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What makes *Iron Storm* (4X Studios, Kylotonn, 2002) relevant to the ongoing discussion on game textuality? How can this game be used to explore the limits of a story that is stretched across media? What does *Iron Storm* tell us about the narrative possibilities in an interactive space? This reading of *Iron Storm* attempts to probe both the game and its narrative content in order to put into practice some of the key concepts evolved during the course the ludology versus narratology debate.

Before getting to the actual dissection of *Iron Storm*, it is worth mentioning that this game gets personal – inevitably – at some point, a claim that is argued throughout this article. Attempting to analyze *Iron Storm* from an individualistic perspective is a part of extended research to discover a feasible method by which game narratives can be interpreted, a perspective striving to be informed   by the discussion on interactive media.

Why *Iron Storm* as subject of analysis? The Dream Catcher's 2002 game blends the ludic and the narrative into one homogeneous experience where the player cannot tell whether he/she is immersed in a told story of wild fantasy or in a virtually realistic game play. We will try to x-ray this *experience* after we separate the multiple layers.

Complex story system

Although not as much as in *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2002), *Iron Storm* does contain some special markers invisible to the non-inspecting eye; narrative treats implanted in the 3D realm and cloaked in irrelevance. When scrutinized, these textual and visual signs shape-shift from visual ornaments or insignificant adjectival paragraph fillings into a rewarding meaning that furthers engagement and leaves the player wanting more from both the storyteller and the designer. *Max Payne*'s world is crowded with signs of this sort changing the narrative itself into a 3D composite. However, the signs in *Max Payne* do call for their own pages.

Gaming Invasion (2008[1]) justifiably describes *Iron Storm* as "…a must have for any historian…". The relation between the player's familiarity with WWI and what he/she can find in the game's "space architecture" (Jenkins, 2004) is directly proportional. One example from *Iron Storm* would be that WWI in the game is called "The Great War": one of the designations most commonly used at the time and least used now by non historians.

They did their homework in *Iron Storm*. It is often said that Hollywood bends history, which takes a good deal of research just to know where and how to bend, and to

what extent. In *Iron Storm*, history isn't just bent; it is disfigured into a harrowing status quo, a purgatory of past and present. It is obvious that a historical study was conducted in order to deform the historical track into a compelling science fiction first-person nightmare, made possible by a complex story system. In the multi-layered and multi-perspective *Iron Storm* narrative, you can stop the plot on its timeline path to investigate, walkthrough, question, and discover fictional truths, extra narrative twists, and new points of depth between the unlit corners of the three-dimensional narrative structure.

Established by Janet Murray, immersion became the most prominent aesthetic criterion of computer games, which has been employed and analyzed over and over by game scholars and even combined with other aesthetic models[2]. Nevertheless, immersion still immersion still needs to be further discovered. Murray (1997) maintains that the immersive power of cyberspace is due to the spectacular effects and arresting visuals. *Iron Storm* immerses you into its story before you remove the package sealing; you do enter the story before you enter the play. The package case captures your attention with arresting visuals. For a start, the case emulates a book: when you grab the rectangular hardcover case, the color festival of graphics cannot go unnoticed. The printed letters and depictions protrude out of the 2D surface in an insisting behavior. Then you open the book on page one for a brief introduction as to what to expect: the historical trauma in real time is introduced by screenshots from play sessions. These screenshots are dropped onto the first page canvas in a spectacular multilayered graphical composition. I start reading: it is March 1964 and World War I is still raging. I will become James Anderson: a lieutenant, and I will have to end this war, somehow, violently. I open the package to find the CD, the manual, and a 1963 issue of *The Scout*: a fake newspaper: It is today's newspaper, a 1963 newspaper in style and format in the most realistic sense, with a business section, sports, weather, culture, ads, etc, and every word in every section either contributes either to the story or to its setting. Today's issue features the headline "Fifty Years!". Today it is fifty years since WWI started, and the map of Europe shows the trenches along the Friedrich line that cuts Germany in half. On the first page there is a section showing ten key dates in the struggle. Here are some "facts" from the game world based on *The Scout* issue:

> 28 June 1914: Assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand (not Franz Ferdinand).
>
> 1921: The Bolshevic government in Russia overthrown.
>
> 1925: France, Britain, Italy and the United States decide to quote western armies on the stock exchange.

Based on this introduction to the game world, the bad guys this time – that the West is fighting – are the Russo-Mongol Empire.

To sum up, it did not sound good at all. A war that is being fought with WWI ethics and mentality (gas warfare is OK and no Geneva Convention!), and with WWII and modern weaponry (i.e. laser guns and helicopter gunships). The game reminds you of the Geneva Convention in the first few moments as you witness a captured unarmed enemy soldier being executed by a fellow gunman. Even worse, the game seems to get very personal.

Regardless of how upsetting this fabulous bastardization of history might seem, the game designers went an extra mile to make it feel realistic: not only have they collaged pieces of real history with pure fantasy in a complex story system, they have also limited the number of weapons that I can carry. However, they didn't have to, since I have willingly suspended my disbelief even before I was told that The United States of Western Europe (USWE) was founded in 1933, the same year in which the hi-tech stock exchange was created in Eastern Africa. It was a personal choice for a higher reason: immersion as an active choice[3].

Storytelling as 3D composite

The *Iron Storm* story stretches across media. The printed text is inside and outside the play sessions. The subtitles are in the play sessions and in the cut scenes, in addition to occasional reading assignments in order to inform the play tactically. More storytelling is in the printed text outside the game play: the book-like package, the newspaper, the story summary, and the character profiling in the booklet (manual). This can even be taken to the internet for more storytelling in the form of walkthroughs or fan discussion forums[4]. The graphics are inside and outside the play sessions as well by means of cinematics: in-game and out-of-game cut scenes and online trailers. This complexity of presentation in *Iron Storm* creates what Chris Crawford (2005) calls *depth* by which he means narrativity and interactivity that call for mental exertion.

I don't see a problem in how many game scholars believe that games are about winning and not about narration. It is not a problem that they express how they feel about computer games. Nevertheless, what is not acceptable is to expect everyone to have the same desires in a game, for example, the very fact that I, as a player, find myself in direct opposition to the assumption that cut scenes are annoying decorations interrupting the play (Pearce, 2004 & Eskelinen, 2001) simply undermines such generalization. We are in no position to expect every player to want the same kind of pleasure: the rush, the safe violence, the compelling story, or all. The same goes for researchers. Game composition and free will leave you with the option of either scrutinizing a narrative in an interactive medium or spending your days and nights weighting the scriptonic and the textonic in a game[5]. A narrative analyst is eager to find meaning and relate to it. Whether in literature, art, history, or politics, meaning has always been the big prize, but can we expect one finding of meaning to appeal to all of us? No. All readings and all meanings are born to a single parent, and what happens next is called discussion and comparing of notes in order to see where our meanings correspond.

Immersion within the immersion

To get back to *Iron Storm*, I remind myself that narratology is a descriptive and not a prescriptive discipline. It is about time to explain how I reached the meaning in *Iron Storm*: As a loyal reader-response disciple, meaning is cooked in my head as I perceive, and since my brain is not tabula rasa, I simultaneously bring my own opinions and personal experiences into play as I interact and while I am

impersonating James Anderson's character. Even before I accessed the first play session, I was already creating historical associations inspired by previous readings.

The game play started and I went on unfolding the plot. Soon enough, my movement in the trenches and all the atrocities triggered Eric Hobsbawm's portrayal of WWI in *The Age of Extremes* (1994). The fear, the depth, the interaction, and the immersion all made possible by a narrative architecture, a navigable space, and by the various storytelling elements such as the printed text, the filmic segments, and the play sessions. *Iron Storm*, the self proclaimed "… piece of Anticipation fiction…" traversed the traditional notions of printed narrative and film in order to connect the dots into a mesh of transmedia personal experience.

I can describe my own immersive experience by describing the three-dimensional structure of the game's narrative. The story is communicated pervasively on three levels: through the play sessions, the game interface, cut scenes, and accessories (e.g. the case, the booklet, and the newspaper), and the infinite and unordered storytelling outer space among players in verbal discussions, chat rooms, walkthroughs, ads, game play videos promoting strategies to help traversing the story world. The three levels are navigable and their building blocks are similar: text, video, and sound. During the play, I frequently stopped the fighting madness to watch a short propaganda documentary. There is a series of optional televised propaganda segments that are scattered all over the virtual grid. Form time to time I was able to take few moments (when no enemy soldiers are around) to turn on The Deutsche-Russische Tageschau[6] (D.R.T.) TV station for information, or some interesting war propaganda. It happened that some of these segments were a little too interesting: by the end of the transmission, I would realize that the fun is over and that I have to get back to the bloodbath, a slight but measurable shocking realization, especially when an enemy soldier sneaks on me while I am watching the D.R.T. The play dimension is often paused in order to move to another dimension; e.g. either to consult the game interface or check for information on the internet.

My personal reading of *Iron Storm* wasn't flat either; my individual response to the game included learning and growth. As always, I intended to optimize my experience, maybe in recognition to the work done to create *Iron Storm*. I tried and failed more than once, got frustrated and built up anger, consulted an online walkthrough, developed an understanding of the designer's layout and intent, until I learned how to take care of that tank in Wolfenburg Square.

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Notes

[1]   Cited from www.ironstorm.com

[2]   For example, Kucklich's model of narrativity, openness, and interactivity.

[3]   Janet Murray (1997) maintains that the effect of presence in immersive worlds goes beyond Samuel Coleridge's "willful suspension of disbelief" to the "active creation of belief" (110)

[4]   A manifestation of Celia Pierce's descriptive narrative operator

[5]   Scriptonic and textonic events are used refer to two different strings of signs in games:

"Aarseth [sic] suggests a useful distinction between scriptonic and textonic changes in the text. Scriptonic change refers to changes in the information as it appears to players, while textonic means changes in the text." Hanna Wirman (2007)

6 *Tagesschau* (not *Tageschau*) is German for "a look at the day". The second "S" might have been removed from the game since *Tagesschau* now refers to the most viewed German newscast and it was used to refer to the historical newsreel in cinemas. Again, the game gets too close to the thin line between fiction and reality.