Interactive Frame Narrative and Player Evaluation-Based Story Evolution in 「Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War」

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1. Foreword (1)

- 「Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War」 (AC0)
- Bandai Namco Games
- Sony Playstation 2 (2006)
- “Flight Shooting” genre
1. Foreword (2)

Aspects of Interactivity

Analysis of the Frame Narrative Structure

Special characteristics of storytelling

Literary Merit

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1. Foreword (3)

“Literary Merit”

• Metric for understanding the potential depth of meaning and significance of a particular game narrative

• “Does this game’s narrative, through artful usage of storytelling devices, produce reactions/impact similar to that of classical works of art/literature?”
2.1 Background (1)

Frame Narrative = “Story within a story”

- Way of managing the reader’s attention
- Method used to create strong metaphors
2.1 Background (2)

{ Main Story }

Start → Scene → End

{ Sub Story }

Scene → Scene
2.1 Background (3)

Examples from Literature:

Homer’s *Odyssey*  
Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*
2.1 Background (4)

Examples from Film:

The Princess Bride (1987)

Inception (2010)
2.2 Frame Narrative in Games (1)

Frame Narrative have been used to raise the narrative quality of games

- Typically employed as Side Quests
- Assume the role of another character in order to better understand the main story/character
- Generally, gameplay occurs in both the main and sub stories, as in the following examples:
2.3 Frame Narrative in AC0 (1)

**MAIN STORY**

Assume the role of the “Demon Lord,” an historically-influential ace pilot from the Belkan War 10 years prior. The entirety of the missions and gameplay take place here.

**SUB STORY**

Present day, 10 years after the Belkan War, a journalist working on a documentary of the war hunts down clues to the true identity of the Demon Lord. No gameplay at all.

All of the gameplay in AC0 is found only in the Main Story layer.

(Consequently, the Sub Story is wholly non-interactive)
2.3 Frame Narrative in AC0 (2)

Main Story

Cause-Effect Relation

Sub Story

3-rank Evaluation System
2.3 Frame Narrative in AC0 (3)

3-rank Evaluation System

1. The player’s enemy kills are tallied up

2. The player is assigned a rank according to the aggression gradient

3. The Sub Story evolves according to the aggression rank

- KNIGHT
- SOLDIER
- MERCENARY
2.3 Frame Narrative in AC0 (4)

3-rank Evaluation System

Kills anything that can be targeted

Downs only mission-relevant targets

A degree of aggression that is a balance between Mercenary and Knight

MERcenARY

SOLDIER

KNIGHT
2.3 Frame Narrative in AC0 (5)

Main Story

Sub Story

Start

End

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3. Analysis and Discussion (1)

In terms of determining the structure of a Frame Narrative, where does the authorial agency lie?

Conventional Static Media (Printed Media, Film, etc) VS Game Player

In particular with AC0, enabling the player to influence the evolution of the story through a Frame Narrative accrues two special advantages.
3. Analysis and Discussion (2)

**Advantage 1:** The 3-rank Evaluation System is hidden, allowing the mechanic to mold the story to the player.

Some examples of games with story change mechanics:
- Starcraft II: Wings of Liberty
- Metal Gear Solid

Generally, games try not to hide such mechanics.
3. Analysis and Discussion (3)

Advantage 1: Hidden Evaluation System molds better story to player

Players are plainly presented all the potential rewards and details about each choice before actually choosing. Very overt.

http://www.gamecheatplaza.com/diaries/StarCraft2/

「Starcraft II」:Choice Screen
3. Analysis and Discussion (4)

Advantage 1: Hidden Evaluation System molds better story to player

Eval. System is lightly disguised as character dialogue, but generally players are aware of it

Metal Gear Solid: Torture Scene
3. Analysis and Discussion (5)

Advantage 1: Hidden Evaluation System molds better story to player

By contrast, AC0’s Eval. System is almost completely hidden

- Eval. System
- Player

This player kills everything on every occasion: must be a Merc.
Will dispense Merc. Chapter...

This game is awesome

Game is less evident $\rightarrow$ Immersion preserved
Advantage 2: Frame Narrative contextualizes the player's actions as having direct historical consequence (relative to the game world).

The cumulative Frame Narrative of AC0 can succeed in portraying a deep aspect of geopolitical realism.
3. Analysis and Discussion (7)

Metaphor:

Showing the player the face of the enemy that has been shot down establishes, maintains, and extends the metaphor of plane and pilot.

A fight between fighter jets is not simply a competition of machinery and skill, but rather, a fight carried out on multiple levels:

- Plane vs. Plane
- Man vs. Man
- Nation vs. Nation
- Ideology vs. Ideology
3. Analysis and Discussion (8)

Effect of AC0 System on Replay Value

Hidden Evaluation System

Wide variety of player items
3. Analysis and Discussion (9)

Effect of AC0 System on Replay Value

- Not Knowing that the story can be influenced by the player
- Not being encouraged to play the game again

• Although having a wide variety of options and item to boost Replay Value, the Hidden Eval. System will still negatively impact Replay Value

• Frame Narrative + Hidden Eval. System is not a “Silver Bullet”
4. Conclusion

1. Through a close critical reading, this paper has shown that the use of a hidden player evaluation system and a frame narrative were instrumental in producing potent metaphors and raising the Literary Merit of the game.

2. The combination of these two factors has the potential to expand the game itself outside of its own definitional boundaries into a realm of art that is neither game nor story, but somehow effectively both.
Future Work

1. Apply similarly-styled close critical readings of other games which employ interactive frame narratives to intriguing effect.

2. Expand and promote the study of games from the Japanese game industry.
References


Games:
(1) Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War, Bandai Namco Games, 2006. (PS2)
(2) Final Fantasy VII, Square, 1997. (PS)
(3) Starcraft II: Wings of Liberty, Blizzard Entertainment, 2010. (PC)
(4) Metal Gear Solid, Konami Computer Entertainment Japan, 1998. (PS1)

Other Media: