowell, and John Rhys-Davies, the game lived up to expectations. In order to succeed in the combat sequences, the main goal of Colonel Christopher Blair (Hamill) is to keep up the morale of his troops. Through conversations, he has to choose between two options regarding a character or an event. The decision the gamer takes will have an impact on what will happen next; a wingman always fights better with his morale high. The interactive video sequences therefore serve to add depth to the characters. They also help to further the story, a story told in the same way in *Wing Commander IV: The Price of Freedom* (1995, which had an impressive budget of \$12 million) and *Wing Commander: Prophecy* (1997).

Carrying on the Sierra On-line tradition of point-and-click adventure, Roberta Williams and Jane Jensen created two classics of the interactive movie genre. Co-founder of the company and designer of the famous *King’s Quest* series, Williams wanted to try something new. She decided to make a horror game and thought it was necessary to use real actors to truly scare people.¹⁴ The third-person perspective *Phantasmagoria* (Sierra On-Line/Sierra On-Line, 1995) takes place in a digitally rendered manor and town (whereas *Phantasmagoria II: A Puzzle of Flesh*, not designed by Williams, would be shot in real sets). Adrienne, the main character, has to discover the mystery of the manor and to fight an evil spirit she ill-advisedly released and who comes to possess her husband. The game contains a rape and several violent death scenes. Controversial enough, it was banned by the Australian government. Nonetheless, it was considered at the time a masterpiece and was part of the “Hot Ten List” (along with *The 11th Hour*) in the September 1995 *Electronic Gaming Monthly*. Jane Jensen’s *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery* (Sierra On-Line/Sierra On-Line, 1995) was also well received. Alternating between Gabriel Knight and his assistant Grace Nakimura, the goal is to solve the mysterious existence of a werewolf. Praised as a great adventure, it was also considered to be one of the few successful examples of live-action video used over photographed backdrops. What’s more, Jensen’s series is in itself very representative of the evolution of genre. It goes from 2-D with *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers* (1993), to full-motion video with *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery*, and to 3-D with *Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned* (1999).

Upon the release of *Dragon’s Lair* in 1983, associate editor Telka S. Perry underlined in a epigraph of her article “Video Games: The Next Wave”, that although interactive disk technology lent reality to arcade games (and home video games, we should add), purists still believed the ultimate video game evolution lied in real-time computer-generated graphics.¹⁵ This actually turned out to be true. As real-time 3-D engines grew in image processing power during the mid-1990s and delivered a much more truly interactive experience, the production cost and the lack of malleability of the filmic image, coupled with limited gameplay, became less appealing for both designers and gamers. Just like the early cinema of attraction, the making of interactive movies would give way to other practices. The interlude of the interactive cinema experiment in the 1980s and 1990s would have shown that, indeed, video games are not the movies.

Notes

1. According to Gunning, the cinema of attractions is in fact opposed to the cinema of narrative integration which subordinates film form to the development of stories and characters. See André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, "Le cinéma des premiers temps, un défi à l'histoire du cinéma?", in J. Aumont, A. Gaudreault and M. Marie (editor), *Histoire du Cinéma, Nouvelles Approches*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris, 1989, pages 49-63, and Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde", in *Early Cinema, Space. Frame, Narrative*, in Thomas Elsaesser (editor), British Film Institute, London, pages 56-62.
2. From the September 1983 article, "Dragon's Lair: a Marriage of Science and Art" included with the game *Don Bluth Presents Dragon's Lair 20th Anniversary Special Edition* (2003). However, the source is not indicated.
3. See Marc Saltzman, "Dragon's Lair", *Supercade. A Visual History of the Videogame Age 1971-1984*, edited by Van Burnham, Cambridge, MA\assachusetts: MIT Press, 2003, page 348. As the first game to feature High Definition TV graphics, *Dragon's Lair 3D: Return to the Lair* (Dragonstone Software/Ubisoft, 2002) also has its place in history.
4. For information about early laserdisc games, the website www.dragons-lair-project.com remains the most significant reference.
5. A flyer available at http://www.dragons-lair-project.com/games/materials/flyers/large/md_02.jpg.
6. The date on the box set of the game is 1992, but it is known to have been released in 1993. The same is true of the Philips CD-i version of *Voyeur* (1993/1994).
7. Steven L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, New York, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001, pages 456-457.
8. Daniel Ichbiah, *La saga des jeux vidéo*, Paris, France: Éditions Générales First – Pocket, 1997, page 208.
9. Rusel Demaria, *The 7th Guest: The Official Guide*, Rocklin, California: Prima Publishing, 1993, pages 344 and 345.
10. Steven L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, New York, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001, page 273.
11. Ibid, page 470.
12. See Philip Elmer-Dewitt, "The Amazing Video Game Boom", *Time* (Attack of the Video Games), Vol 142, No 13, September 27, 1993, page 43.
13. From an interview found in Rick Barba, *Under a Killing Moon. The Official Strategy Guide*, Rocklin, California: Prima Publishing, 1995, page 229.
14. See Rusel Demaria and Johnny L. Wilson, *High Score!: The Illustrated History of Electronic Games*, Berkeley, California: McGraw Hill/Osborne, 2002, page 142.
15. See Telka S. Perry, "Video Games: The Next Wave", *IEEE Spectrum*, Vol. 20, No 12, December 1983, pages 52-59.