

The Future of Animated Cinematics and Cutscenes Within Gaming

Introduction:

The line between the film industry and Video game storytelling has been rapidly blurring with the evolution of animation. From when videogames became a popular way of storytelling, starting with games like Metal Gear (Metal Gear, 1988) began including visual cutscenes rather than just text, and as graphics and consoles became more powerful, cutscenes got more advanced, leading to games such as Final Fantasy to modern masterpieces such as The Last of Us (The Last of Us, 2013) and Grand Theft Auto V (Grand Theft Auto V, 2013). Most videogame audiences have come to love and expect cutscenes to help develop the story, allowing most to be pre-rendered for the best quality, or rendered in game to allow for customisations to the player's avatar. This has kept players engaged in most storytelling, especially for those who tend to skip the story of a game because of bulk text or hidden lore. Cutscenes help developers tell their story to players without putting off players to engage with it.

However, as cutscenes are now more prominent, some players find them now distracting from the core gameplay, claiming some studios spend more on cutscenes than the actual game. This report will explore how 3D animation is reshaping gaming narratives, analysing cinematic influences and how this may or may not have benefited the quality of gameplay for players. As well as what this might mean for the future of video games' relationship with animation, inside and outside of the game.

Chapter 1:

Videogame cinematics have become a staple for fans of the medium since its creation. The first videogame cutscene has been a topic of debate subjugated to three different games: Pac-Man, Donkey Kong and Metal Gear, which holds the Guinness world record for the first use of cutscenes to

tell a story in a videogame (Guinness World Records, 2015). Metal Gear uses 2D cutscenes to help tell the story, along with text, it was the first of its kind to introduce storytelling that wasn't built into the core gameplay. As years went on, with improvements to technology, cutscenes grew in quality and became more popular with developers, the rise of CD storage space being implied as the reason (The Next Generation, 1996). With technology only increasing with storage being smaller, more accessible for less money, games seem to depend on cutscenes for majority of storytelling aspects, most AAA games released most notably The Last of Us (The Last of Us, 2013) and Grand Theft Auto V. Both of these games utilise newer technologies such as motion capture for body and facial animation (NeoGamer - The Video Game Archive, 2019). These newer cutscenes use a combination of acting and cinematography to help its storytelling, as graphics and technology to improve quality becomes much more realistic, more interesting ways of conveying the story to players.

Some of the most iconic video game cutscenes come from Grand Theft Auto V, one of the most popular games in the world. Within the hundreds of hours of gameplay sits almost five hours or cinematic cutscenes, not including all the games online cutscenes from the dozens of activities players can take part in. One of these amazing cutscenes in the campaign is when you play as Trevor, taking place as you enter the bar waiting for the Mr Cheng and his translator. For example, within the same scene. The player will walk into the Bar, where the cutscene begins, the camera is placed eye level with Janet, the owner, where she heckles him about being banned from the establishment. It then cuts to a longshot of two men fighting in the middle of the Bar, Trevor asking about them, which after cuts back to a wide shot from the bar, where Janet responds: 'Whoever wins... Gets Banned.'

The acting by Steven Ogg as Trevor is very well known to be one of the most iconic parts of the GTA V story, his ability to capture Trevor's psychopathic behaviours perfectly is almost in and of itself scary. Throughout the game's cinematics, the camera plays a large part in making the player feel involved whilst also them feel important to the story's development. This is done by making the cutscenes look hand filmed and shaky, almost like a documentary. By using this technique, they make players feel involved, all the shots usually take place from eye level. The use of quick, small zooms on key moments of acting and delivery help to engage players and make different aspects of the

cutscenes important. As well as the acting, the camera in this scene is continuously shaky, again making the players feel as if they are sat in the Bar watching all this play out, or that the person behind the camera is watching this play out, nervous to interact or be near someone as crazy as Trevor. The last camera cut also happens to be where a chair currently is positioned within the room, implying the voyeuristic nature of the camera. A tool to be a viewer of all the different actions these main characters commit. It keeps players engaged and aligns them with the world of Los Santos.

However, some players would disagree with the practice videogame cinematics have brought with them. Players over recent years have claimed studios have become lazy in game design, leaning on cutscenes to be aspects are the primary source of storytelling and causes disruption from the gameplay experience, that cutscenes are be seen as props that are reliant on film techniques to carry the game. (Klevjer, 2002) There have been many discussion threads and reddit posts made with gamers arguing about the inclusion of cinematics and quick time events make the game seem “relatively un-interactive”. (Mark J.P. Wolf and Perron, 2023)

Chapter 2:

One game category that has grown over the last decade is narrative driven games, where choices affect the outcome of the characters involved. Examples of these games include iconic games such as The Wolf Among Us (2013), Detroit: Become Human (2018) and Until Dawn (2015) and now Baldur's Gate 3 (2023). These games were each revolutionary for their genre, allowing for players choices to matter more, to make their own stories and dictate their game as a result.

Detroit: Become Human had lots of talks surrounding its metaphors for Race being the main story plot. For context, the game is about 3 main protagonists, each being an android made by a company called Cyberlife. The story goes that Marcus and Kara, two of the protagonists, go rogue from their functioning code and become free thinkers. This is bad and Connor, the cop android is sent by Detroit Police accompanied by his partner Hank, to stop all the rogue androids fighting for basic rights. The storylines within the choices of the game have pathways depicting the possible other

decisions you missed so you can go back and play those options. They keep players playing, wanting to know what other outcomes or story arcs have been missed due to your choices. One choice that has consequences early on in the game is the fact that you can kill off one of the characters in their first main mission. Kara can be murdered by her owner and this impact means all her story, a whole 1/3rd of the game is gone. Now this is one of the harder events to happen within this mission, as there are multiple things that can and will impact the course of the story, but choices such as these have massive impacts on players trust and liking for the game. If its going to be a narrative choice-based game, they need to matter. “choices that don’t have a designated purpose in the narrative can feel as though they have been pointlessly included” (Paulley, 2017)

However, as games from these genres tend to have lots of cinematic cutscenes and choices for many different storylines, making a large feature length film or TV show about these films would be difficult. Even Moreso, video game narratives until a decade ago were not a successful venture for Hollywood. Surprisingly, even other video games that don’t necessarily have narrative as the core focus of their games have seen massive interest in their stories since these types of games came out. (League of Legends, 2009) and (Overwatch, 2016) being two good examples of 3D video games that have gameplay that would not fit within their world’s reality. Overwatch has had lots of success as a result of their cinematics driven by lore surrounding their characters inside the game, but not in it’s core gameplay, the most popular 8-minute cinematic gaining 48 million views on YouTube alone. (PlayOverwatch, 2016)

After the release of Ready Player One (Spielberg, 2018), kicking off the era of Videogame adaptations (even though it is a novel of the same name) within Hollywood, making Warner Brothers over double their money back at the box office to good reviews. The success of a movie based on gaming was seen as a new beginning for the large videogame franchises to make showstopping movies about. Narratives within existing franchises such as Sonic the Hedgehog (Sonic the Hedgehog, 2020) and The Super Mario Bros (Super Mario, 1985) have seen massive success with their films respectively and even more success in the TV scene with shows such as (Arcane: League of Legends,

2021) and (The Last of Us, 2023). This trend of videogame adaptations has also been popular with fans and therefore shows no signs of slowing down.

Conclusion:

The video game industry has grown since its early days, cinematics going from simple pixelated dialogue to what some would consider full length feature films with the amount within certain games. New genres have formed as a result of in game and pre-rendered cinematics popularity, leading to some of the most visually stunning animation ever produced. Lots of people still see cinematics within the core gameplay of video games to be distracting and boring, they help to tell stories that some people may have just skipped by.

The build-up of players wanting stories that they can interact with and in a sense ‘create their own movie’ is very apparent also. 2010 saw the rise of the choice-based game narrative, allowing players to choose their character’s destiny, even if it wasn’t always the most moral decision. And with the rise of this genre, so has the cinematic life outside of video games, with adaptations or straight up TV and films helping to retell old stories or create new ones from existing characters and worlds. The cutscene and cinematics in videogames is here to stay for the foreseeable future, with the introduction of VR, the space is due to change as players start wanting more first-person experiences and ways of enjoying a story. However, until VR becomes more affordable and compatible with players, cinematics will continue to dominate narratives and campaigns within video games, TV and film.

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