

There have been lots of groundbreaking games recently: games like Batman: Arkham Asylum, Uncharted 2, Brutal Legend, Dragon Age, and Assassins Creed 2.

These games speak to the controversy over stories in games. Some people think stories are crucial in games and others think they are irrelevant (like stories in pornography as John Carmak once said). As a gamer, I think story in terms of any grand plot is pretty irrelevant. I can never remember the plots of game stories even when I am playing the games, though I can remember plots well in books. But these recent games really marry and integrate story, environment (virtual world), cinemagraphic effects, and game play.

Uncharted 2 is the best example of a game that truly integrates cinemagraphic effects, story, and game play. In fact, at times in the game you cannot really tell whether you are watching a movie or playing a game. And the cinemagraphic effects and game play constantly enact the swashbuckling story of the game. What this creates is what I will call a sense of “lucid action”. When I act in the game (embodied by my character) I always know why I am doing what I am doing and I understand what my actions mean in the “emotional economy” of the story.

The story in Uncharted 2 is a rather typical Raiders of the Lost Ark sort of story. The plot is not important really. What is important is how the plot elements integrate with cinemagraphic effects and game play to create a lucid sense of action in the way I just defined it.

Assassins 2 is a deeper example. The game faithfully recreates Renaissance Italy, tells a complex story of conspiracy, betrayal, and intrigue, and creates powerful cinemagraphic moments (e.g., when you survey the landscape atop a high tower or when you assassinate a powerful figure and then say prayers over his dying body). The game also gives the player an encyclopedia of information about the Renaissance and Italy in small chunks. Again, I do not remember or even understand all the details of the plot. But the plot motifs, the amazing virtual Renaissance Italy, the cinemagraphic effects, the encyclopedic information, and the game play (conspiring to revenge a conspiracy, enacting the identity of an ancient Assassin) all converge on a lucid sense of action: I know why I am doing what I doing and understand clearly what my actions mean in the emotional economy of the story.

What all this means is that the actions you take—the game play—always means something in the sense of being an answer to questions that flow from the marriage of the story, the environment, and the information you have been given. You know why you are doing what you are doing not just in the sense of the motive, but in the deeper sense of what it means to you (your character) and what it feels like.

Such a lucid sense of action makes for immersive and powerful game play. I would also argue that such a lucid sense of action is an important cognitive state for humans when they are learning and performing at their best. Good scientists have it when they are working at their peak (yes, doing science and the narrative one is a part of in doing specific instances of science have an emotional economy). In fact, a lucid sense of action (in the sense I have defined it) is probably both connected to and more important than “flow” in both gaming (of the sort I am talking about here) and science and other forms of accomplishment.

These new games are setting the way for a new form of entertainment, one based on a lucid sense of action.