

THE SECRET OF THE POINT AND CLICK ADVENTURES: PSYCHOANALYTIC POINT OF POINTING IN A BYGONE GENRE

Abstract. *This article analyzes the general characteristic of once exceptionally popular genre of adventure video games, which reached its peak with the famous pirate series Monkey Island. Although there have been various attempts to revive it, it is inevitably situated among the relics of history. The reason could be traced to a variety of developmental, economic and conceptual features, but in the final instance it was its own structure that led to its downfall or death. Since its formation, the adventure genre was namely imbued with an unabolishable contradiction, which certainly situates it alongside psychoanalytic practice. It was simultaneously striving for something too much and too little. The adventure games are on the one hand based on the assumption that all the in-game possibilities are pre-arranged, so that the player is only left to acknowledge and approve the already adopted path. But on the other, the genre thrived on experimenting with the game mechanism, where the contingent acts of pointing retroactively undermined the necessity of such preconditioned actions. The article is accordingly based on the premise that the ensuing inference doesn't solely indicate a specific feature of this genre, but also highlights the peculiarity of human existence as such.*

Keywords: *adventure games, pointing, contradiction, Lacan, meaning*

Introduction

"Adventures teaches you a lot of things: reading, English, stealing, pointing, clicking, spitting, saving often but not good habits."

Developers of Monkey Island

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Since the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk and it has been more than ten years since the sudden decline in popularity of adventure games, it is probably an appropriate time to reevaluate this genre whose shelf life has obviously expired some time ago, even if individual authors are still trying to reinvigorate it. The evolution of this genre was full of coincidences and innovative ideas. From the first textual adventures, where the commands had to be entered manually, to *Mystery House* (On-line Systems, 1980) which announced the rise of graphic adventures, and finally *Déjà vu* (ICOM Simulations inc., 1985), whose mouse input enabled the point and click adventures to flourish, they were constantly pioneering the video game business. It would nevertheless be unfair if the conceptual, economical development and, of course, the economical climax of this genre would not be equated with the series *Monkey Island* (Lucasarts, 1990–2011). The latter did not occupy its place in history by refining and completing the game system, but by relying on the contradiction inherent in this genre. Such an undertaking was ultimately also its undoing. The already mentioned attempts to steer the development of adventures more in accordance with certain rules and laws, was also the cause which finally prevented any hope of its revival.

What the developers have forgotten are the consequences of an inner impossibility of particular genres, wherein tonal music and westerns also famously found themselves. Although after Eastwood's last western *Unforgiven* it is still possible to film and reproduce Westerns in the traditional way, it is easy to forget that they have lost all their innocence; they are always mediated through the 'revisionist' break, which functions as its negation. It is no different with the process of creating authentic adventures – an impossible task. Such attempts at artistic production can produce only kitsch, an inherently sentimental and inauthentic behavior. It is a sort of infantile wishful thinking, like idealistic love between a attractive, heroic young man and a pious, beautiful girl. Such fantasies are nothing else than memory traces of something non-existent. What then is the peculiarity of adventure games that simultaneously gives them certain legitimacy?

Adventures per psychoanalysis

In general, video games, like all subjective practices, are bound to their own discourse; that is, their use of language expresses a particular dilemma in our social fabric. More specifically, games are a rhetorical mean by which we get an insight into the structural necessities and intricacies of human experience. This positions them alongside other art forms, which function as thought procedures, consistently committed to the creation of new practices, new potentials, new ways of living and thus certain discrepancies.

Their parallelism is evidenced by the fact that they are equally committed to the use of certain skills, which are not merely a transfer of individual expertise, but a formalizing effect of knowledge¹.

The approach to playing virtual adventures is not simply coupled to an already acquired knowledge with which the player enters into this dimension, but is grounded in its practice which only retroactively justifies the player's theoretical knowledge². Similarly to the psychoanalyst the player is initially left to himself, in relation to other players, subsequently to general codified behavior and finally to automated reproduction of actions in practice. In this context parallels cannot be drawn to their conclusion, because in a certain sense the player is missing what could be called the analysts lack. Directly confronted with the experience of his actions, the player has the possibility to verify the reality of his work, be it through progression, score or outcome in the game, while the analyst is closed into his speculative space, where the validity of his position is left without a firm foundation or justification. This failure of the analysts actually enables us to formulate the deficiency of the procedure of verification itself. The formula of verifiability is based on the assumption of a coherent derivation of the initial predispositions, a method which covers over the fact that coherence presupposes something incoherent³.

Most contemporary analyses detected the source of such a deadlock in the fact that the entire framework of games is constructed around a contradiction, the presence of two opposing elements that cannot be reconciled – this is clearly evident in the structure of adventure games, where thoughtful story is repeatedly interrupted by impossible puzzles. This is why the answer to the question, “how is it possible that such discordance didn't

¹ This results in a Hegelian insight, that knowledge of reality is namely part of reality itself.

² Since Lacan occupies a pivotal role in the present text it is important to note that he consistently evaded the concept of theory because it is tied up with the figure of the subject which is supposed to know. In psychoanalysis the analyst expects a solution, a final answer to his questions from this subject of knowing. This is the trap the analyst must necessarily avoid.

³ There are certainly some genres that are more connected to the analytical experience than others, but in general, video games confront this theme/predicament directly. The assumption that something in (reality) games is limping is confirmed the moment when we start playing, as we are faced with a world that is radically delimited, both in spatial and thematic terms. We cannot simply omit the game structure and venture beyond its boundaries. The rigidity of individual games simply does not allow this. A boxer in a game doesn't interrupt a boxing match to talk about his feelings. The potential of such a premise is explored in open world video games where the player is able to freely wander the virtual world, and can independently decide on the objectives and the method by which to play. The first outline of such a gaming system can be found in the game *Midwinter* (Maelstrom Games, 1989), where the elements of RPG, simulation and strategy were brought together with a narrative of eco-terrorism, guerrilla war, climate theory and political consequences of inaction. Such unbound forms of gaming experience were later radicalized by modding, where programmer would subsequently replace virtually all of the artistic assets in the original game and sometimes even core aspects of gameplay.

undermine its coherence?”, is already at hand: only a consistent derivation of such incoherence enables the internal structure of a coherent world (in the same manner infinity is not a limitless expansion but is established by a self-limitation or finality). In parallel with psychoanalysis, it becomes evident how adventure games are in their essence an expression of this incoherence and thus manifest the dilemma immanent to society as such.

Even though all genres are to some extent caught up in this discrepancy, it was primarily adventure games that took this precondition seriously. What do we mean by this? Let us consider a simple example of an arbitrary untrue statement, say “I’m a mighty Pirate”. Whatever ridiculous intention we had with it is irrelevant here. When an untrue statement is made, the essential thing is not the statement itself but rather the question: what did the individual declaring the statement intend to say with it? Or differently formulated, what is in his statement more than the statement itself? Even if the uttered statement is a lie, it turns out that at the level of enunciation it is true, namely, the truth of the fact that we lie. Between content and the form there cannot be any reconciliation. The very obsession of video games study, the role of content and form, becomes the leitmotif of the adventure genre. As in dreams, contradiction is also inscribed in the essence of adventure games.

While interpreting dreams we must be aware that the dreams themselves are not the essential part of interpretation; this task is rather accomplished by a subsequent retelling, a process by which we translate dream images into a signifying chain⁴. Lacan phrased this the following way: “dream images are to be taken up only on the basis of their value as signifiers” (2004: 510), since they are per se discharged of meaning. This premise is also the foundation of Freud’s insistence that dreams have to be thought as a rebus, which has to be deciphered. Thus, it becomes obvious why adventure games are constructed on exactly the same premise. They are not only a reflection of the true state of social life, but also contribute to the development and critique of everyday concepts (such as necessity, to act, etc. but especially pointing), and breaths new life into them.

⁴ While interpreting signifiers It is therefore necessary to pay attention to the rhetorical elements such as “ellipsis and pleonasm, (the use of more words than are necessary, like unsolved mystery), hyperbaton (different or unusual word order. A suitable example is Kant’s proverb ‘From such crooked wood as that which man is made of, nothing straight can be fashioned’) or syllepsis (the use of a word to perform two syntactic functions. E.g., ‘are’ in the phrase ‘Neither he nor I are willing), regression, repetition, apposition – these are the syntactical displacements; metaphor, catachresis (a mixed metaphor), antonomasia (calling a person by a title rather than a name), allegory, metonymy, and synecdoche – these are the semantic condensations; Freud teaches us to read in them the intentions – whether ostentatious or demonstrative, dissimulating or persuasive, retaliatory or seductive – with which the subject modulates his oneiric discourse.” (Lacan, 2004: 268)

Since the essence of communication is miscommunication⁵ and the “main function of video games is communication” (Arsenault, 2009: 175) we can argue that language is therefore not a sufficient or even an appropriate mean to operate in an adventure world, which is why it is necessary to use an affection in the form of an indirect input of commands. It is manifested as a cursor, the tool which is still used by every computer operating system and it seems that it will not be abandoned, perhaps substituted for a more direct experience of touch based interface. Pointing is therefore introduced as a mediator between the active participants in games and the structure of the game itself. The latter thus possesses the knowledge of what follows, our task as a gamer is consequently reduced to merely pointing at that which has already been given. This is in no way an innocent operation as it is only through random acts that ‘objective’ facts are established. We could say that social reality (the world of games) is simultaneously a presupposition of that which creates it.

The internal mechanism of a conundrum

The definition of adventure games is rather simple. Although they differ in many aspects, the main emphasis is placed on dialogue, narration, solving puzzles and pointing as means to progress in the game. The action, strategic and tactical elements, i.e. those aspects with which we identify modern franchises (*Call of Duty*, *GTA*, etc.) are almost dogmatically excluded from adventures. With the evolution of the genre the input mechanism of commands, keywords or short phrases, where the desired actions had to be entered into the graphical interface, was gradually replaced by a direct interaction using visual elements that were present and available in the game. With such gradual improvement of the gaming mechanism the whole system of fine-mechanics was eventually reduced to pointing and clicking with the mouse button, which initiates actions within the gaming world. By pressing the button and selecting predefined verbs (push, open, use, walk, pick up, etc.⁶), the main character moves on the visible surface, interacts

⁵ In this context, we are referring to Lacan's understanding of communication, according to which “the very foundation of interhuman discourse is misunderstanding.” (Lacan, 1997: 184)

⁶ *Myst* (Cyan, 1993) broke with the classic adventure formula even before it even reached its climax. Its atypicality was particularly evident in the lack of a clear objective, almost non-existent interaction with people or objects, greater emphasis on research and various scientific and mechanical puzzles. Its deviation from the adventure formula, later contributed to the rise of the phenomenon of role-playing games (RPG). The development of the genre eventually culminated in interactive films which follow cinematic norms and uncompromisingly minimized all “redundant” elements typical of adventures. All unnecessary commands with which the gaming world was manipulated was substituted by a gaming mechanism, which only required pressing the buttons at the right moment, for instance *Dragon's Lair* (Advanced Microcomputer Systems, 1983). The side effect of such efficient use of playing time was the disappearance

with other characters (also through predefined questions), manipulates the environment and combines different objects with each other (management of inventory objects) and with the gaming environment or other characters in this environment. Specific feature of this process is in the method of combining which is not necessarily derived from logical combinatorics; the contradiction is anchored in the heart of this genre from its very beginning. More precisely speaking, the principle of contradiction⁷ is relegated to a creative instrument of gameplay. The course of the story takes precedence over all other elements of the game even if that creates contradictions. Precisely for this reason, the genre always moves on the border between too much and too little, an almost non-interactive narrating of the story where we are placed in the role of an observer of events on the screen or the opposite tendency of over-emphasis on the non-narrative approaches such as combative sequences, mini-games or upgrades to the character.

Even such a general outline invites a comparison with psychoanalytic practice in which the analysand on the couch is on the one hand subordinated to the authority of his own statements and on the other contingent unconscious symptoms. It is never clear whether the individual is truly the master of himself. The parallels do not stop here. Ever since their inception, adventures revolved around the mechanism of questioning by which the player uncovers clues, hints and traces. Any advancement is possible only on the basis of these. The procedure was initially limited to direct writing of commands⁸. Subsequent systematizations changed the input method into a more user friendly pre-prepared questionnaire schemes. As in the case of analytical praxis, the latter is characterized by its referral to something absent which is basically nothing else than the logic of signifying. For Lacan, in "language, the signifier is a sign which refers to another sign, which is as such structured to signify the absence of another sign, in other words, to be opposed to it in a couple." (1997: 167) In adventures we are following the same path as in analysis, we are looking for bare signs on the basis of which we assemble a story or

of adventure games while simultaneously flirting with the then already popular action genre, a trend that culminated in games such as the Grand Theft Auto series (Rockstar, 1997–2013), which revolve around the freedom of playing without excessive narrative restrictions and multiplayer socializing.

⁷ According to the classical logic, an object can not at the same time and in the same sense be attributed with properties that are mutually exclusive. "There are some who say that the same thing can be and not be, and that it can be judged both to be and not to be. We have assumed that a thing cannot both be and not be, and shown this to be the least dubitable of all principles." (Aristotle, IV, 1005b) Aristotle suitably constructed his logical system around this proposition and hence existence as such.

⁸ This type of interaction has produced a number of comic situations. One of the more famous examples is already present in the first adventure game Colossal Cave Adventure (Crowther&Woods 1976–77), where the protagonist responds to the command, kill the bear, as follows: »With what? Your bare hands? Against 'his' bear hands? «

a more specific interpretation of the circumstances⁹. This can be achieved by using linguistic forms which convey individual not yet stated or unconscious tendencies. Countless hours are needed to interpret the meaning of the latter in analysis and it is no different in adventures. They are structured in a manner of mundane exploration of the playing surface and repeated questioning of various figures, a sort of perverse fieldwork.

Although exploration represents a major building block of this genre, herein also lays its initial problem. During the heyday of adventures, there was another phenomenon which started its unrestrained expansion, namely, the internet. For adventure games this meant that "solutions to puzzles that would have mystified gamers for days were suddenly just a couple mouse clicks away. This had a great impact on how adventure games were played. When you ask players now how they play adventure games they often admit that they reach for a walk-through whenever they get stuck for more than a couple minutes. This was unheard of before, unless you felt like calling expensive hint hot-lines¹⁰." (Eekelen, 2008) With the rise of awkwardly named genre of role-playing games, which fused the emphasis on story, puzzle solving and interaction with action elements and the piquancy of other genres (*Tomb Raider*, *Resident Evil*), the originality of adventures started to diminish.

That is why our task is not to search for the lost authenticity of this once popular leisure activity, but an attempt to see what it can still tell us about our time. Accordingly, we need to follow the analytic insight and be aware of any, even the most irrelevant statement and fact. The analyst finds himself obliged to dance circles around certain topics rather than go directly toward them, or to veer away from them altogether when the memories and thoughts associated with them are overly charged. Even conversations that do not contribute anything other than a comic intermezzo, or even nothing, form an integral moment in deciphering puzzles. Because of this proximity between psychoanalysis and adventure we should be aware of the challenge at hand and not give in to the temptation of compromises and shortcuts. Our task is so therefore strangely comical, as we must let ourselves be led around by the nose, so to speak. Experienced analysts generally agree that no matter what they might expect to come out in any given analysis, they are always surprised by what they find. A statement that can be easily attributed to adventures since its gaming experience is indispensably tied to uncommon dialogues.

⁹ Due to this we should not be surprised by Lacan's statement that "the essence of language has never been to serve the function of communication." (Lacan, 2009: 106)

¹⁰ The proximity between psychoanalysis and adventures is clear. An equivalent phenomenon can be found in psychoanalysis in the form of self-help manuals, which can certainly contribute to a better feeling but such remedies are always temporary.

The question of desire

The collection and subsequent selection of the questions points to the all-comprehensiveness around which the adventure genre is structured but also the inherent self-parody involved. The sequence of questions has no effect on the continuation of the game, as it is possible to click each of them and achieve the same result. Many who have tackled with this curiosity have therefore likely asked themselves “what is the deal with conversation trees which appear to offer choices when you can actually end up clicking on every question? All the fun of selecting your own order for a list, surely there should be an effect to the choices you make with conversation selection.” (Hill, 2009) However, the criticism about the superfluity and boredom of doing so misses an essential insight about such an approach. The entire process is essential, which is why we should not miss any of the options, even if they are banal or trivial. The pinnacle of such a formalization of language is introduced in *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasarts, 1990) where the usual action interlude of swordsmanship is replaced with reciprocal insulting. The most famous of the insults and counter-insults from the game is the often repeated “You fight like a dairy farmer” and the reply “How appropriate, you fight like a cow”. The trick is not to randomly identify the correct answers, but in the tiresome search for all possible permutations. Only on the basis of these lateral activities can the conditions for the possibility of further play be established.

The necessity of questioning in conversation turns out to be pointless, since the player requires exact predetermined reactions; one question follows another, without having to have consequences in the external conditions. However, only in such a manner can the player raise the Lacanian question of ‘*Che vuoi?*’ or “what do you want” (Lacan, 2004: 291), or more precisely, “what do you want from me?” We would be mistaken if we took this as a sign to questioningly look at the experts and expect a satisfactory knowledge in their statements. Privileged site of knowledge, or All-knowledge as Lacan called modern expert knowledge, has the exact opposite function: namely to cover up the truth. Things do not only remain hidden, but the entire field of questioning is erased, making it an undesired practice. This need for questioning enables the player of adventure to question the random content of his idiosyncratic desire.

At this point it would be obscene not to ask what exactly is this desire. The latter cannot be interpreted as an ingrown formation in us or a pre-formed objective of the game, which leads the character to the object of desire or even to satisfaction of needs, but rather as a lever, on the basis

of which the veiled and enigmatic Other¹¹ may acknowledge the subject (player). In other words, desire is desire only as the desire of the Other, cultivated as an adoptive child. These can come in the form of an ideal, norm, virtue or morality but what counts is their mediatory role, which is evident in our earliest needs that our food must be prepared. It becomes clear that what is desired by the Other is essentially what is desired by us. Without questioning what the Other wants from us and we from him, we can do nothing else but stare at an open curtain behind which there is only blank space. All tasks are soluble due to the fact that our actions are mediated:

The object of man's desire, and we are not the first to say this, is essentially an object desired by someone else. One object can become equivalent to another, owing to the effect produced by this intermediary, in making it possible for objects to be exchanged and compared. This process tends to diminish the special significance of any one particular object, but at the same time it brings into view the existence of objects without number. (Lacan, 2003: 295–296)

This unsubstantiality of desire has its consequences. We can no longer insist on the traditional notion that desire possesses a hard core which can be reached with enough willpower. Desire is composed as a chain of missed opportunities, signifiers, which stand in as a mark of absence. It may mistakenly refer to the desired substance, but those instances produce an uncanny effect. The signifier itself is not filled with a fixed meaning or a positive character, but is there to direct us to the next one – the differentiation of one element from another therefore forms a series of differences. Therefore, “the key here is that desire is not the message itself. It is neither the original sentence nor the final one, but the process or structure of distortion itself.” (Leader, 1996: 108–110)

It is therefore paramount to view desire less as meaning something and more as a way to *resist* meaning. We know that we desire something but we do not know what. A personal response which would stitch up the gap between desire and need is even redundant, as they are structurally unable to overlap. Precisely because of this the bond between the protagonist and the player has an essential role in video games. Although it seems that it is

¹¹ In short, it is a substantial agency which emerges out of the interaction of individuals as an ‘objective order’ but cannot be reduced to that interaction alone, even if it determines the lives of those individuals. This is precisely the reason why the other of other does not exist. This is particularly evident in *Leisure Suit Larry* (Sierra, 1987), where the debates between the narrator and main character form the heart of the play. Some kind of meta level does not exist as an objective position, as it is degraded into equivalent conversational partner who is just a little more sarcastic than the protagonist.

nothing but an indirect management of the character on the playing surface, the relation also reveals the existential discomfort which we as speaking beings must endure. While other genre games easily translate our inputs (desires) that trigger certain pre-planned actions, the same cannot be said in the context of adventures where things go awry: for the most part the protagonist acts unpredictably¹². Our requests will be answered but always expressed through the figures desires, which represent the excess of needs. Ever since the first part of *Monkey Island*, which we will later analyze in greater detail, the undead pirate LeChuck is only a manner with which the protagonist Guybrush maintains his desire unsatisfied¹³. Every encounter with the object of love fails because of his interventions. This slipping cause is present all the time.

Once we click on a particular object, in order to implement a certain action or simply to obtain some relevant information by means of conversation, it becomes clear that causality is not simply a derivation of an original intention. Even the most banal attempt to directly realize an act(ion) leads to unforeseen consequences. For example, in the course of the game Guybrush chooses the banjo as a method of combat – a humorous way to get out of a fight. But in a surprising turn of events, it turns out that his adversary is extremely well-versed in playing it. A similar deadlock is also present at the level of the story. The plot twist at the end of the second part is not resolved in the next, but simply continues as if nothing had happened, as if there is no negation¹⁴. When interpreting video games it is much more sensible to rely on causal failure rather than on rationally constructed and coherent story or as Lacan elaborated: “It is often more important to sustain the problem raised than it is to solve it.” (1998: 425)

Even if it turns out that the necessity of questioning relies on a contingent material of desire, with events lined up without any linkage, there is a simultaneous appearance that the game knows more than the player himself, even if he completely plays through it and meticulously memorizes every moment. So it seems that there is someone else that plays the game for us in the background and necessarily leads us in a particular direction,

¹² This can be partially contributed to the split of the players' role, “who is firstly a player, then a protagonist of the game and lastly the protagonist of the story.” (Giner-Sorolla, 1998)

¹³ This pattern is evident in the first monkey adventure. The player can send Guybrush into a dark alley, where he then confidently, without our suggestions, asks if anyone is there. At that moment the town sheriff appears and warns him that bad things can happen to a person in a dark deserted ally like this one, and at this time of night, nobody would be around to see it. All offered choices or reactions to this situation, which are available to the player, suggest a fulfillment of this desire.

¹⁴ If we may allow ourselves to spoil this well-known twist, everything presumably happens in the mind of young Guybrush, who is in reality at an amusement park with his parents. This observation offers yet another sign of the proximity of *Monkey Island* to dreams.

whether it is a programmer or a playwright. The linearity of the story only reinforces this fact¹⁵. The world of adventures is not open.

The question raised at the beginning of the chapter can now be interpreted in a different light. The enquiry into the relationship between necessity and contingency is not founded on a question. It turns out that the truth of questioning is a puzzle, however not as solvable test but as an answer. The situation is analogous to the case of Chimeras question to Oedipus. Such a conundrum can only produce an arbitrary answer which can be factually true but every one of them will produce a different outcome or meaning. Freud's example of the Oedipus complex signifies exactly this, an already done decision-answer that precedes the question¹⁶.

Since we are without a doubt on a Hegelian path, which is based on not doing something by halves, since a fear of error is error itself, it will not be pompous to declare that adventure games are constructed around the interrogation into the nature of common concepts. As we have demonstrated in detail, adventure games are filled with many unexpected concepts which by themselves express theoretical sharpness. However, the innovation of this genre becomes evident only if we take a closer look at the basic functioning of the game mechanism: the gesture of pointing, which is closely tied to the theme of incoherence. Inasmuch we wish to think this contradiction (immanent to adventure game) to its logical end, we mustn't overlook the formalized (graphical) user interface with which we as the player can mediate any action to the character that represent us inside the game. For an act to occur there needs to be go-between in the form of a cursor or a pointer. This particular moment simultaneously enables the formation of the (game) world and in the same move alienates it from itself. The given immediacy is always lagging. However, it appears that pointing is by necessity (not just programming, but spiritual) the central element around which the pleasure of playing adventures is structured.

¹⁵ This tension between necessity and contingency is also present on the etymological level. Let's look at individual concepts which define the genre. Video is derived from lat. *videre* and means to see, game (from ger. *gamena*) denotes a communion, togetherness of people or participation and adventure (lat. *advenire*) signifies to arrive, to happen or befall. We could say that even when viewing the development of events from a distance, we are already assisting in the development of a particular idea. By following the necessity of thinking in games, we are obliged to traverse the entire route, click on all the objects and ask all the questions. Thereby something happens or befalls us, which means that as a by-product we produce something new. Here we can once more see the closeness of psychoanalysis and adventures; this means that real analytic experience is nothing more than an adventure into the unknown.

¹⁶ As Lacan says: "the function of the puzzle means something half-said (*mi-dire*), just as the chimera appears as a half-body, ready to disappear altogether once a solution is given." (Lacan, 2007: 37) The riddle as an enunciation is a case of anticipation of something enounced, which ultimately retroactively inscribes the consequences of the puzzle. This relationship is bound together with interpretation.

The secret, the revenge and the curse

Monkey Island is without a doubt the paradigmatic example of this genre. It was not only the most popular adventure series of all time, but due to its structural complexity also presents an ideal testing ground for analyzing and developing individual concepts. In short, we play as “Guybrush Threepwood¹⁷, a pirate wannabe willing to do whatever it takes to become a swashbuckler. He has come to Melee Island seeking his fame and fortune, and before his tale is through he’ll have pointed and clicked on every man, woman, beast, and object in sight. Working your way through the game is a matter of talking to people, picking up items, and using them in peculiar combinations. Solutions to puzzles can often be esoteric, but that comes with the territory. A bit of trial and error will get you through most predicaments.” (Hatfield, 2010) Various story plots, complications and puzzles support the game structure which is focused around the effort of Guybrush to confirm his piracy and an incompatible romantic relationship with a brave girl that he meets on his first adventure.

Although the series was initially conceived as a complete trilogy, it was due to its success and other production requirements repeatedly resurrected. The story was never finished and can be in different iterations followed even today. Still, the most famous of them remains the first part called the Secret of Monkey Island, which was followed by Revenge of LeChuck and The Curse of Monkey Island¹⁸. It appears as if the titles themselves imply an inherent deadlock of the game. None of the games explicitly reveal the “Secret of Monkey Island” or what is the truth. The players didn’t regard this conundrum as yet another comic paradox but actively tried to construct different interpretations that would make the story more coherent. Perhaps the most famous of them focused on the clue at the end of the second part, where it seems that the whole story is just the fantasy of little Guybrush who was brought by his parents and brother Chucky to an amusement park named Big Whoop¹⁹. This is substantiated by numerous examples, evidence and links that are perhaps even too convincing. Nev-

¹⁷ Guybrush was appropriately given his name after one of the animators saved the file in which his animated two-dimensional image was situated and used the name Guy, as general characterization of the character with the extension of brush, which referred to the program with which latter was created. Guybrush’s surname Threepwood didn’t have such luck of coincidence, as it was selected by a vote within the studio.

¹⁸ The next part in the series, which will consequently remain anonymous, can not be classified among the listed games due to a basic flaw. Playing was no longer orientated around the mechanism of point and click. Since the game was also intended for consoles, it was necessary to replace the established system with a simplified management of the character using the keyboard or joystick.

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of this theory, see <http://scummbar.com/resources/articles/index.php?news=niffer=readarticle&article=2> or http://www.geero.net/2010/01/the_true_secret_of_monkey_isla/

ertheless an essential detail is omitted that makes this kind of reading fall short. The thesis is based on the assumption that only the first two parts, written by Ron Gilbert, the creator of the series, can be referenced, while the franchise was subsequently taken over by other artists who ignored the established mythology. This may be factually true, however, it overlooks the psychoanalytic point that the intention of the author is always situated elsewhere as he himself believes, regardless of whether he is aware of it or not. As we already showed, this is not the result of an inadequate or unfitting method to resolving the hidden meaning behind the official story, but an inherent mechanism of consciousness.

Relying on this insight, we can take a closer look at the driving force that structures the individual's experience of the world of the adventure games and start with the immediate empirical image. At this level we can sensually ensure that the richness of the world really exists – our senses only accept it such as it is provided to us. Things simply are. These random images represent the most basic relation of the object and knowledge however they are nothing permanent. Change is introduced by a simple stimulus of consciousness. The situation is as follows: we have *this* as a perceiving I, and *that* object before us. Arising therefrom is an insight that the original givenness of the empirical world must necessarily be mediated through a specific moment of reflection – a separation of one level from another.

To corroborate this view and to continue our theme we may briefly have to resort to the worn out question by which psychoanalysis gained independence from the psychologisation of the individuals' world: What is a signifier? Although we could name countless examples, Lacan's seminars still provide the most subtle ones. In the third year of his seminars, he introduced the essential themes of the signifiers, how they are placed within the field of communication and in what way they are distinguish from ordinary transmission of information. To illustrate this, Lacan appropriately, in the spirit of adventures, delivered an image of a lone captain on a small ship swaying back and forth in the blackness of the night and in the middle of the ocean. Despite this impenetrable black curtain, he seemed to detect a movement behind this pattern. We can characterize it as a sign. The essence of this anecdote is, contrary to expectations, not present in the meaning of this sign. The reasoning behind this event forms a signifier, namely the reaction to the phenomenon. It is not irrelevant whether the captain yields himself to emotionality and mechanicalness of the situation and ascribes certain meaning to the happenings or if, on the other hand, he "goes to his diary and writes – at such and such a time on such and such degrees of latitude and longitude, I noticed this and that." (Lacan, 1997: 188). A simple response to a nudge from the sign is not sufficient for signifiers to work. There also has to be a denotation, as a signifier by itself does not signify anything.

When in the first part Guybrush is looking around the village of the notorious monkey island cannibals, who don't eat red meat because of health reasons, he can look inside individual huts and make this startling progression while examining them: it's an empty hut; this hut is very empty; I can't see inside that hut, but I bet it's empty; this is the emptiest hut I've ever seen; I bet if I look up 'empty' in the dictionary, there'd be a picture of this hut! Most empty dimension is the voidness of words themselves. The nature of this idiom can provide shelter to different meanings. That sign in the night can mean a call that has to be followed, warning against the danger of impending death or a flash of hope. These questions are unsettling for the hysteric, he doubts in them and repeatedly questions their significance. Meanwhile, the psychotic is not exactly sure that he truly detected something, but there is no doubt for him that this has a meaning.

Such a confrontation with meaning is inscribed into the world of individuals, whether it is interest, desire, lust or something else. Adventure games are imbued with the same mechanism (phenomena) in which the appearance of certain objects or situations requires our reaction. Thus we are introduced into the order of signifying which is always interlaced with the operation of meaning. This process is not a hidden and all-embracing lead but a relationship of oppositions such as day and night or Lacan's favorite example of woman and man, while the pirate jargon posits its principal relation in the opposition of water and land. With this insight, it becomes clear that "in fact, the signifier, with its own action and insistence, intervenes in all of the human being's interests – however profound, primitive, elementary." (Lacan, 1997: 197)

We do not need a complex reflection of events in order for immediate sensuality to vanish. It becomes clear that the circumstances already become complicated at the moment we arbitrary point at something, since this is also the point where we undermine the world's foundation. The act of pointing, exemplified by the above mentioned gesture in the dark, namely bars us from direct engagement with sensory perception. It is befallen with the same fate as language that is always too late in its haste for now(ness), like a drunk pirate who staggers towards his goal. Nevertheless we can not get ahead of ourselves and announce certain truths about pointing before even taking a look at the inner necessity which justifies it.

Now is...

If we take a step back and look at the example of doubt in analysis, it turns out that the verification of any declaration can be done in two simple ways, which simultaneously introduce a certain deadlock into the discussion about adventure. When someone raises the question: "What is night?",

we can without any hesitation resort to direct pointing of external circumstances, darkness. However, this procedure can also be dispensed with and instead refer the examiner to the absence of light i.e. a secondary criterion. Pointing at circumstances is therefore closely tied with meaning while in the other example it is necessary to introduce inference to instate a certain meaning; "look around you, there is no natural light, so consequently it can only be night." The problem encountered in analysis is precisely the absence of a direct indicator on the basis of which it would be possible to state: you see, here it is, your symptom. Only on the basis of the functioning of the entire mechanism can we comprehend certain psychic tendencies that allow us to make any conclusions in analysis. It therefore seems that adventure games have just the opposite logic of psychoanalysis, because the indicator or cursor is genuinely depicted on the playing surface so that the object of pointing is directly present before our eyes.

Even if we leave aside the issue of pointing for now, we can not ignore the fact that in this particular genre of games shortcomings of a strict opposition between subjectivity and objectivity become obvious, since they can not be brought to a common denominator. The standpoint of the subject, which presents itself as *this* consciousness or I before an object is present, is opposed by *that* object in such a way that the latter is not treated as an indeterminate and neutral thing. They don't observe each other neutrally as subjectivity cannot by definition be isolated. It perceives around itself other particularisms, whether they are other subjects or objects of desire, such as gold, girl or grog. All of these objects, irrespective of their pre-determined practicability, acquire through player's use of knowledge their meaning. In gaming this is especially characteristic of adventures. We nevertheless have to keep in mind that in the first moment knowledge still depends on the object and not vice versa.

There is no need to relinquish the spirit of adventurous to show this point. When the player steps into the game, initially the givenness of the situation in individual locations is still unmarked by any provisions: we could say that they are framed into the background. However, even the most unusual examples of objects and places on the playing surface pops up from this background the moment they are defined and thereby become marked by random provisions which apply there and then. In general, we can not determine whether it is really possible to put a monkey into the inner pocket of a jacket or use a banana as a metronome, which can hypnotize the monkey that plays piano inside the pirate bar. The same stroke facilitates the emergence of living objects (that passed through reflection and can therefore be manipulated) and a whole pleiad of primary objects that blend into the background and do not allow to be touched. While a single branch with a hanging monkey enables the player to enter the monkey cemetery, the

remainder of these branches are there to covers up their own nonexistence in relation with the employed one.

Every object or other figure is subject to logic of signification where a simple questioning can enable their withdrawal from immediacy²⁰. Uncovering immediate reality is therefore not as obvious as it seems, as it turns out that the same gesture that animates immediacy before our eyes also triggers its fall back into the background. Such a process of signifying functions as a veil, where reality and signification become unhinged. Although they reside on the same surface, it becomes clear that they do not belong to the same order. What kind of cunning of reason is needed to outwit the objects, which evade us in their immediacy and get an insight into their true form?

At first we have to accept the role of self-positing finitude mentioned at the beginning of the text and proceed by acknowledging that infinity is consequently not produced by extending into the vastness of the great beyond but with simple self-restraint. For the same reason we can not adequately answer the above stated question "What is night?" by referring to external predicates. Although the immediacy of this moment is not the truth as such, it nevertheless contains the truth of the question. The only possible answer to this query can be found in the statement "Now is night", whereby we must insist on it up to its breaking point. Hegel explained this in the following manner: "The now is pointed out, this now. Now: It has already ceased to be since it was pointed out; the now that is is an other than that pointed out to us, it is what has been. This is its truth; it does not have the truth of being." (Hegel, 1989: 88) By insisting on this impossible place of »here and now«, the place where the reconciliation between object and subject should take place, where we could truly enjoy the emotion, the stated, the immediacy of the moment, we get an answer in the form of a negation: it's not that (*ce n'est pas ça*). While the basic doubt is solvable by setting up the coordinates of meaning, the hysterical doubt (and Hegel is considered to be the most sublime of hysterics) contains doubt of meaning itself, which is, however, a point relevant to adventures.

Hegel's statement "now is night" thus reveals the internal unsustainability of the question "what is night?". This is explicitly illustrated in the monkey adventures, where some islands, such as Melee Island, are committed to permanent night, while others are adorned with a constant day. Both islands are not so much bound together by the fact that they are islands but through the comprehension that now we are looking at one and the next moment at another. In this way it is always possible to determine their now in relation to the previous (opposite) one. This island on which I stand now, is different from the previous by the mere absence of night. The difference

²⁰ For example, the reoccurring question in *Monkey Island*: "What is the Big Whoop?"

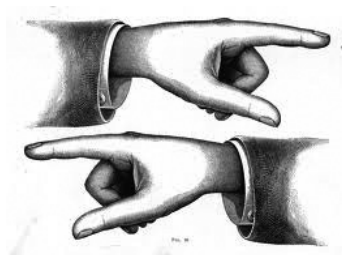
between the two is based on the negation of one of the moments of consciousness. The only thing left from the original »now is the night« on the island and other »it is always day« is a certain *now*. Following this path, we return to the already mentioned opposition between the subject and object, but this time at a more general level.

In the search for truth beyond contradiction, we merely produce another one. However, a detail was lost from sight, which becomes apparent only on the basis of pointing. In the same manner as with language, the chase for the moment of "here and now" establishes a difference between something enunciated (content of speech) and enunciation (the place from which it is enunciated). While the latter represents the moment of "now", it is endlessly pursued by the point that enunciates it: now, as the instant of pointing and the place from where we point are therefore differentiated. In order to comprehend this structure, it is also essential that we take into account the place of enunciation also negates the 'here and now', thus meaning that the act of pointing simultaneously creates and negates. This function can be seen on propaganda posters from the early twentieth century, from which Uncle Sam²¹ addressed passers-by that they are the ones who should unconditionally respond to his call: »Your country needs YOU« or »I want YOU«. When the poster addresses the addressed passers-by, they lose their passivity and neutrality as they adhere to the signification, even if the act of pointing misses its point. Even if the attempt to capture the positive patriotism fails, it doesn't get caught in the opposite state of spitefulness. Through negation the immediate 'here and now' returns to the starting position of 'here and now'. "This is no longer exactly the same as at the beginning of the journey, it has since namely undergone a reflection into an other-being." (Dolar, 1990: 106) It becomes clear that pointing is not an innocent behavior, by capturing the true image too late, it actually points to its inner being, which is paradoxically nothing. That's the point of Lacan's »this is not that«, which is actually *nothing* but nonetheless something.

The socially unacceptable gesture of pointing the finger at someone is based precisely on this premise. It points to the lack of (being in) the

²¹ The history of this image, which directly addresses the observer, did not begin with the propaganda call of Uncle Sam, but with another similar figure. This image was portrayed for the first time by London newspaper *Opinion* (magazine) in 1914, when they placed Herbert Kitschener, then Minister of War Affairs, on their cover. His face and the stretched out arm with the pointed finger, was subsequently reproduced in other countries and for different purposes. For example, the Soviet Union designed a variety of military figures who addressed the passers-by with calls such as, "why are you not in the army," "did you enlist," "you, are you not a member of a cooperative – join soon," or "how do you help the front?" "This kind of propaganda still remains synonymous with the iconography of Uncle Sam, which premiered in the newspaper called *Leslie's Weekly*. This is probably the most literal depiction of Althusser's paradigm of interpellation. For a detailed analysis see: Althusser, Louis (2001): *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

individual in question. An indication that such a rule is engraved into everyday practices is explicitly evident in the film medium, where finger-pointing has been intentionally avoided over several decades. It is nevertheless important to note, that this act acquires its signification precisely on the basis of its absence. More simply put, the lack of certain properties is also a positive feature²². This is explicitly displayed in the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The extended pointer finger (accompanied by a scream) by which aliens indicate a human presence is a method to differentiate themselves from humans: the fact that human kind is symbolically imbued by lack (of a double). If the extended index finger pierces a gap in the fullness of meaning, then the middle finger occupies the place of phallus or Master signifier in the logic of signifying. This is not only a (sexually oriented) excess of potency but also a way to suture the absurdity of the situation and allow the messenger and the addressee a symbolic identification (which is of course lacking) – this is also the reason that even the whole spectrum of objective facts cannot guarantee that the shown middle finger will prevail in all occasions. Although we could list a whole range of permutations of pointing, we should highlight Lynch's upright thumb²³ which represents the difference as such, a binary opposition of affirmation and negation in a particular situation (life and death, confirmation and rejection, yin and yang, presence and absence, one and nothing, and so on).



With this image in mind, let us return to the predicament of how to decipher the contradictory nature with which adventure games are imbued. In the course of the text, we presented these tendencies on the case of language practices and others signifying procedures and with it developed the conditions of the possibility of meaning. Finally we contextualized the phenomenon of pointing as an essential element for understanding the human

²² The most compelling example of how something that did not happen can still be an event is still Arthur Conan Doyle's *Silver Blaze* and therein described »curious incident of the dog in the night-time«. The incident is unusual because the night, that a stranger should have appeared in the house, the dog remained silent, thus doing nothing.

²³ It would be hard to find a more appropriate example as Agent Cooper in the exceptional TV series *Twin Peaks*.

trait of lacking. Along the way it became clear that something has clicked as soon as we began pointing. The click in adventures is already embedded into the act of pointing. It is performed virtually automatically. It is merely necessary to confirm the already made decisions, or in other words, the necessity which conditions us to click does not stem from a desire to set in motion the events on the screen, but from the contingent decisions that we're involved in the game, but only as someone who thumbs up, signs or dots the "I" on a pre-prepared plan.

Conclusion: The point of pointing

Let's finally get to the point and answer the elusive question: What is the secret of adventure games? We initially demonstrated the inherent unbundling of dreams and adventure gameplay, where we pointed out that dreams are nothing more than a rebus or puzzle, which has to be deciphered. Monkey Island exemplified this feature as it included "some of the most bizarre puzzles of all time, including one that used a rubber chicken with a pulley in the middle and another that involved an actual red herring. The ridiculousness of the puzzles, much like its cast of quirky characters, became part of the game's charm, as its internal logic was predicated upon silliness and clever wordplay." (Moss, 2011) As we have already demonstrated, such contradictory logic is not a means unto itself.

A rebus or a picture puzzle is equally composed of linguistic and pictorial elements. This integral part of adventures was also used by Freud to interpret the functioning of dreams. According to Freud, "the perceptive fragments of a manifest dream exhibit in the form of its organization a certain speech form. The latter is largely equated with interpretability (*Deutbarkeit*), since interpretability means for Freud causalization. He consequently assumes that causal relations can be sufficiently expressed only within the language." (Klammer, 2011: 256) Puzzles are therefore not a special means of thought by which we can strengthen our mind but an internal mechanism of human commonness and meaning. Interpretation thus demands attentiveness to the spoken word. It is only in such a way that meaning can come to fore. Because of its central role, let us consider the concept of interpretability. It is derived from the German word *Deutbarkeit* and generally signifies that which can be shown or givenness to meaning. It is conceptually and etymologically linked on the one hand to *Deuten* which refers to explaining, but more significantly to pointing, and on the other *Bedeutung* as a referent of meaning and importance²⁴. Having said this, it is now difficult to ignore the obvious point to make.

²⁴ Even more illustrative is the connection between speech and pointing is present in the Serbo-

The secret or the truth (be it this texts or the monkey islands²⁵) is present in the effort of pointing at a certain phenomenon. When pointing at a thing, we do not try to touch it's pre-established meaning, because meaning is not an already made dress. It is namely a retrospective formation based on the gesture of pointing but as such always already present. Meaning is therefore not founded on some substantial image (*Urbild*) which would fill the entire canvas of meaning, but on a practice of retroactive denotation. In this context, it becomes clear why the psychoanalytic trauma is not conceptualized as a reflection of a shocking and unexpected event that shakes the stable everyday picture of the world, but as an inconsistency of meaning, which is usually constructed several years after the actual experience. Only by arriving too late, by missing the immediacy of meaning by pointing at nothing, do we capture its inner kernel, knowledge that this nothing but nonetheless something, is a sign of meaning. Although every signifier is destined to signify nothing, this consequently doesn't presuppose a state where nothing is signified, on the contrary, the more that pointing (or words) does not signify anything the more its meaning is solidified. The secret of Monkey Island is so secretive precisely because it does not designate any concrete thing. Pointing can be therefore understood through the literal reading of the pirate motto: "Take what you can, give nothing back" made famous by the Pirates of the Caribbean which can be best summed up in psychoanalytic terms: interpret, look for clues, little slips of tongue, metaphors and symptoms, but do not touch the nothing that is my being. If the adventure genre always moves on such a border between too much and too little, then the observation by a blogger "that the genre is mostly dead and so slightly alive" (Cox, 2012) can only be mostly false but slightly true. It is dead, but as such is still alive, like the living dead or expressed in the spirit of the genre, the playing dead²⁶. It is obvious that such an inherent contradiction couldn't be sustained or resolved but it nonetheless provided the possibility of other genres to evolve.

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Croatian and Slovenian word kazati. While in the first case it indicates an act of speech, in Slovenian it is used solely to draw attention to something, usually with a finger or an image.

²⁵ Throughout the whole series there is a constant reemerging of the question, what is the secret of Monkey Island that seems to be known only by LeChuck, as it is the cause of his undeadness. However, in the course of the game it becomes clear that actually nobody knows it, neither the natives nor the voodoo priestess and least of all Guybrush.

²⁶ We should not be surprised that *The Walking Dead: The Game* (Telltale Games, 2011) was the harbinger of the revival of adventure game genre while simultaneously honoring its death.

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