V. Computer Games as a Comparative Medium

A Few Cautionary Remarks

I've just locked an open door. Strange, yet symbolically compelling.

GRIM FANDANGO

In recent years both the number of games based on films or TV-series, as well as film adaptations of successful games has exploded. A film or TV-series has barely hit our screens when the related game also becomes available. Game-minded viewers who have seen SPARTACUS BLOOD AND SANDS (2010) can now ‘experience’ the life of a gladiator by buying the iPhone game. And, even though the THE TUDORS TV-series (2007-2010) has come to an end, the avid fans can still continue the experience by playing one of Henry’s spies in the adventure game THE TUDORS: HIDDEN OBJECT (2010). In light of these developments, it is not surprising that computer games are increasingly studied from a comparatist or cross-media perspective. However, as examples in the previous chapters have shown, present-day games are far removed from the games we played even ten years ago. Contemporary (action) adventure games are primarily computer games, as opposed to interactive stories, or even interactive films, as they once were called. Nevertheless, as they still employ narrative procedures comparable to those used in books and films, it is only natural (especially when comparing media) that we borrow techniques and terms from literary and film studies to analyse them.

In this chapter, I will first elaborate on this trend to either tell the same story in different media or to disseminate it over several media. I will show that this phenomenon is not as new as the recent increase in related media texts might suggest, by illustrating how games themselves were and are adapted or disseminated in other media. In the main part of this chapter I will discuss setting (an aspect of mise en scène) in the media computer game and film, to show how our interpretation of its use in one medium may have a negative influence on our interpretation of its use in the other medium when we are not aware of possible media specific differences. Being alert to these differences is especially important in trans- and cross-media analysis, as every version of a media text is

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1 The original text of this chapter was part of my presentation “Computer Games as a Comparative Medium” (Veugen, 2009) at the International Conference Computer Games / Players / Game Cultures: State and Perspectives of Digital Game Studies, held in Magdeburg, Germany, from 19 to 21 March 2009. This text has been altered and expanded.

2 Also called SPARTACUS BLOOD AND SANDS (2010).

3 See Chapter III.
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the product of at least three modifications: the choices made by the creator(s) of this version; the ‘language’ of the medium used; and the restrictions posed by the medium. Basically this means that, as long as ‘adaptations’ are being compared within the same medium, for instance a remake of a particular game or a newer game in a series, this usually does not pose any problems\(^4\). But when applied to different media, the same term may mean different things and thus lead to problems of interpretation, as we saw in Chapter II. Therefore, when we compare games to their story counterparts in other media we have to consider such media specific differences.

Adaptation, cross-media and transmedia storytelling

The recent increase in computer game adaptations of titles from other media might suggest that they are a new phenomenon. But this is not the case. On the contrary, they have a long tradition, as can be seen from early text based games like _THE HITCHHIKER’S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY_ (1984) based on the 1978 series of radio plays by Douglas Adams (Image V.1), or even earlier, the Atari 2600 arcade title _SUPERMAN_ (1978) or the TSR80 game of Tolkien’s trilogy _The Lord of the Rings_ (1981).

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\(^4\) From a comparatist point of view; there might, however, be game skills and kinaesthetic issues, as I will show below.

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In the early 1980s, the arcade and home console markets were booming\(^5\) and game companies had a hard time keeping up with the increased demand for new titles. As graphics were sketchy it was easier to have a game that was based on a well-known sport (e.g. tennis, basketball, or racing) or a well-known story, concept, theme, or character from another medium (e.g. Superman or space travel)\(^6\), as their familiarity would remove the need for lengthy explanations in a game manual\(^7\). As a result, many games were (comic) book or film related (see Images V.2 a-d).

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\(^5\) One of the main reasons for the success of the home console, according to Herz (1997), was the bad reputation arcade halls had at the time (dark, gloomy, wrong crowd). However, even when arcade machines were placed in more child-friendly environments, parents still rather had their children play at home, where they could keep an eye on them. A good depiction of (the misconceptions on) arcade and home computer gaming at the time is shown in the film **WARGAMES** (1983).

\(^6\) See for instance the Dracula example in Chapter 11 of *King's Quest* in Chapter III.

\(^7\) And as Nolan Bushnell already commented on the failure of his game **COMPUTER SPACE** (the first commercial computer game): “Nobody wants to read an encyclopedia to play a game” (Kent, 2001, p. 34).

\(^8\) Also see the original promotional flyer for the arcade cabinet at: http://www.arcadelectrical.com/?page=thumbs&db=videod&id=979 (14 August 2010)

\(^9\) **DRAGON’S LAR** (1983) was the first game to have this kind of resolution. Although it was first released in the game arcade, it was an adventure game and it used analogue animated film footage stored on a laser disk.
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Or as Bill Kunkel editor of *Electronic Games* magazine commented on the licensing of film and TV-titles at the time: "They've licensed everything that moves, walks, crawls, or tunnels beneath the earth" (Harmetz, 1983, p. 17).

But the explosive demand for new games also led to an increasing number of too hastily designed games that were not up to scratch or even faulty. The most infamous example is of course the game *E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL* (1982) developed by Atari for the Atari 2600 home console. The enormously successful film *E.T.* (1982) seemed to Atari a 'must have' candidate for a Christmas game release the same year. So as soon as Atari acquired the license a costly advertising campaign started which reverted back to the film (also because there was nothing else to show): “On television, the ads for an E.T. video game simulate[d] scenes from the movie” (Maslin, 1982, p. 21). But because of the lengthy negotiations the game’s designer Howard Scott Warshaw had only six weeks for development. Consequently, the game not only bore little resemblance to the film, its gameplay was also too short and too simple. The then 10-year-old Sarah Kinley was quite adamant in her verdict: "E.T. was just in a maze and then he got to Eliot's house and the lights went on and the game was over." (Harmetz, 1983, p. 17).

The game’s shortcomings spread rapidly by word of mouth and the results were disastrous. Atari was almost brought to bankruptcy, while the debacle itself was seen as one of the contributing factors to the video game industry crash of 1983\(^\text{10}\). But it also meant that game manufacturers became wearier of film deals:

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\(^\text{10}\) Atari allegedly paid 21 million dollars for the license. Later it turned out that they had overestimated the number of games that could be sold by three times (in relation to the number of Atari 2600 systems they had sold). Many unsatisfied customers also returned their cartridges, adding to the numbers. Eventually the large number of unsold or returned cartridges ended up as land fill in New Mexico. See Kent (2001), DeMaria & Wilson (2002), Harmetz (1983), and the documentary *THE STORY OF COMPUTER GAMES* (2003).
"People will take one look because they know the movie title," said James Levy, president of Activision, one of the few games companies that avoids licensing. "But if an exciting game isn't there, forget it. Our audiences are too sophisticated. You can't fool them." (Harmetz, 1983, p. 17)

Text adventure games based on books or other more verbally oriented media fared better. The above-mentioned Douglas Adams game based on his *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* (1978) radio plays became a (lasting) hit. The radio play was so popular that it also initiated five books, a TV-series, several computer games (although some were never released), another series of radio plays, a stage show, a website, three series of comic books, two series of towels and a Hollywood feature film (with its own merchandise). And although it stems from an era where production companies did not yet encompass all types of media, the radio play and its ‘descendants’ became what Henri Jenkins would now call an example of convergence culture:

…the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, the search for new structures of media financing which fall at the interstices between old and new media, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. (Jenkins, 2005, p. 2)

Related to convergence culture is another trend where a narrative is told across different media platforms, called transmedia storytelling by Jenkins:

…a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Dalen, 2007)

…any narrative that starts in one medium and extends to others. [...] a form of storytelling where each new platform adds something meaningful to the fictional world - whether it's more backstory, deeper stories for secondary characters, the interactive dimension of a game, or new opportunities for the fans to participate in telling the story. (ibid)

Already featured in the STAR WARS and POKÉMON franchises, amongst others, transmedia storytelling came to the fore with the simultaneous release of the *ENTER THE MATRIX*...
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computer game (2003) and the second film in THE MATRIX trilogy: THE MATRIX RELOADED (2003). Although the game's protagonists seem to be two minor characters from the first film, Niobe (Image V.5) and Ghost (Image V.6), in the second and third film it becomes clear that they, especially Niobe, are important to the success of the humans. The game also links THE FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS (2003), one of the ANIMATRIX films, to THE MATRIX RELOADED\(^\text{12}\). ENTER THE MATRIX therefore is not merely merchandise (like many other film-based games) but a part of a multi-layered story told ‘across’ different media\(^\text{13}\).

After the success of THE MATRIX more cross-media and transmedia games were released, with storylines that progressively became more independent from the ‘original’, such as the James Bond game 007 EVERYTHING OR NOTHING (2004), which was not based on an existing Bond film or book, or 007 QUANTUM OF SOLACE (2008), where “the game story goes well beyond the movie plot” (Griffith, 2009)\(^\text{14}\). However, it should be stressed that

\(^{12}\) In FINAL FLIGHT OF THE OSIRIS, just before she dies, Jue leaves a package in the Matrix warning the humans of an invasion by the Sentinels. In ENTER THE MATRIX Niobe's first job is to retrieve the package. In THE MATRIX RELOADED Niobe contacts Morpheus and it becomes clear that the Osiris' message is confirmed. But for those who only watched the films the short 'summary' in the second film is enough; it is not necessary to know how the message got there and at what cost. Although THE MATRIX is thus a form of transmedia storytelling it is quite evident that the dissemination of THE MATRIX's story across the varied media is clustered in Venn-diagram like cross-sections according to audience and media. ENTER THE MATRIX is an action-adventure game aimed at experienced gamers, who liked the films and are also likely to buy and appreciate the ANIMATRIX films. If Warner Bros and the Wachowski brothers had wanted to target a larger part of the film's audience, they would have opted for another, more accessible, game genre (cf. the emphasis Showtime puts on their Tudor games being casual adventure games).

\(^{13}\) To date nine animated films, two comic books, a website, a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMRPG), six DVD's with additional material, and another single-player computer game.

\(^{14}\) Due to the 2009-2010 financial crises many movie studios had to cancel planned projects, including MGM. Therefore, the new Bond movie starring Daniel Craig was put on hold. However, this did not deter Activision from going ahead with a new Daniel Craig Bond game instalment called JAMES BOND: BLOOD STONE (2010): “While we may have to wait a little longer for the next instalment in the James Bond series, gamers and Bond fans can take a quantity of solace in the fact that the suave super agent is getting the videogame treatment from blur developer, Bizarre Creations with James Bond: Blood Stone, a wholly original 007 epic pencilled in for release later in 2010” (Keating, 2010).
'independent' Bond games are much older (see Images V.7 a-d)\textsuperscript{15}. Other recent game titles not only add to the storyline of the film; they also utilize the true capabilities of the medium by making the unfolding story dependent on the gamer’s choices. In *SPIDER-MAN: WEB OF SHADOWS* (2008), for instance, the gamer’s actions not only lead to different endings; they also determine the enemies she will fight, and the environment, the city, and the people she will encounter.

![Images V.7 Several Bond games that where not based on a Bond book or film](image)

Interesting in this light is the game *BATMAN ARKHAM ASYLUM* (2009). EA Games held the rights for a game tie-in with the release of the Batman film *THE DARK KNIGHT* (2008). However, although a game was under development at Pandemic studios, because of the untimely death of Heath Ledger it was never released\textsuperscript{16}. At the time, Batman fans eagerly

\textsuperscript{15} I.e. games that were not directly derived from a Bond film or book. The *007 EVERYTHING OR NOTHING* game is remarkable because it uses the then James Bond, Pierce Brosnan’s scan and voice, stressing the link between the films and the games. As Image V.7c clearly shows, this is not the first time the James Bond actor has been used for a non-film-linked game. As we saw in the previous note, using the actor for both the films and the (non-linked) games is now common practice.

\textsuperscript{16} Heath Ledger played Batman’s adversary The Joker in the film. See Ingham (2008) and Jenkins D. (2008) on the impasse suffered by the makers of the original game because of his accidental death.
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anticipated a DARK KNIGHT game, especially as the film did extremely well at the Box Office. Therefore, Phil Rogers (CEO of Eidos Interactive) as soon as possible announced that their studio would be creating a completely new and different Batman game, entirely separate from the film:\footnote{17}

In Batman: Arkham Asylum Eidos and Warner Bros. are building a true action adventure game experience worthy of gamers and fans. [...] Players become Batman, like he has never been seen before in a video game, as he fights through intense circumstances in Arkham Asylum utilizing his intuitive detective skills and aggressive melee attacks. (Rainier, 2008)

Note that Rogers emphasizes the gameplay aspects of the game and that the game would satisfy both Batman fans as well as action adventure fans. Despite the fact that the game was no longer an adaptation of the film (or perhaps thanks to) \textit{BATMAN ARKHAM ASYLUM} (2009) was received positively by game critics, as well as by the gaming audience\footnote{18}.

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Adaptations based on games are also almost as old as the medium itself. There are new game adaptations of original games e.g. \textit{ADVENTURELAND} (1978) a version of \textit{THE COLOSSAL CAVE ADVENTURE} (1975-76) written in BASIC for the home computer by Scott Adams\footnote{19}. Early games have also been adapted to books and novels e.g. a series of four books written by S. Eric Meretzky that take place in the fictional universe of \textit{ZORK} (1980) published in 1983-1984 (Image V.8)\footnote{20}, or the two \textit{Gabriel Knight} books written by Jane  

\footnote{17}{The new game was also not based on an existing Batman comic, although one of the co-writers was Paul Dini, who wrote several of them.}
\footnote{18}{The game has a critic score of 9.2 (based on 60 reviews) and a user score of 9.2 (based on 6119 votes). Source GameSpot http://www.gamespot.com/xbox360/action/batmanarkhamasylum/index.html (August 2010).}
\footnote{19}{See Chapter III.}
\footnote{20}{Interestingly, the books are also ‘interactive’ in that they let the reader choose what page to turn to (on the cover it reads “A What-Do-I-Do-Now Book”) similar to the \textit{Choose Your Own Adventure} book series. The four}
Jensen which describe the events in the first (Image V.9) and the second game (Image V.10). The Gabriel Knight books are faithful adaptations of the games, not elaborations on the game’s story. This is not the case with the Lara Croft Tomb Raider books. These are new stories about game protagonist Lara Croft. And as their cover art shows, they are part of the TOMB RAIDER franchise (1996-2008) which directly refer back to the games.

Image V.11  Lara Croft Tomb Raider books from left to right The Amulet of Power (Resnick, 2003), The Lost Cult (Knight, 2004) and The Man of Bronze (Gardner J. A., 2004).

Early film adaptations of games include SUPER MARIO BROS. (1993), STREET FIGHTER (1994), MORTAL KOMBAT (1995), and WING COMMANDER (1999). These adaptations are interesting because none of them are based on a game of progression, which would have been the obvious choice as film is a narrative medium. This may be why these films were not very successful. It is therefore not surprising that the first commercially successful game-based film, LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER (2001), is based on a story-structured game. But the film’s success also stems from the fact that it is not a direct adaptation, but, like the books, another story in the TOMB RAIDER franchise. The main reason for the film’s success,

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21 See also Chapter IV.
22 There are also TOMB RAIDER comic books and TOMB RAIDER theme park rides.
23 In the past decade more and more film adaptations of popular games have been produced, and film versions of present-day hit games such as CALL OF DUTY (2003-present), UNCHARTED 2: AMONGST THIEVES (2009) and RED DEAD REDEMPTION (2010), where Brad Pitt has been given first refusal for the role of John Marston, are planned (Jackson M., 2010). The increase in film adaptations of successful games also led to a major April Fool’s Day prank by IGN (Imagines Games Network), one of the leading computer games news sources. On 1 April 2008 they released an exclusive trailer of what to all intents and purposes was a film version of THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1986) to be released exactly one year later: “Few videogame properties hold the cachet of The Legend of Zelda. As a film project, it’s on the scale of Lord of the Rings. But no one has tackled a live-action adaptation of the storied franchise… until today. Production Company Rainfall Films has asked IGN to premiere the very first footage from their live-action Zelda film — a very literal adaptation of the magical epic — and, of course, we said, ‘Yes!’” (IGN Staff, 2008). Many fans of the games, who did not notice the date, were fooled, especially as the trailer had been professionally made and used all the trademark conventions of the standard Hollywood film trailer.
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however, was that the narrative centred more on the protagonist Lara Croft, without compromising on the exotically located action packed story of the games (Sloane, 2001). To achieve this, Lara's character, which was sketchy in the games, was given more background (Nguyen, 2006). Overall, however, most film adaptations (even the ones based on games of progression) do not do very well, certainly not in comparison to the success of the original games.

A new development in the adaptation of computer games and cross- and transmedia storytelling can be witnessed in Ubisoft's ASSASSIN'S CREED franchise. Of course, game series themselves are a common phenomenon. They are as old as the KING'S QUEST series (1984-1998 (original series)) and as recent as GRAND THEFT AUTO (1997-present) and CALL OF DUTY (2003-present). In the past, most series were only available on one platform, but as the CASTLEVANIA example in Chapter II showed, games may also move platform. What then is new about ASSASSIN'S CREED? The first game, ASSASSIN'S CREED (2007), which was originally planned to coincide with the launch of the PS3 to show off the new platform's capabilities, did not make the planned launch date. When it eventually hit the shelves, an XBox360 version was also released and later a PC version followed. With a project this costly such a strategy is of course understandable, but the multi-platform approach also showed that the new PS3 and XBox360 were not the strong contenders that they were made out to be. Furthermore, game producers learned that game audiences were not as willing to invest in new hardware to be able to play a particular game as they had been in the past. Although ASSASSIN'S CREED had some major flaws and therefore received mixed reviews, its story and setting (and the stunning fluent motion of the avatar) did appeal to the gaming audience. One of the reasons was the game's intriguing frame narrative and the story of the main protagonist Altaïr. Of course, more game series are based on a

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24 In games, characters especially in the earlier adventure and action adventure games were left relatively blank to allow for easier identification by the gamer. Opinions differ as to whether or not this is a successful strategy. See Klevjer (2007) and Cross (2008).


26 And even change their genre, usually for commercial reasons, but also because a series like CASTLEVANIA has run so long that it survived several platforms.

27 Before its launch in November 2006 demonstrations of the Wii and the Wii-mote controller had shaken up the platform world. Sony even adapted their PS3 controller to make it more interactive, in an attempt to give the PS3 gamer some sense of motion control. But, although the PS3 was released a few weeks before the Wii, the innovative concept of the Wii appealed to more gamers. This was also helped by the fact that the Wii was much cheaper. However, the real competitor was Sony's own PS2. Most gamers stuck to their PS2 as this platform had by far the most software titles. And some of the major producers, such as Square with their successful FINAL FANTASY series, kept developing new games for the PS2 because this was where the mass market was. In fact it was not until 2010 that the first main FINAL FANTASY title (XIV) was released for the PS3 and (a first for Square) for the XBox360.

frame narrative\textsuperscript{29}, but these usually centre on the game’s protagonist\textsuperscript{30}. In \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED} the frame narrative is a conspiracy theory about modern day Templars out to gain world domination and a group of modern day assassins who want to stop them, while the individual game stories all take place in a historical past and tell part of how the frame narrative came about. Following the success of the first game Ubisoft released a second game, \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED ALTAÏRS CHRONICLES} (2008), for the Nintendo DS, which gave some insights into the exploits of Altaïr before the start of the first game. This setup would become the backbone of the franchise\textsuperscript{31}. The main story is told in three major games for the PS3, XBox360, and PC, while the life-chronicles of the assassins (which also give some insights into what happened between the assassin’s stories and the main games) are told on other platforms\textsuperscript{32}.

The innovative take on the frame narrative and the dispersion of the interlocking stories over several platforms made the \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED} series different from other game series. In addition, unlike other game franchises, the \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED} franchise consists of more than the games alone. Of course, the franchise has its own websites\textsuperscript{33} and channels on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube\textsuperscript{34}. But Ubisoft also launched an interactive assassination game on a most unusual gaming platform: the social network Twitter\textsuperscript{35}. Other elements of the franchise are the atypical teaser trailers Ubisoft launched for \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED II} (2009) and for its follow-up \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED II BROTHERHOOD} (2010)\textsuperscript{36}. These trailers are unusual because, unlike other game trailers, which normally consist of gameplay footage and cutscenes, they are a mixture of live action scenes (shot against blue screen) set in the actual game’s surrounding and in-game footage/cutscenes (Image 1).  

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\textsuperscript{29} GABRIEL KNIGHT, SPLINTER CELL, MAX PAYNE, METAL GEAR SOLID, UNCHARTED, to name but a few.  
\textsuperscript{30} Or in the case of the KING’S QUEST series (1984-1998 (original series)) on a family.  
\textsuperscript{31} Today more game franchises, such as Activision’s CALL OF DUTY, use the same strategy, i.e. to make the main games of a series for the four major platforms (PS3, XBox360, Wii and PC) and additional games for handhelds (PSP, Nintendo DS, iPhone). Whether or not a Wii version is included depends on the type of gameplay the game calls for (as the Wii uses a totally different kinaesthetic approach). As we saw earlier (note 27), even game series that have a long standing relationship with one platform such as FINAL FANTASY (Playstation) now also release games for other platforms (most notably the Nintendo DS). The most notable and successful exception is THE LEGEND OF ZELDA series (1986-present) which is still only produced for Nintendo platforms.  
\textsuperscript{32} See Appendix B for an overview of the frame narrative so far, and the story of the individual parts that make up the franchise.  
\textsuperscript{33} One for each major instalment (and market i.e. US, UK, etc.), see Appendix B. Ubisoft later also released a Facebook game \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED PROJECT LEGACY} (2010) to coincide and interweave with \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED BROTHERHOOD} (2010).  
\textsuperscript{34} And naturally, the usual merchandise.  
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED TWITTER ASSASSINATION EXPERIENCE} (released 23 July 2009). See Appendix B for details.  
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED II BROTHERHOOD} is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, as it is not part of the main trilogy, but a continuation of the second game, it should have been launched for one of the handheld platforms, but was launched for the PS3 and XBox360 (with a PC version following later) instead. Secondly, it is the first game in the franchise that is multiplayer, for which it immediately received the best online multiplayer award from Game Critics at the 2010 E3 convention.
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V.12 and Image V.13). This setup not only makes them very intriguing; it also means that they are not a true depiction of the games, i.e. they do not give any information about the gameplay of the new game nor information about the game skills needed. The trailers were made by Ubisoft Montreal and Hybride Technologies37, as was a short 36 minutes film ASSASSIN’S CREED: LINEAGE (2009), the prequel to the second game (again a combination of live action and CGI) released in three parts in the weeks immediately before the game’s release.

37 Hybride, makers of the visual effects for such films as SIN CITY (2005) and 300 (2006), had been acquired by Ubisoft in 2008: ‘Ubisoft will work closely with Hybride to share technology and to develop tools in order to optimize the creation of both video games and visual effects and to offer gamers visual experiences that rival those of the cinema. [...] ’The future of our industry depends on our ability to create brands that captivate audiences and to extend those brands to other forms of entertainment,’ said Yves Guillemot, chief executive officer at Ubisoft. ‘This alliance is a true first for the industry,’ continued Yannis Mallat, chief executive officer of Ubisoft Montreal. ‘Ubisoft and Hybride share the same vision of entertainment convergence’ (Ubisoft, 2008).
Ezio’s (the main protagonist of the second game) story is also told in the books *Assassin’s Creed Renaissance* (Bowden, 2009) and *Assassin’s Creed Brotherhood* (2010), but these books do not add to the transmedia experience, as their stories are almost exactly the same as those of the games38. Ubisoft furthermore released several graphic novels, as well as a mini-series of *ASSASSIN’S CREED* comic books set in Russia near the time of the Tunguska event39. One of the newest additions is a short animated film about Ezio, which bridges the time between *ACII* and *AC BROTHERHOOD*. The *ASSASSIN’S CREED* franchise thus now consists of several games on varying platforms, mixed media trailers, a short mixed media film, a short animated film, two book, and a series of graphic novels and comic books40; showing how a complex story can be played, viewed and read by the same individual user employing different media and platforms.

However, although the *ASSASSIN’S CREED* franchise and the cross-media narrative of the assassins on the surface does not seem different from other franchises (other than the fact that the medium it derives from is a computer game), there is one major difference between this transmedia narrative and those that originate from other media like film or television. In order to be able to piece together the complete story, the prospective gamer not only has to own all the different gaming platforms the assassin’s stories are disseminated on, but also has to master the kinaesthetic skills for all these different platforms41. And this is the real crux. Even the biggest fan of *ASSASSIN’S CREED* will be hard

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38 The story in the first book does resolve some of the uncertainty about Ezio’s first girlfriend, but it does not give any information about whom Ezio will eventually marry to carry on the bloodline (a topic heatedly debated on the *ASSASSIN’S CREED II* forum). As the book already included the Battle of Forlì and the Bonfire of the Vanities, those who read the book before finishing the main game (like me) were a bit confused by the lacking game parts, before it became clear that the two events would be sold separately as downloadable content (DLC). The latter is now common practice with large games and a new way to keep the audience connected to the games and the franchise (and make more money, of course). As there are also passages in the second book that are not in the game, these will undoubtedly also become available as DLCs.

39 Information about the event is already found in *ASSASSIN’S CREED II*, as well as some information on what happened to Altair.

40 See Appendix B for the complete overview.

41 A rare view of what this is like was recently given by Nicholson Baker from *The New Yorker* who, for the first time in his life, began playing computer games about a year ago: “To begin, you must master the controller. On the Xbox 360 controller, which looks like a catamaran, there are seventeen possible points of contact. [...] Then, there are the very important colored buttons: the blue X, the green A, the red B, and the yellow Y. On the slightly smaller Sony PlayStation 3’s controller, the buttons are similar, except that in place of the colored letters you’ve got the green triangle, the pink square, the red O, and the blue X. (The PlayStations 3’s blue X button is in a different place than the Xbox 360’s blue X button — madness). In order to run, crouch, aim, fire, pause, leap, speak, stab, grab, kick, dismember, unlock, crawl, climb, parry, roll, or resuscitate a fallen comrade, you must press or nudge or woggle these various buttons, singly or in combination, performing tiny feats of exactitude that are different for each game” (2010, p. 53). Although transmedia storytelling does not usually involve having to play a game on more than one main platform (although the PC version of *ASSASSIN’S CREED* is slightly different and called *THE DIRECTOR’S CUT*), the handhelds also have a multitude of buttons and button combinations as have the main systems (except, of course, the iPhone). Baker’s struggle to master the controllers makes it clear why the Wii is so successful. And even though one might assume that the DS(i) would make things easier with its stylus, the *ASSASSIN’S CREED* DS(i)

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pushed to invest so much. Consequently, only a select group of gamers will own all of the games on all of the platforms and an even smaller number will have the necessary skills (or patience) to finish all the games. Fortunately, in the age of the Internet, this is less of a problem than it would have been ten years ago, as complete game sessions of all the games can now be found on YouTube or game video websites. Therefore, even if a gamer can only play the main games, she can watch the others being played\(^{42}\), which will give her narrative closure\(^{43}\). And Ubisoft’s acquisition of Hybride Technologies\(^{44}\) suggests that they might eventually even make a film adaptation of the main narrative, once the story is complete.

The dissemination of the ASSASSIN’S CREED story over several media and platforms asks an unprecedented commitment on part of the gamer when she wants to experience the complete story; also because the individual assassin’s stories (‘told’ on the handheld platforms) can not be easily skipped as they are not side stories about ‘lesser’ characters as in THE MATRIX transmedia franchise, but part of the life stories of the main protagonists. Despite this extra commitment, Ubisoft’s take on convergence and transmedia storytelling is a great success. Why then does transmedia storytelling in games succeed, while adaptations of games in other media are rarely successful? As we saw at the beginning of this chapter audience expectations are media specific. For games this means agency. A gamer does not want to sit back while the narrative unfolds; she wants to play an active part and have the feeling that her choices make a difference. As the previous chapters on genre and, especially the one on space, have shown, reading about a protagonist or seeing him\(^{45}\) on screen is not the same as ‘being’ this person, walking around ‘in’ the story world, enacting the narrative, making choices (in short exerting agency). Or as Ryan put it:

> The player pursues the goal specified by the game by performing a series of moves that determine the destiny of the gameworld. This destiny is created dramatically, by being enacted, rather than diegetically, by being narrated. But in contrast to standard drama, the enactment is autotelic, rather than being directed at an observer: performing actions is the point of the game and the main source of the player’s pleasure. (Ryan, 2004, p. 349)

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\(^{42}\) Or read the walkthroughs.

\(^{43}\) Of course, you would still have to watch the short film and read the comic books.

\(^{44}\) See note 37.

\(^{45}\) In games most of the protagonists are still male, unfortunately.
And as Ryan also rightly observed, this ability to act on the game world determines the narrative success of a game. This is why adaptations of games in other media seldom work. For an enthusiast of the *Prince of Persia* games, seeing Jake Gyllenhaal in the film adaptation *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010) feels unnatural because as a gamer one constantly wants to direct his actions and choices, not lean back and watch the story unfold. Stories in games of progression, unlike (popular) literature and film, are not an end in itself but part of a construction in which gameplay and narrative cooperate to give the gamer a sense of accomplishment. The gamer will only know what happens next in the story when she has the necessary game skills to overcome in-game obstacles put there by the designer. Consequently, modern open world games can still have a strong in-game narrative (in fact most of them do), but the story now focuses more on the gamer as the avatar, than on the gamer directing the avatar. In the film version of *Red Dead Redemption* John Marston would long since have rounded up Williams’ gang or, in failing to do so, mourned the loss of his family. In the game he is constantly sidetracked by other people’s requests for help or he meets yet another untimely death because the gamer still lacks the necessary skills to quickly counter attacks by gangs or wild animals. For someone used to the immersion of books and films this can be unsettling, because she relies on the ‘narrator’ to take her through the story’s events and make her care about what happens in the fictional world. A game, however, does not rely on subtlety of plot or complex characterization to get the gamer immersed in the story; the fact that she is part of its fictional world, that she is acting in it and, for all intent and purposes, is determining its fate, automatically make her care.

This interlacing of gameplay and narrative also works the other way around: when other media stories are adapted into games. This is why the game versions of cartoons and films have to be different as we saw earlier on, and why *Batman Arkham Asylum* was so successful despite the fact that it was no longer an adaptation of *The Dark Knight*. Even a game like the *The Da Vinci Code* (2007), which is an adaptation of what could be termed a

46 The only thing the film has in common with the game of the same name (apart from the dagger that turns back time) is that the story bases on the hero-king myth (see Chapter VI). But as this is the most common character script for games, which is also used frequently in (action) adventure books and films, this is not as surprising as it might seem at first hand. A major flaw in the film version is that the fluid acrobatic movements the game character uses could now have been easily mimicked in the film with the use of free running. See for instance the French films *Banlieue 13* (2004) and *Banlieue 13 Ultimatum* (2009) where the frequent use of free running in chases endows the film character Leïto with game character qualities.

47 See, however, the game *Heavy Rain* discussed below.

48 Of course, in games of progression the designer ultimately determines what happens next, but in open world games because the gamer is given the choice of how she wants to play the game (concentrating on the story and what happens next, or exploring the vast game world independent of the in-game story) the dichotomy between the top-down narrative script and the bottom-up gameplay is less of an issue, which also gives the gamer more sense of agency.
classic adventure game in book form\textsuperscript{49}, was altered to make it more fitting for a computer game (including very physical fights Robert Langdon has to get into which are incongruous with his book character)\textsuperscript{50}. But the storytelling characteristics of the medium used are only part of adaptation. The ‘technical’ abilities and limitations of the medium also play a part. As the \textit{TUDORS GAME SEASON 1} shows, despite its user friendliness, the iPhone is not really the best medium to use for an adventure game adaptation of a visually opulent TV-series. Its technical affordances are too limited for a combination of high-definition images with the fluid 3D story world that gamers have become used to. Consequently, the game has to rely on still images with dialogue displayed in text boxes, not even presenting the story world one screen at a time as in the older 2D adventure games. Instead, the gamer constantly has to shift between dialogue mode (where the story unfolds, Image V.14) and ‘travel’ mode (where she moves from room to room to advance the story, Image V.15). This makes playing the game very tedious, as gameplay depends more on finding the right room\textsuperscript{51} than on solving challenging puzzles\textsuperscript{52}.

The makers of \textit{SPARTACUS BLOOD AND SANDS} (2010) solved the technical limitations of the iPhone better by opting for a simpler game of emergence: a fight game in the setting of

\textsuperscript{49} With its use of real world locations, hidden objects and clues, puzzles and a plot that centred on investigation and interrogation. That Dan Brown is a fan of adventure game puzzles can be deduced from other puzzles he devised, which can be found on his official website (http://www.danbrown.com) and the site of the fictional character Robert Langdon (http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/davinci/robertlangdon/).

\textsuperscript{50} That most of the puzzles in the game have changed is no surprise, otherwise solving the game would be too simple. This, however, also indicates that the franchise assumed that most of the people who would want to play a \textit{THE DA VINCI CODE} game would have read the book first.

\textsuperscript{51} Basically manoeuvring through a 2D maze, which is considered very old fashioned by adventure designers.

\textsuperscript{52} This is not to say that good adventure games are impossible on the iPhone. iPhone versions of older adventure games do work, because the technical limitations of the old computer platforms and the iPhone are very similar. The iPhone \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED} games also work because they do not have the ambition to rival the fluid 3D visual style of the main platform games, in stead they fall back on the simple 2D side-scrolling style of early arcade games.
the series (Image V.16). As the TV-series also has numerous gladiator fights, the gamer who knows the series will not be disappointed, especially as the imagery used is unmistakably taken directly from the series, not only the characters, but also the vast amounts of blood and gore. And even for a gamer who does not know the series, the game is fun to play when one likes the genre, whereas the TUDOR game will certainly not appeal if the gamer has no prior knowledge of the TV-series.

![Image V.16 Screenshots from the iPhone/iPod game SPARTACUS BLOOD AND SANDS (Artificial Life inc., 2010)](image)

Summing up we can say that the success of a game adaptation or a game as part of transmedia storytelling depends on a good balance between gameplay and narrative. This is why the ASSASSIN’S CREED franchise works, as most of the transmedia stories are also games. This is also why game adaptations of books and films can never be completely faithful, as they will always have to be adapted to fit a particular gameplay genre. Still, game adaptations, especially of action adventure films or films for a younger audience have become a standard part of the convergence package. Therefore more and more of these films contain scenes that can be directly included in the game version. Book and film adaptations of games also have to deal with adaptation problems, the most prominent of which is how to flesh out the (protagonist’s) story without losing the direct feel of the (inter)action. As reception and reviews have shown, most adaptations have failed in this respect. However, the more successful ones, such as TOMB RAIDER (Lara Croft), GABRIEL KNIGHT, MAX PAYNE and the book version of ASSASSIN’S CREED II (Ezio Auditore da Firenze),

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53 Note that there are also colour limitations, which make the colour red stand out more. The possible implications of this I will discuss below, when discussing setting.

54 Confirming that it is just another piece of merchandise.

55 As we saw in Chapter II, not all fiction and film genres (and consequently not all stories) are suitable for turning into a game. We also saw that certain genres, such as the detective, adapt well because its key elements strongly resemble the gameplay of adventure games.

56 The famous example is the pod-race in STAR WARS EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE (1999) for which George Lucas received a lot of criticism. When one sees such scenes, it is obvious that they are not merely quoting a well-known gameplay element, but instead are intended for the game adaptation.
have shown that having a story which centres on a strong protagonist helps\textsuperscript{57}. But ‘how’ the story is ‘told’ not only depends on the language of the medium; the technical affordances of the device used also play a part, especially when computer games are concerned.

Before discussing what the above means for the comparatist, there is more to be said about the medium used. In the above I already discussed some of the implications the game platform’s technical affordances have. I will return to this in the next part, when I discuss setting in game and film. But I will also return to the visual grammar discussed in the previous chapter, as the ‘language’ of the medium also affects the way we view and interpret the story world.

\textit{Setting - Location}

The term mise en scène, literally ‘putting on stage’, was first used for plays and later adopted by film. In the scope of this chapter, I cannot discuss all the particular aspects of mise en scène, which are setting, lighting, staging (i.e. movement and acting), and costume and make-up (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001, pp. 159-161). I will therefore focus on setting, as this will suffice to show how games differ from films and what this means for comparison. Setting in film involves location, colour, and props, and the way these are portrayed by the camera\textsuperscript{58}; all part of the visual grammar of film, which the viewer has learned to read. I will discuss each of these aspects separately, how they are implemented in film and how they are implemented in games, highlighting the differences; but first I offer some observations on setting as a whole.

Setting in film is already one step up from setting in theatre as, according to Bordwell and Thompson, it “plays a more active role in cinema than in most theatrical styles” (ibid., p. 159). They quote André Bazin to illustrate this point:

\begin{quote}
The human being is all-important in the theatre. The drama on the screen can exist without the actors. A banging door, a leaf in the wind, waves beating on the shore can heighten the dramatic effect. Some film
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{57} It should come as no surprise that most of these protagonist’s stories are based on the hero-king myth (see note 46). As the myth is much loved and has occurred in many variations as early as the story of Gilgamesh, it becomes clear why such adaptations stand more of a chance of being successful. In fact, a hero-king protagonist gives us a game hero who grows in relation to the story (a characteristic preferred by the majority of a group of ninety-two Arts students at the VU, see Guijt (2009)). On the use of the hero journey in games, see the International Game Developers Associations’ book \textit{Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames} (Bateman, 2007) or Gamasutra’s feature \textit{Using the Hero’s Journey in Games} (Duniway, 2000).

\textsuperscript{58} Camera is usually addressed as a separate element in film theory and analysis, and not, as I do here, as part of setting/mise en scène, as camera in itself is one of the means to convey the visual and narrative grammar of film. However, in games, as we shall see, the camera is a vital element in the way setting and props are ‘framed’. Therefore, I took the liberty to discuss these aspects of camera use in my discussion of setting.
masterpieces use man only as an accessory, like an extra, or in counter-point to nature, which is the true leading character. (ibid.)

The most obvious difference between setting in film versus game is of course the fact that setting in film involves showing and viewing, while setting in games is about navigating and interacting. Or to rephrase Murray’s quote from the last chapter: “Linear media, such as books and films can portray [setting] either by verbal description or image, but only digital environments can present [setting so] that we can move through” (1997, p. 79).

This has been true from the earliest games on, especially in the adventure game and its decedents, as we saw in Chapters III and IV. Of course, the fact that the gamer has to be able to move through and interact with the story world of the game affects how setting is portrayed and how the elements of setting work. Consequently, setting in games is different from setting in non-interactive media like films and books. For instance, as games are about participation in the game world, in a game ‘man can never be used only as an accessory’, to paraphrase Bazin: even in the most desolate landscape the avatar will always be present. Modern day game designers, however, do aspire to create a setting that is as impressive as the ones featured in some memorable films, as Jade Raymond, producer of the first ASSASSIN’S CREED game (2007) stated:

We also think gamers want more then another Halo or GTA clone. Maybe there is room for games to bring to life the kinds of settings that movies have made so memorable. (Movies like Braveheart or Kingdom of Heaven both share this epic feeling, we are trying to achieve in Assassins’ Creed.) (Seif El-Nasr et al., 2008, p. 13)

And in modern day games setting can be, and usually is, very impressive:

But after an exhausting day of shooting and skinning and looting and dying comes the real greatness of this game [RED DEAD REDEMPTION]: you stand outside, off the trail, near Hanging Rock, utterly alone, in the cool, insect-chirping enormity of the scrublands, feeling remorse for your many crimes, with a gigantic predawn moon silvering the cacti and a bounty of several hundred dollars on your head. A map says there is treasure to be found nearby, and that will happen in time, but the best treasure of all is early sunrise. Red Dead Redemption has some of the finest dawns in all of moving pictures. Albert Bierstadt couldn’t make morning light look this good. (Baker, 2010, p. 59)59

Note that Baker is describing the setting of RDR as if he is actually there (and not John Marston). He is ‘in the setting’, he is experiencing it, living it, not merely looking at it from a more detached distance. But setting in games is not only beautiful scenery; it is a

59 Albert Bierstadt is a 19th Century German American painter best known for his often dramatically but still naturally lit landscapes of the American West.
‘physical’ presence. Riding through pouring rain in RDR will not only get your avatar wet, it will also limit visibility severely, and hence affect gameplay.

A major part of setting is the location where the action takes place. In film, this can be a real world place, or a studio setting, or both. In all cases the cinematographer can leave out part of the setting (and of the actors), e.g. by using blue-screen, to fill in later with scenes from other takes or with computer generated images (CGI). In games, however, the whole setting has to be created “from digital scratch”, as Siegel rightly observed in his New York Times review of RED DEAD REDEMPTION:

For a genre that has been so essential to the film business, it may seem surprising that the western has traditionally never lent itself to video games. Then again, western games, like Activision’s Gun from 2005, have never sold well because there has never before been a western game that was truly made well. And that may be because the western, perhaps more than any other genre, exposes how much more work is required to make a convincing game than to make a “realistic” film. John Huston set Hollywood on its ear in 1948 with “The Treasure of the Sierra Madre” by shooting on location. But all of those mountains and plains and ridges and gorges were already sitting there waiting to be photographed. But if you want mesas and forests and gulches and rivers in a video game, you have to build them by hand, from digital scratch if you will. Moreover, in a game you have to build all of it. In noninteractive entertainment — be it a play, film or television program — the director controls exactly what the audience sees at every single moment. That is why it makes sense to build sets that are nothing more than plywood facades: if the audience can’t see it, it has no reason to exist. By contrast, a great western game allows players to roam the frontier as they please.

As Siegel noted, setting in games does not only have to be created because it has to be viewed; it has to be created because if it is not there the gamer cannot move through it, nor can she interact with it. And the world that has to be created can be and often is vast in today’s non-casual games. Furthermore, setting is not just the landscape and landmarks the gamer sees/moves through everything that is in the setting, i.e. characters (including the races they belong to and the languages that they speak), animals, objects (such as signposts, baskets, bottles, etc.), in short everything one might encounter has to be designed and programmed. In addition, this world also has to be given its own laws of physics (if the apple is to fall, it has to be programmed to fall) and metaphysics (as they can be quite different in a game, especially in games with a science fiction or fantasy

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60 Of course, as the film AVATAR (2010) showed films where most of the setting consists of CGI can still be very convincing, but thus far these are more the exception than the rule, and as STAR WARS EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE (1999) showed using almost exclusively CGI can also make setting look unconvincing and artificial.

61 Because the setting in open world games has become very vast, more and more research looks into ways to automate the process of landscape and level design. See for example Smelik et al. (2010) and Dormans (2010).
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theme) (Pratchett, 2007). Moreover, the setting of the game world also has to be realistic (despite the fact that it might be completely fictional and fantastic)\textsuperscript{62}. For the gamer this means that this world has to 'look real'\textsuperscript{63}, i.e. the graphics have to be as realistic as possible\textsuperscript{64}. Secondly, everything in the game world has to work in the way the gamer expects it to work, for example, when the game avatar is standing in front of a mirror the gamer expects to see a reflection\textsuperscript{65}. Thirdly, items in the world (be they dust, clothing, people, etc.) have to have kinetic realism (move and behave as expected), so no horses that gallop midriff (because they are not properly aligned with the game's horizon), or vultures that literally disappear into solid mountain rock\textsuperscript{66}. Fourthly, the world should be coherent; for instance, non-player characters (npc's) should interact logically with and react logically to the player character, other npc's or other items in the game. Finally, the world has to be credible (for instance, dialogue (also that of npc's) should fit the character, the setting, and the time\textsuperscript{67}).

Realism in games, however, has its own drawbacks. The more realistic a game becomes, the more critical the gamer becomes. For instance, on the one hand admiring the use of period advertisements in newspapers in RDR, such as those praising the health benefits of smoking [sic], while on the other hand despairing of the fact that John Marston's weaponry in the video sequences (both in the short scripted events as well as in the longer cutscenes) does not correspond with his actual outfit at that point in the game\textsuperscript{68}. In film, the script supervisor (continuity supervisor/script girl) would ensure that costume and props correspond between shots. In games such discrepancies usually indicate the game engine's technical limitations or even faults. But whatever the reason, such experiences pull the gamer out of the immersive game world.

\textsuperscript{62} Of course, in other media, such as film, realism has become a very problematic issue, as Bordwell and Thompson, amongst others, have noted. There are many aspects to be taken into account when talking about realism, such as the time in which the film was produced, the time it depicts, the acting method favoured at the time, any stylistic aspects that may be at play, etcetera. At the moment, the computer game audience, however, still wants higher (graphic) realism in certain game genres (e.g. in First Person Shooters) and both hardware production companies (such as ATI and NVidia who develop graphic chips) as well as major games companies (Microsoft Games, Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, Rockstar, Activision, Sony Computer Entertainment) work relentlessly to make games that meet those demands.

\textsuperscript{63} The official term used is verisimilitude in graphics.

\textsuperscript{64} Although the success of the Wii and the Nintendo DS have shown that this does not hold true for all game genres.

\textsuperscript{65} Which, for instance, is not the case in RED DEAD REDEMPTION, consequently taking away part of the illusion.

\textsuperscript{66} Both these examples occur in RED DEAD REDEMPTION.

\textsuperscript{67} This, of course, is one of the issues with realism. What is considered realistic very much depends on the audience and (cultural aspects of) the time in which the game/film etc. is produced (and by whom). Cf. the difference in historical realism in the tv-series discussed in Chapter III or the alleged realism in DEADWOOD (2004-2006) versus earlier tv-westerns such as GUNSMOKE (1955-1975) or Stanley Kubrick's SPARTACUS (1960) with the present SPARTACUS BLOOD AND SANDS TV-series (2010).

\textsuperscript{68} Especially as one of the achievements of ASSASSIN'S CREED II's immersive realism is that clothing and weaponry in scripted events and cutscenes always correspond with those of the actual gameplay.
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As in film, locations in games can be fictitious or based on existing places. In the previous chapter, we saw how designer Jane Jensen and her team made careful recreations of real world locations for the GABRIEL KNIGHT series of games. More than just a backdrop for the story, they were interwoven with the narrative and the gameplay. In the second game in the series, GABRIEL KNIGHT THE BEAST WITHIN (1995), Gabriel is faced with wolf attacks in the south of Germany where he now lives in his ancestral Schattenjäger home. The attacks lead him, and Grace (his assistant and other playable character in the game) to a hunting club led by the charismatic Baron Von Glower. Gabriel is soon taken in by Von Glower but Grace discovers that he is not what he seems to be.

![Images V.17 a-c The Sängersaal in Neuschwanstein is decorated with scenes from Wagner’s opera Parzival (a). In the game these pictures have been modified (b) to tie in with Wagner’s lost opera. Every panel tells part of the opera (the story of the Black Wolf). But Neuschwanstein is also important in another way. Throughout the castle acts from the lost opera are hidden, and the gamer (as Grace) has to search the rooms to find them. In image c one of the acts is found behind a hidden panel in the Sängersaal.

69 As we already saw, Henri Jenkins calls this use of location “evocative spaces” (2004).
70 All the wall paintings and other elements of Neuschwanstein have been faithfully reproduced in the game and commentary from the guided tour has been added so that the gamer can take a factual virtual tour of the castle in the game.
As it turns out, he is an ancient werewolf who might know more about the alleged suicidal drowning of King Ludwig II in the Starnberger See. The famous composer Wagner, Ludwig's friend, also made the connection between Von Glower and the mysterious Black Wolf, so he composed an opera to expose the baron. But Ludwig died before the opera could be performed and after Wagner's death the score was lost. Grace has to find the score and stage a performance in the original theatre, the Wittelsbacher opera house, so that the Black Wolf is yet exposed, especially because Gabriel, in the meantime, has been bitten by one of Von Glower's pack, and is therefore turning into a werewolf. As the game uses full motion video, all the locations in the game use both real footage of the actual places and interactive digitized images enhanced with game elements, sometimes moderately altered to fit in with the story of the game, as in Images V.17 a-c. However, most games do not go to such great lengths to incorporate history, location, and gameplay elements in the game's narrative as the Gabriel Knight series does.

Still, location can also be used to aide in gameplay tasks in different ways (cf. the use of content genre in Chapter II). In Syberia (2002), for instance, locations include a library...
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(Image V.18), and a graveyard: places that create atmosphere and allusion\(^{72}\). But their familiarity also helps the gamer to know which information she might find there.

Of course, one of the great benefits of having to create a place “from digital scratch” is that games can accurately recreate historical places based on archaeological evidence, for instance to enhance the gameplay with educational aspects as in \textit{TIMELINE} (2000) or to create compelling architectural escape routes as in \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED} (2007)\(^{73}\).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Image_V.19}
\caption{Piazza San Marco Venice in \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED II} (Ubisoft, 2009). Baker (2010, p. 57) described Venice in the game as “moments of loveliness […] when you reach a lookout high up over Venice and allow your gaze to sweep across the sfumatoed city. The colors are brown stone, weathered brick, the occasional red flapping banner\(^{74}\), and pale Mediterranean blue.”}
\end{figure}

Such hyper-realistic renditions of location as in \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED} and even more so in its sequel \textit{ASSASSIN’S CREED II} (2009, Image V.19) have not always been possible. Over the years, games have moved from a single screen with fixed boundaries (e.g. \textit{PONG} (1972), Image V.20) to freely navigable 3D spaces. And while graphics started life as simple black and white pixels on a TV-screen (Image V.20)\(^{75}\) the graphically most sophisticated console to date, the PS3, now uses full HD resolution (1920x1080 pixels) in true colour\(^{76}\).

Moreover, as the setting in most games has to be navigable, it has to be rendered in real-

\(^{72}\) See Ernest Adams (2002) and (2003) for a detailed description of the use of architecture in computer games.
\(^{73}\) See Chapter III.
\(^{74}\) Here he confuses Venice, which has blue banners, with another city in the game, Florence, which has red banners.
\(^{75}\) Note this is not black and white as in film (a wide range on a scale of gray). In the earliest games, this literally was only white (light on) and black (light off).
\(^{76}\) Some well-known computer display standards over time have been CGA (640x240 pixels with 2 colours or 320x200 pixels with 16 colours), EGA (640x350 pixels; 16 colours out of 64), VGA (640x480; 16 and 256 colour modes), SVGA (800x600; 16 and 256 colour modes), and XGA (800x600; 65,536 colours and 1024x768; 256 colours).
time\textsuperscript{77}. This means that setting depends on the technical specifications of the hardware\textsuperscript{78} the game is played on.

In the previous chapter, we saw that designers have learned to adopt hardware limitations to develop a specific visual grammar that best suits the gameplay of a particular game genre. We also saw that gamers have learned to read this grammar, and that different types of gameplay call for different types of interactive views. While the action based gameplay of ASSASSIN’S CREED benefits from the detailed, fluid, and realistic rendition of the settings, finding objects in an adventure game is notably easier when the gamer can see a whole screen at a time (as in GABRIEL KNIGHT THE BEAST WITHIN, Images V.17 a-c).

A location-related aspect, where games obviously differ from film, is the game information which is superimposed on (or frames) the screen, such as the icon bar in point-and-click adventure games (Image IV.8, p. 124) or the health and weapon stats in a First Person Shooter (Image II.5, p. 42). Fast-paced open world games use small directional mini maps (also called compass maps or GPS) as an indispensable aide:

As the size of the video game’s diegetic world grew from one screen to several screens to intricate multi-leveled three-dimensional mazes, providing the player with some visual representation of a conceptual map became

\textsuperscript{77} For the non-interactive part of the game visuals, the cutscenes, the limitations are less restrictive as these scenes are pre-rendered and stored on an external storage device. Here the designer can recreate the visual grammar of the cinematographer, although restrictions on colour depth and resolution still apply. One designer who is particularly known for his cinematographic cutscenes is Hideo Kojima of the METAL GEAR games (1987-present). However, as cutscenes are usually not rendered in real time, the issues addressed here (technology's influence on setting) do not affect them. They are therefore left out of the discussion.

\textsuperscript{78} This also includes the device used for output. Colour depth, for instance, is notably worse on an LCD screen, as opposed to screens that use a cathode ray tube like non flat-screen television sets. Plasma screens also have more natural colour, although still not as good as cathode ray.
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more important. These represented or “mapped” spaces became an onscreen representation of off-screen space [...] designed to orient a player or indicate important events occurring in off-screen space. (Wolf, 2001, p. 67)

As Wolf notes, mini maps not only give information about the direct surroundings of the avatar (such as the location of important non-player characters (friend or foe), transport, objects, etcetera, see Image V.21; they also function as a means of navigation so that the gamer can see where to take the next turn (therefore most of these maps rotate, keeping the direction the gamer is headed in North; hence GPS or compass maps)79.

Image V.21 In RED DEAD REDEMPTION (Rockstar Games, 2010) the mini map (lower left corner) indicates important locations such as a gunsight (small revolver icon) and the stagecoach (exclamation mark) superimposed on a street map with buildings (used for navigation). The direction of locations to reach is marked with a yellow dot, while people that need your help or attention are marked with blue dots and enemies with red dots (not in this map). The blue bar left of the map indicates the health status of the horse, while the red bar indicates the health status of the avatar, John Marston (who is represented by a white oval pointer in the map).

Another obvious visual difference with film is the marking of important locations such as rendezvous points. As the action in these open world games is fast-paced, key locations have to be clearly marked so that they can be easily found. In ASSASSIN’S CREED II this is done by marking rendezvous points with bright white circles (Image V.22) and by putting an exclamation mark in the mini map (Image V.22, lower right corner). RDR uses a bright yellow cross in the main screen and a yellow dot (sometimes even a small yellow cross) on the mini map. But what helpful information is superimposed on the screen and how it is placed and functions is game-dependent. Some games, like RDR, try to keep the

79 Stockburger diverges from this narrow view and suggests mapped spaces should be regarded as “part of the game-camera, because they are necessary elements within the visual representational apparatus that generates the spatial simulation” (Stockburger, 2006, p. 156).
information to a bare minimum, limiting it to the mini map (Image V.21) and occasional text hints in the top left corner. In this way what the gamer sees is more cinematic. However, this also means that playing the game is harder than when all the important stats are immediately visible, as in ASSASSIN’S CREED II (Image V.22).

Still, irrespective of how much or how little information is superimposed, the gamer will always have to learn the visual skill of monitoring the mini map and the main screen at the same time (otherwise, mainly focussing on the mini map will result in regularly bumping into people and objects, while focussing on the main screen means that potential enemies in off-screen space are missed). Open world games cannot do without at least a mini map. Other games, however, those that do not support free roaming, such as the more story-structured action adventure game UNCHARTED 2: AMONGST THIEVES (2009), can (almost) dispense with superimposed game information (Image V.23). UNCHARTED 2: AMONGST THIEVES’ visual style is part of the designers’ aim to make the gamer feel that she (her avatar) really is participating in a cinematographic experience.

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80 As we saw in Chapter II, RDR based its story and imagery on existing films and books, one of which was John Hillcoat’s THE PROPOSTION (2005). After the game was released, Hillcoat was asked by Rockstar to make a machinima film from RDR to promote the game. Hillcoats adaptation RED DEAD REDEMPTION: THE MAN FROM BLACKWATER (2010) (http://www.rockstargames.com/videos#/video:4861) was aired on 29 May 2010 on FOX; and even had its own teaser trailer. The machinima film shows how cinematic present-day games can be.

81 Add to this other helpful information that is superimposed and it becomes clear that far from being a lean-back medium computer games require “jaw-clenched concentration” as novice gamer Baker (2010, p. 53) put it.
Image V.23 Regular gameplay in *UNCHARTED 2: AMONGST THIEVES* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009) has no superimposed information on the screen (left image), guns and ammunition stats are only visible when actually handling a gun or when collecting ammunition (right image).

The gaming audience thus wants locations that look and feel as real as possible, on the one hand calling for real world realism, while on the other hand envisaging beautiful locations and scenery as in film. The technical affordances of recent open world and action adventure games on platforms such as the PS3 and the XBox360 have made a cinematographic visualization of location possible, perhaps for the first time offering the gamer something that could be called interactive cinema. However, as with narrative and gameplay, the two elements should be carefully balanced. Increasing the cinematographic ‘feel’ of a game will make it visually more immersive, but this either means that gameplay is more restrictive and linear or it will make the game harder to play.

*Setting - Camera*

Another major difference in the setting of present-day games is the way setting is framed by the ‘camera’. In film, the director and the cinematographer carefully plan camera position, angle, etc. for every shot. After shooting, these rushes are scrutinized another time by the editor, who turns a fraction of the material that was originally shot into a visual story. In contrast, in present-day PC, PS3 and XBox360 games the gamer controls the camera, so she chooses the best angle from which to operate. As we saw in the previous chapter, this practice emerged with 3D games, where the game camera allows the game experience to become more personal as it supports different playing styles and different ways to be involved in the game space. In older games, the ‘camera-position’ was dictated by its suitability for the game-play and the technical limitations at the time, so very different from the way camera is used in film. However, as Michael Nitsche pointed

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82 As film is now often shot digitally, it is quite common to shoot enormous amounts of ‘film’ so that the editor has a wider choice of material to get the scenes just right. For instance, for the film COLD MOUNTAIN (2003), 200+ hours of material were shot, which Walter Murch then edited down to 154 minutes (*CLOSE UP EXTRA: FILMMONTAGE*, 2006).
out, in certain instances in the game *METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY* (2002), the game seems to quote a traditional camera angle found in certain film genres:

...the camera moves down to eye height and behind the main hero whenever the player-avatar hides behind a wall. The shot quotes a cinematic tradition from thriller and action movies that use the depth of the composition to juxtapose the player-avatar in the foreground and the target moving on a level deeper in the picture. (Nitsche, 2008, p. 88)

Hideo Kojima, the creator of the *METAL GEAR* series (1987-present), is well known for his cinematic style. For that reason, the above camera position might well pay homage to a cinematic tradition. However, *METAL GEAR* games are first and foremost stealth games in which camera position is designed to help gameplay. The oldest *METAL GEAR* game (1987), for instance, uses a top-down perspective (Image V.24). A more sophisticated view was not possible at the time. But as the gamer has a good overview of the whole screen, this did not matter. The top-down view clearly shows where enemies, obstacles, and possible hiding places are positioned. This is important because in a stealth game the gamer either sneaks up on enemies to eliminate them or she sneaks and hides to avoid them.

![Image V.24 METAL GEAR (Konami, 1987, Commodore64 version)](image)

You have to sneak past the dogs while they are sleeping.

Top-down perspective is also the prevalent camera position in *METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY* (Image V.25). It is only when the avatar crouches next to or backs up against a

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83 The *METAL GEAR* series is another example of a cross-media game. In the early years, an independent novelization of the first game was produced for the American market, while Konami made a radio play based on the game for the Japanese public. Since 2004 the cross-media element has become more serious, with the release of (digital) comic books, while new instalments of the game often have an accompanying DVD to bring the gamer up to date with the story so far. There were also plans for a feature film (with Christian Bale possibly playing the lead), but these were postponed indefinitely in January 2010 because Konami was afraid of “a duff movie hurting the image of the game series” (Parfitt, 2010).

84 Although the gamer can change to a first person perspective (almost) any time, but this is not very useful to the gameplay (especially for gamers used to the perspective (i.e. visual grammar) of the previous games).
wall (hiding near a corner to avoid being detected), that we get the angle Nitsche describes (Image V.26). However, the main purpose of this stance is not to visually quote a cinematic tradition. It is chosen to enhance and help gameplay. With this camera position, the gamer can see more than when first person perspective would have been used, but not as much as in top down view. On the one hand, the stance suggests that the protagonist (Snake) looks around a corner to see if an enemy is approaching, thus enhancing tension\textsuperscript{85}. On the other hand, however, the notably larger field of vision the gamer has (as opposed to the avatar), gives her the opportunity to decide what action is more appropriate: taking out the enemy as silently as possible or trying to leave the place undetected.

The fourth \textit{METAL GEAR} game, \textit{METAL GEAR SOLID 4: GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS} (2008), uses a gamer-controlled camera. As a result, sneaking up on enemies feels more real\textsuperscript{86}. The drawback of this freedom is that sneaking and crouching in third person perspective means that the avatar often ends up facing a wall (Image V.27); implying that Snake cannot see if enemies are about. Of course, the gamer can then try to recreate the cinematic stance, but this is rather difficult and takes a lot of time. So normally, one just does not bother. And, as the larger field of vision of the gamer still applies, it does not seem that important which way the game character is facing, as long as he stays hidden. However, it does pay to turn the avatar around, because this makes a quick exit possible if

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\textsuperscript{85} Even a crouched position where the avatar is not looking around the corner heightens suspension, as approaching enemies (which can be seen by the gamer) mean possible detection.

\textsuperscript{86} Again, \textit{MG4} is a stealth game where detection should be avoided. This time, when the gamer does not act accordingly, the voice of Otacon (Snake's friend and technical support) reminds the gamer that she should use stealth.
needs be\textsuperscript{87}. In \textit{METAL GEAR SOLID 4: GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS}, the “more directed camera style” of the previous games, which limited “the interactive access of the user to camera control” (Nitsche, 2008, p. 102) thus has been abandoned in favour of an interactive camera which makes the gameplay more realistic and more immersive and which the new hardware now supports.

Still, the cinematic camera position is not entirely forgotten in the game, as it can now be found in cutscenes (Image V.28)\textsuperscript{88}. As the gameplay of action adventure games benefits from the gamer controlled camera, it has become the norm in modern day games of this genre, even on some of the handheld platforms such as the PSP.

\textit{Setting - Colour}

Another important component of setting for the cinematographer is colour. Colour can be used to create atmosphere and mood, for instance the brown and gray post apocalyptic palette of \textit{THE ROAD} (2009). Colour is also often used in contrast, for instance the warm coloured countryside versus the cold menacing city (\textit{WITNESS} (1985)) or the lush green wilderness of the jungle versus the barren dry and dusty browns of so called civilization (\textit{THE EMERALD FOREST} (1985)). In some films colour is even more closely linked to the narrative, for example the colour red in \textit{THE SIXTH SENSE} (1999). More often, it directs the viewer’s eye, as in the film \textit{SHINDLER’S LIST} (1993) where the red coat of the little girl

\textsuperscript{87} Although this position is even less convincing from the avatar’s point of view as Snake is then literally turning his back on approaching enemies. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, camera position is not only chosen for aesthetic purposes (see quote Tong & Tang on p. 131).

\textsuperscript{88} To compensate for the fact that the game mainly uses an over-the-shoulder 3D view, Snake now can use the camera of a small robot sidekick in first person point of view, so that he can explore his immediate surroundings that way; a neat way of the design-team to help the stealth actions of the gamer.
Cross-media Analysis

cannot be overlooked in the otherwise black and white film. Until fairly recently game designers could not use colour in such a sophisticated way, as the number of colours available were limited due to technical issues. That is why WOLFENSTEIN 3D (1992) uses bright colours, as it had to use the then commonly used VGA palette (see note 76, and Image II.5, p. 42).

Its legendary successor DOOM (1993) could look gloomier as the designers now knew how to tweak the palette. But the number of colours was still limited so that some of the brighter colours had to be used (Image V.29). The next game in the developing FPS genre, QUAKE (1996), used the then new SVGA graphic card (see note 76). As such, it was the first FPS to use polygons instead of pixels, which made the graphics look a lot smoother (Image V.30). Nevertheless, the number of colours was still limited to 256. Fortunately, this palette has more dark hues than bright ones. Using darker colours means a loss of detail. For the programmers this meant that they could achieve the same effect with fewer polygons, i.e. fewer calculations by the graphic processor, which in turn meant smoother real-time graphics and smoother gameplay. Therefore, taking advantage of the limitations of the hardware, they not only created a better running game, but they also created the dark-toned dungeon-like colour scheme so typical of the genre. But as Image V.30 shows, this also meant that the gamer either has to crank up her monitor’s contrast and brightness to maximum, or she has to submit herself to the dangers of the atmospheric darkness.

Since then colour and graphic detail have moved significantly forward. Consequently, games like ASSASSIN’S CREED (2007) can use subtle colour differences, as Jade Raymon managing director of Ubisoft Toronto and producer of ASSASSIN’S CREED told Seif El-Nasr:

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89 Of course, in this film it is more than merely directing the viewer’s eye, see the next section on props.
The city [Jerusalem] had been under siege by the knights and soldiers for almost 3 years. We've added a cold blue filter to give this city a more modern look and its own unique personality (post war atmosphere). Each city in the game will have its own filter so players will be able to tell them apart in a glimpse of an eye. (Seif El-Nasr et al., 2008, p. 14)

But it seems that gamers are not yet cued to this cinematic use of colour, as one reviewer wrote:

The seemingly sandbox design of the environment is loaded with the same NPCs [non-player characters] and same locales, everything looks the same. If you look real careful, you're going to see it's not all the same. The architecture actually varies depending on the predominant religion in the city, but the color palette, the beige overtones; it just makes everything look the same. (Jojic, 2007)

The reason a gamer does notice the predominant religion of a city, or to put it more accurately the occupying force (Arab, French or English), is because this directly affects the state of the city's buildings which in turn affects the avatar's movements and consequently gameplay. Acre, for instance, has just been recaptured by Richard the Lionheart⁹⁰ and now has an English speaking occupying force. Before that, the city lay under siege for three years (Seif El-Nasr et al., 2008). When Altaïr (the protagonist) approaches Acre, the first things the gamer will notice are small palisade walls used by the siege army. She will furthermore see numerous corpses and still smoking ruins. Within the city, the walls show signs of damage, while buildings have crumbled roofs and towers. Other buildings around the city have been destroyed completely, leaving only rubble. As one of the best ways (and sometimes only way) to move around in the game is over the roofs, it is easy to see how the damage in Acre directly influences gameplay. And as sound in open world games is important because it usually signals potentially dangerous events in off-screen space⁹¹, it becomes clear why a gamer should associate the language spoken in a city (the occupying force, the religion) with that city and consequently with elements that affect the gameplay in that city. Colour does not affect gameplay and is therefore overlooked. Another reason why the difference in colour between the three cities is less noticeable is because it is only possible to be in one city at a time. Of the three cities only Damascus is clearly different as it has warm brown tones. But the difference between the greenish-blue of Jerusalem and the sunnier blue of Acre is more subtle. Only when one

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⁹⁰ A historic fact that did happen in July 1191, the year in which Assassin’s Creed takes place.
⁹¹ See the previous chapter.
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sees captured images of the cities side by side (Image V.31), do the individual colour filters become obvious.


Image V.31 a-c The three cities in ASSASSIN’S CREED (Ubisoft, 2007) all have a different colour to give them their own atmosphere and tell them apart.

Something similar happened when Baker mistakenly described Venice in ASSASSIN’S CREED II as having red banners (Image V.19). As in the first ASSASSIN’S CREED game, in ASSASSIN’S CREED II gameplay is affected by the city Ezio (the protagonist) is in. Boldly red-banneered Florence belongs to the Medici, the family the Auditore support. As a sign of gratitude, Ezio is given a red cape with the Medici emblem. Wearing the cape in Florence will mean that his notoriety will not increase, even though he behaves in a way that would normally make him more noticeable to city guards. In other words, wearing red shows his allegiance to the Medici, which in turn gives him a certain level of immunity. In blue-banneered Venice, on the other hand, a city that harbours Ezio’s enemies, even though the effect of the cape is the same as in Florence, Ezio wears Venice’s blue lion cape as a disguise, a spy’s outfit, to blend in with the crowd. Here the cape was not earned by helping the city’s authorities, but given to Ezio as an assassin’s prop at the end of his initiation into the Order. Because wearing the correctly coloured cape directly influences gameplay, it is strange that Baker did not notice this, also because the differently coloured banners in the second game are a lot less subtle than the hazy colours in the first game.

92 I did a few informal surveys amongst gamers who had played ASSASSIN’S CREED (in total ca. 50 gamers), and only one of them had noticed the colour differences between the cities.
However, it might well be that gamers like Baker just notice the colour of the banners when they are in a particular city and therefore do not change capes beforehand, which indicates that they do not associate a city with a particular colour. However, this would also imply that they see the capes only as gameplay props (see below) and not as part of the story, even though they were intended as such (as were the visual differences in the first game).

The ASSASSIN’S CREED examples show that just as with the other aspects of the visual grammar of the new games, gamers need some time to become acquainted with the cinematographic use of colour now possible on the XBox360, PS3 and PC.

Setting - Props
The final element of setting Bordwell and Thompson discuss are props, objects that play an important part in the visual narrative, for instance the paperweight that shatters at the beginning of CITIZEN KANE (1941) or the girl’s balloon in M EINE STADT SUCHT EINEN MÖRDER (1931). In games, even if a prop is part of the narrative, it is also, and more importantly, an item that is necessary for gameplay. In adventure games, these are objects that the gamer has to collect, otherwise it is impossible to end the game; in shooters they are rations, medical kit, weapons, and ammunition necessary for survival; and in role-playing games they can be use to upgrade the game character, change his/her appearance, etcetera. Obviously, the way props are ‘introduced’ is significantly different in games than in film. In a film, the viewer has to wait for the prop to appear. Often we first see the prop because it stands out from the rest of the setting through light or colour; next the camera usually focuses on the prop and then zooms in. In games, the gamer first has to find the objects, decide on their usefulness (whether they are props or not) and then figure out how, when and where to use them (see previous chapter). Moreover, in contrast to film, the avatar cannot deftly pick up props, because that would cost too many lines of code as every object is handled differently. Therefore, the normal way to pick up props is to bump into or run over them (e.g. in RDR, as in most other games that use guns, the gamer

93 The Wii uses a graphic chip with built-in hardwired functions that runs at a relatively slow speed (about half that of the XBox360 and the PS3), which has about a third of the memory capacity of that of the other two consoles. It therefore cannot do subtler colour effects such as shading, unless the program code directly addresses the built-in hardwired functions. Few game companies are willing to do so. Therefore colour use on the Wii will remain simpler compared to the other platforms.

94 In fast paced games subtle colour clues are also inefficient, as we will see later on.
Cross-media Analysis

makes the avatar run over weapons to stock up on ammunition) or the gamer clicks on
the object and it magically becomes part of the inventory. Alternatively, in case the object
is (very) important to the narrative, a scripted event follows, where we see the avatar
handling the object in close-up95. Gamers are familiar with this use of in-game objects, so
there is no great need to change the practice96, although more aspiring games such as
HEAVY RAIN (2010)97 now try to give the gamer a more realistic way of handling objects.

In HEAVY RAIN interaction with objects is contextual. This means that the gamer can make
the avatar actually pick up objects, open doors, even take objects from the places that
contain them (a glove department, an inside pocket) in a very natural and realistic way.
But this also means that button assignment on the controller is also contextual, so that the
way the game responds to button input seems to change all the time98. To help the
gamer, indications of which buttons or controller movements to use are now super-

95 In many games, bodies have to be searched (e.g. to get money), this usually triggers a scripted event
depicting the searching.
96 Although having to watch the same scripted events over and over (such as skinning animals in \textit{RDR}) makes
actions look very repetitive. Gamers therefore often seek ways to bypass them. Games that avoid such
repetitiveness are therefore valued higher.
97 “Heavy Rain eschews rocket launchers and power-ups in favour of a character-driven story about love,
sacrifice and a serial killer that splinters in myriad directions according to the choices the player makes. If the
man behind it [David Cage] is to be believed, it is the beginning of a radical new era in console gaming, one
that will fundamentally change the way we think of play, and herald a new art form as vital and innovative in
the 21st century as film was in the 20th. […] A noirish thriller that features four major playable characters,
its script runs to many thousands of lines of dialogue, and 12 distinct endings, with endlessly variable ways
of getting to them. Cage estimates that the game has roughly as much content as five feature films. […] I’m
inspired by film-makers such as Ridley Scott, David Fincher, Orson Welles,” he says, and pauses, deciding
whether or not to say it, and then takes the plunge: ’I feel a little bit arrogant, but I feel really close to
Welles. Not the weight, I hope, but with Citizen Kane, he was the first one to use the camera to tell the
story. And I got the exact same feeling in Heavy Rain. In other games, the camera is just a window. We use
it to create emotion.’ ” (Bland, 2010).
98 Of course, there is a system in place, but as there are quite a few possible avatar actions, you are at first
overwhelmed by the sheer amount of buttons and combinations which seem impossible to memorize.
Fortunately a PlayStation Move version of the game was released in Europe in October 2010.
imposed game iconography, it does take some time for the gamer to adapt. Moreover, the action required sometimes has to be quick and instant (for instance when in fights or when posing questions, as in Image V.33) so that there is no time to read the superimposed screen info. Consequently, a game that could give a gamer the most memorable cinematic experience ever, at first is often so hard to interact with that it feels far from natural or immersive.

As computer graphics have become more and more sophisticated, props in computer games no longer have to stand out graphically from the rest of the setting, for instance by adding bright red markings (e.g. the bright red crosses on medical kits and the bright red directions arrows in \textit{QUAKE}, Image V.34) or by giving them more detail (e.g. the tweezers and the magnifying glass in \textit{Gabriel Knight Sins of the Fathers}, Image V.35). But, as I will show below, there are valid reasons to continue to use less subtle ways to mark props. Furthermore, how props are ‘highlighted’ seems to be game genre dependent.

In fast-paced games, and especially open world games, the gamer often has to deal with time constraints and with a vast but also extremely detailed terrain. In such games, the location of specific items has to be marked more clearly. \textit{Red Dead Redemption} does this by labelling corpses (people, animals) as small x’s on the mini map. Thus, the gamer can first use the mini map to locate the general area the corps is in and then switch over

\begin{itemize}
\item As every choice the gamer makes leads to a different response with other consequences further on in the game, this is very frustrating.
\item The \textit{Gabriel Knight} images can also be found in the previous chapter (Image IV.17 and Image IV.19 respectively). They are repeated here for convenience.
\item People carry money and other useful items such as animal bait and moonshine, while ammunition is often found in the direct vicinity of the corps. Animals have skins, claws, tusks, feathers etc. that can be sold or that are necessary in side missions. As collecting herbs is also part of the side missions, herbs have their own icon on the mini map.
\end{itemize}
Cross-media Analysis

to the game camera to visually pinpoint the exact location (which still can be quite tricky). Other potentially valuable items such as chests containing ammunition, money, outfit parts, etcetera, can only be found using normal vision while searching the terrain with the game camera. In ASSASSIN’S CREED II the location of some props is clearly indicated by icons on the mini map (e.g. pages from Altaïr’s codex\textsuperscript{102}). To find other items that have to be collected (feathers, statues) or hidden symbols/hidden information, the gamer can use eagle vision (a special camera mode (Image V.37) which can also be used to identify enemies (red) and targets (yellow)). But because treasure chests are again not marked at all, the gamer has to search the game world methodically to find them\textsuperscript{103}.

Image V.37 Eagle vision reveals hidden information (left) and enemies and targets (right) in ASSASSIN’S CREED II (Ubisoft, 2009).

The slow paced adventure game THE DA VINCI CODE (2007) uses light to draw the gamer to props, clues and puzzles. But not in a subtle way as in GK3 or as in film. In THE DA VINCI CODE you just have to find a light source (Image V.38)\textsuperscript{104}.

Image V.38 In the game the DA VINCI CODE (2K Games, 2007) you just have to look for a source of light (lamp, candle) in a scene to find props, puzzles, and clues.

\textsuperscript{102} See appendix B.
\textsuperscript{103} Or use cheat maps.
\textsuperscript{104} Although actual gameplay (of a very small non-representative group of five gamers) showed that gamers more attuned to the cinematographic use of light did pick up on this visual cue more quickly. While some of the gamers more attuned to the visual grammar of earlier adventure games even had to be told that they should pay attention to areas near a light source. See Naves (2007) for a detailed discussion on the use of light sources in THE DA VINCI CODE.
Cross-media Analysis

In the more fast-paced action adventure game *UNCHARTED 2: AMONGST THIEVES* (2009), the archaeological treasures that have to be collected can be found by searching the screen for a bright white blinking round coin-shaped spot on the ground. When the avatar is moved towards the spot a treasure casket is super-imposed on the screen with the (console dependent) controller button the gamer has to press to collect the actual artefact. But the bright white spot is quite small and the avatar has to be relatively close to it for the gamer to see it. In *HEAVY RAIN* finally, although it is a slower paced adventure game noir, the design team have given the gamer a special set of dark glasses which the avatar can wear (Image V.39) to examine crime scenes (to find foot prints, tyre tracks, objects, etc.) and analyse samples more thoroughly (fingerprints, dna, etc.).

In *HEAVY RAIN* (Quantic Dream, 2010) special glasses can be worn at possible crime scenes to reveal objects and marks that may or may not help in solving the crime.

But other important props (e.g. the key that gives access to the killer’s dwellings) can only be found by searching an area with the game camera for (usually logical) container objects such as drawers or cupboards.

However, the game also uses visual puzzles common to the adventure game genre; for example the gamer will find said key by shaking clay lizard ornaments (Image V.40 and

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105 The coins are merely tokens that stand in for all kinds of differently sized and shaped (archaeological) artefacts.
106 This also depends on the area and time of day. In a light shaded area (e.g. sand) in bright daylight the spots are less easy to find than in murky weather or at night on a dark forest path, for instance.
Cross-media Analysis

Image V.41) until she finds one that rattles\textsuperscript{107}. When she then smashes it, the key can be picked up from the floor (Image V.42).

Thus, despite the more sophisticated graphics modern day games use, they all use some form of extra visual information to help the gamer find certain props. Fast-paced open world games use more obvious markers when speed may be of the essence, while the gamer can use caesuras in the game pace to search areas more thoroughly with the game camera. The slow-paced (action) adventure games can use more subtle visual clues (compared to the fast-paced games), but they can also give the gamer in-game equipment that ties in with the game's narrative or theme, and/or use visual puzzles common to the genre.

In short, setting in computer games is directly linked to gameplay. For instance, when rain is pouring down in a film it adds atmosphere and conjures up all kinds of allusions, but how much this hinders the protagonist and whether or not she will reach her goal, is already written down in the script. In a game heavy rain [sic] will also add atmosphere and may well conjure up allusions. It furthermore enhances the visual reality of the game, at least when the appearance of the avatar changes appropriately and when visibility is limited. But in a game like \textit{RDR} it is the gamer who decides what happens next, i.e. whether visibility is still reliable enough for navigation or whether it would be better to advance game time until the weather has cleared\textsuperscript{108}. Furthermore, in computer games the gamer constantly interacts with the setting, moving through it and using elements that are part of it. This interaction can be dictated by the gameplay, for example in the \textit{ASSASSIN'S CREED} games high towers are the only way to unlock new parts of the game world (church towers and minarets in the first game and church towers and campanulas in the second game) required gameplay skills are therefore assessing the scalability of towers, finding a way for the avatar to climb to the top and then using kinaesthetic skills to get him there. Or interaction can be part of the game's script (e.g. finding and shaking the clay lizards in \textit{HEAVY RAIN} (2010)), or theme (e.g. having to find, lasso and break at least one wild horse in \textit{RDR}). However, in computer games, especially in open world games, the gamer can also interact with the setting just for the fun of it. In \textit{THE LEGEND OF ZELDA TWILIGHT PRINCESS} (2006) she can go fishing to take a break from the strain of gameplay. In \textit{ACII} it is just so

\textsuperscript{107} As there are quite a lot of these scattered on the dirty and filth littered floor of the corridor outside of the killer's rundown apartment (Image V.40), it shows that even an ambitious game like \textit{HEAVY RAIN} contains visual adventure puzzles that take some suspension of disbelief.

\textsuperscript{108} Note that there are of course instances where game time cannot be advanced because bad weather conditions are part of a gameplay challenge.
much fun to run over roofs and beams and especially to use planters to swing around corners, that many a gamer will even do so when she is not in a race or hunted by guards. Likewise, she will scale the heights of minarets, churches, and campanulas just to enjoy the fantastic view. The game *GRAND THEFT AUTO VICE CITY* (2002) is well known for the fact that quite a lot of gamers just drove around in their car listening to one of the nine radio stations implemented in the game, just enjoying the scenery, not getting involved in the game’s story or challenges.

*Implications for comparatists*

Why should a comparatist have to be aware of these differences? The use of colour, as discussed above, is a good way to illustrate this point. When discussing older games, the film theorist, who has been trained to notice colour cues in film, might be tempted to say that the use of colour in *QUAKE* heightens the feeling of anxiety and claustrophobia of the gamer, but that the bright red blood and bright red markings on some of the ‘props’ lessen this effect. Or she could interpret the contrasting red colour of the blood as part of the cinematography of the horror genre\(^{109}\). A comparatist versed in the technical history of computer games would know that the real reason the blood and markings stand out in the game is that with only 256 colours, the contrast between the overall dark tones and the few red tones the palette offers becomes more pronounced. The motivation for marking the ‘props’ thus is part of the visual grammar of the fast-paced FPS game genre. Even though the game uses polygons, the graphic detail in *QUAKE* is still very coarse. This makes finding objects in a hurry quite difficult. With the red markings, the items are more noticeable. This is very handy when one is running around and is desperately in need of ammunition or a medical kit.

The use of colour in *ASSASSIN’S CREED*, on the other hand, shows that more recent games can and do try to use colour in a more cinematographic way, but that gamers are as yet ‘blinded’ by the visual grammar of games so that they do not recognize that of film. This may also be the reason that games still use more explicit means to draw a gamer’s attention, even in slower paced adventure games. That *GABRIEL KNIGHT BLOOD OF THE SCARED BLOOD OF THE DAMNED* did use the subtle visual cues of film grammar is not surprising, as it was the first 3D adventure game to be produced. Consequently, the designers were obliged to find a new visual grammar for 3D adventure games that would not only look good in 3D, but would also be helpful to the gamer. Therefore, it is quite understandable

\(^{109}\) She could not mistake them for symbolic props (cf. the contrasting red coat of the little girl in *SCHINDLER’S LIST* (1993)) as their abundant use excludes this interpretation.
that they should turn to a visual grammar that should be familiar from other media, now that the graphic hardware allowed it. Another reason for the change, as the above discussion of setting showed, was that now that the camera had become gamer-controlled the whole concept of the game’s use of graphics had to be rethought:

GK3 offers a freely roaming camera that lets players go where they please and zoom in on whatever they like. [...] The idea was that players could be the director and choose their own camera as the action was unfolding. This had a serious and very expensive effect on the art: it meant that artists could take no shortcuts with their animations. In a prerendered movie, an animator has full control over the camera and can avoid bothering with anything that’s outside of its view [off screen space]. This saves a lot of time. In GK3, because players may at almost any time decide to take control of the camera, they would be able to see the action from any angle they pleased and go "behind the curtain" so to speak. Therefore, the animators needed to make sure that the entire scene could be both viewable and good-looking from any angle. (Bilas, 2000)

Seeing that story-structured games nowadays use a gamer-controlled camera in a 3D environment, incomparable to camera use in film, the question arises whether or not it is still possible to compare games to their counterparts in other media. Furthermore, even when a more faithful adaptation exists (e.g. the Gabriel Knight books and the Assassin’s Creed books), comparing it to the original game is completely uninteresting: firstly it only tells one ‘version’ of the story (the first Gabriel Knight game, for instance, has several possible endings), and secondly since it is either based on the same script as the game or even is a fleshe out version of the script, interesting questions you would pose for other kinds of adaptations (e.g. what has been left out, what has been condensed, how ‘faithful’ is this adaptation) have become redundant.

This, however, does not mean that comparison has become completely superfluous. Even though a game of ‘guess the Western’ is fun when playing RDR110, its usefulness in a serious academic discussion can be questioned; investigating the Western in computer games, on the other hand, will not. Why, for instance, does the Western theme work in the arcade version of Mad Dog Mcree (1990) and in RDR but not in Activision’s Gun (2005)? The same goes for the vampire theme. Why are there so few original or franchise tie-in vampire games? What prohibits the translation of vampire narratives into interactive games111? And for those there are, what is their target audience? Have new vampire-

110 As with so many of these past-times once one gets started, it is hard to stop, for instance the machine gun defence of the fort in Texas Rangers (2001) must have inspired the same fight in RDR, while the game character Nigel West Dickens bears an uncanny resemblance to Alan Mowbary’s character of the top-hatted Dr. A. Locksley Hall in John Ford’s Wagon Master (1950).
111 These two vampire-theme questions were almost literally taken from a call for contributions to the upcoming book Fanpires: Audience Consumption of the Modern Vampire posted on the Digra mail list on 26
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themed games also moved more towards a female public or are they hedging their bets, as do most vampire films and TV-series, for instance by making the action scenes more pronounced (as in the adapted Twilight Saga film Eclipse (2010)) or by departing more and more from the originating books by emphasizing the original horror genre (as in the True Blood TV-series (2008-present) based on the Southern Vampire books by Charlene Harris)?

Other interesting points of research for a comparatist are the different visual ways in which cutscenes are presented, for example through comic book graphics, as in Gabriel Knight Sins of the Fathers (1993, Image V.43), Max Payne (2002) and Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne (2003, Image V.44); or by means of full motion video, as in Gabriel Knight The Beast Within (1995); or in the shape of the more common animated movies, as in Gabriel Knight Blood of the Sacred Blood of the Damned (1999)\textsuperscript{112}.

Image V.43 Cutscene in which Gabriel sees Malia for the first time. Note that in the game the image is built gradually from the component parts (left to right, top to bottom).

Gabriel Knight Sins of the Fathers (Sierra Online Inc, 1993)

August 2010. It must be noted, however, that in the past few years the number of original (non-tie-in) vampire-themed games has increased, undoubtedly because of the recent upsurge of the theme in other media.

\textsuperscript{112} Such phenomena are sometimes termed instances of transtextuality, i.e. media specific phenomena which take place in different/distinct media without any influence of one medium on the other or any necessity for an original version.
Or a comparatist could look into the use of different media which are included as part of the set and the narrative of certain games, i.e. not those that are included as ‘merchandise’ (as in the ASSASSIN’S CREED II BLACK EDITION\(^{113}\)), but additions that add to the narrative of the game, such as the book The Alan Wake Files, which is included in the limited edition of the ALAN WAKE game (2010). This book contains research material collected by a man called Clay Steward, who, like the game protagonist, started to be haunted by strange dreams. As the book looks completely like a normal non-fiction book, including information on what the book is about and the author’s bio and picture on the inside flaps, as well as a back cover with cited recommendations from such authorities [sic] as The Whole Truth Newsletter and Close Encounters Quarterly, one can be forgiven for thinking that this is just a regular book. Of course, it is not; it is a clever and different take on transmedia storytelling now contained within a single game’s set.

Other more analytical research questions include differences in the use of narrative techniques in the diverse media, for instance the ones investigated in this dissertation (setting, genre, space, character). But also questions such as Jesper Juul’s assumption that flash-forwards (time) in games are not possible because they would refute any actions by the gamer; or differences in the use of off-screen sound in film and game,

\(^{113}\) Which includes bonus quests, a figurine of Ezio, an Assassin’s Creed Conspiracy Book which gives insights on the art, story and background of the game, the game soundtrack by Jesper Kyd and all previously released videos and behind-the-scene interviews.

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etcetera. However, we must not forget that systematic synchronic, but especially diachronic comparative (cross-media) research into the narrative aspects of computer games is still very young, as is the medium. If we look at present-day games, we see that they are gradually finding their own (visual) narrative grammar, made possible by advancements in technology\textsuperscript{114}. Looking into narrative practices of other media is therefore not interesting if we see them as prescriptive (e.g. someone who focuses on the genre debate in fiction and film has not understood that genre in computer games is inherently different), while looking at them as examples, maybe even as precursors, might help us define new rules and practices for the analysis of computer games, as Axel Stockburger did for the analysis of game space\textsuperscript{115}.

In the next chapter, I will take a more detailed look at character, more specifically Tolkien's hero-king Aragorn, in a variety of media. The goal is to see whether, and if so how, choices made by the writer (director or designer) of that particular media text, or the 'language' of the medium itself, or technical restrictions the medium poses have affected our perception of Aragorn.

\textsuperscript{114} Although even more loosely structured narratives, as in \textit{Red Dead Redemption}, still cannot be told completely cutscene-free.

\textsuperscript{115} See the previous chapter.