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Lucasfilm's Loom**

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# The pleasurable lightness of being: Interface, mediation and meta-narrative in Lucasfilm's Loom

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The past few years in videogame history have been ripe with innovative controllers. The Guitar Hero series, the Nintendo Wii, and to a certain extent the Nintendo DS, have popularized what we could call *mimetic interfaces*, that allow for a greater degree of correspondence between the player's real-world actions and the avatar's in-game response, offering a sense of *immediacy*. However to date the majority of games taking advantage of these interfaces are not primarily narrative-driven and do not concern themselves with fiction very much.<sup>1</sup>

There is however a different, overlooked and scattered, strand of game design, that relies on traditional controllers and finds another way of conjuring an illusion of presence and being in the game world. These games bridge the gap between the player and the avatar by, paradoxically, adding a level of mediation between the avatar and the world in the game's fiction. In other words, in these games, the avatar, just like the player, does not *directly* manipulate the environment. *Mecha* games or story-based flight simulations such as *Wing Commander* (Origin 1990), whose avatars are usually *pilots* of huge robots or battle spaceships – not the robots or battle spaceships themselves – do this quite straightforwardly<sup>2</sup>. The celestial brush in *Okami* (Clover 2006) is another example: using the PS2 (or Wii) controller, the player draws certain shapes, that in turn the avatar draws<sup>3</sup> in the fictional layer of the game, in order to call on divine powers and cast a desired spell. This, according to its reviews, adds to the wondrous, poetic quality of the game (Roper 2006). Still, although the celestial brush interface is one of the game's main attractions, it is not the exclusive way of interacting with the environment<sup>4</sup>. But there is a game that does something very similar more consistently and with a great deal of justification in its fiction. This time, the medium is not painting, but music, and the game is not Japanese, but American. It is the black sheep – or, better put, black swan – of Lucasfilm's adventure oeuvre.

The place of *Loom*<sup>5</sup> (Lucasfilm 1990) in the adventure game canon is a peculiar one. It never became synonymous with the genre like Sierra's King's Quest series or Lucasfilm's own Monkey Island franchise. As its lead designer Brian Moriarty recalls, "nobody felt strong" about making a sequel (Mamen – Jong 2006). However, the critical reception of the game has been overwhelmingly positive, even in retrospect, only citing its shortness and lack of difficulty as drawbacks. And although *Loom* did not sell as well as many other Lucasfilm titles, it stood out as a unique, idiosyncratic and self-contained experiment, while still remaining very accessible. No wonder it generated a dedicated following, it's fan reviews tend to be very emotional and melodramatic, portraying the beauty of the game as something elusive, almost immaterial:

This game was made with the clear intention to produce an independent, intimate, lyrical work of art, a transparent, quiet fable with ether-like gameplay and music as the driving force of the game. [...] *Loom* is the Buddhist of adventure games: it listens to the silence, it understands the beauty of a moment, and it doesn't need many words to express the very essence of life. [...] Each encounter is memorable, each character is unique, and sometimes you feel the game carries you somewhere through a thin stream of air, up into the sky. [...] To call it wonderful wouldn't be enough to describe its sublime beauty<sup>6</sup>. (Roschin 2003, italics added)

Rather than paraphrasing these words of praise, with which I largely agree, I will set out to discover how the "sublime" nature of this game comes about. I will argue that it is due to a sensation of immediacy, created by the alignment of the game's musical interface with its fiction. I will show that this immediacy is present on many different levels, from the many parallels between the player and the main character's situation to the character's relationship to his environment and the very metaphysics of the game's fictional world. But first, let me tell the story so far.

### **Bobbin's journey**

The game takes place after the "passing of the two shadows", in a fantasy world inhabited by a number of guilds – Blacksmiths, Glassmakers, Shepherds, Clerics, and the reclusive Weavers, who were the only ones who did not join the race for prosperity. The main character, Bobbin Threadbare, is an ostracized Weaver, who had just turned seventeen. At the beginning of the game, he is summoned to the guild's Sanctuary. There, next to a giant loom<sup>7</sup>, he witnesses a quarrel between the elders of his guild and his tutor and protector Dame Hetchel. She is turned into a swan egg, because she taught Bobbin how to weave, although he was not allowed to due to his questionable ancestry. Then another swan flies in, crashing through the stained glass window of the hall, and all the elders also turn into swans and follow her. One of them leaves behind a distaff<sup>8</sup>, which will become the musical instrument Bobbin will play and which he will use to interact with the world. As it is said in the prologue to *Loom*, which came on a cassette tape bundled with the game, Weavers can weave "subtle patterns of influence into the very fabric of reality". Their music is a magical language that can directly affect the world. Having learned this, Bobbin sets out on his coming-of-age journey to leave the island of Weavers for the first time.

Bobbin is a very strange avatar. He does not have a face. All we can see of him and all the other weavers are their eyes, gleaming in the absolute darkness under their capes; and, as we learn later in the game, peering under the cape means death, most probably by disintegration. Bobbin's lack of definition, along with his down-to-earth name (see Frodo and Bilbo Baggins) and the fact that he is an outcast from his own tribe of outcasts ("Why do they always leave me behind?" he asks), helps the player to identify with him.

But there is more to Weavers. Their Sanctuary, the most important location in the game, is great, majestic and church-like interior, all stained glass windows and stately pillars, while from the outside it is a mere tent. The Weavers guard the Loom, which weaves the fabric of the world. For them, the living world is a single tapestry

that contains the very formula for its undoing – and that can be altered by the magic of music. Outside of the tapestry, there is *the Void*, which most likely also fills Weavers' cloaks. Although the nature of a Weaver's body is never resolved within the game's fiction, we can easily interpret them as creatures half of the living world, half of the Void. If we accept this interpretation, we can see Bobbin as an outsider to the whole living world, just like the player. Travelling light and hiding under his hood, he is like a monk on a pilgrimage. Just like the player cannot bring real-life objects into the game, Bobbin cannot carry a sack himself, which is exactly what other adventure game characters do – the reviewer's mention of Buddhism makes perfect sense. All Bobbin carries is a musical instrument.

### Point 'n' click ballet

According to Brian Moriarty, the musical component – as well as the omnipresent swans – of *Loom* was influenced by Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, whose score is used throughout the game. Besides making *Loom* one of the few – if not the only – game inspired by a ballet, it also made for a unique control interface. Although the underlying *SCUMM* engine was originally designed to facilitate classic verb and inventory-based adventure games, such as *The Secret of Monkey Island*, the interface was significantly reworked for *Loom*. Instead of *Monkey Island's* verbs and inventory<sup>9</sup>, the bottom part of the screen shows a distaff. Clicking on different parts of it, which correspond to the notes on the C major scale, you can play sequences of four notes, called *drafts*. Most of the interaction with the fictional world<sup>10</sup> is then performed by playing these *drafts* to certain objects.

Bobbin can learn the drafts by watching other people perform them, or just by *listening* to the music in the world. For example, when he sees some liquid dripping out of a vial, he can listen to it and hear the draft for *emptying*. He can then play this draft himself at an object he wants to empty out. When played in reverse, the draft becomes a spell for *filling up*. Similarly, the draft for *putting to sleep* can be reversed to *awakening*.

At first, Bobbin cannot play all the notes in the octave, which disables him from repeating everything he can hear. He gains the ability to play the higher notes at pre-defined moments in the game. There are 16 different *drafts* in the game, most of which are randomized once you start the game. There is also one grammatical rule – of reversal of order having the effect of reversal of meaning. A few drafts (such as *mirroring*) cannot be reversed, as they are musical palindromes<sup>11</sup>. The gameplay strongly resembles language acquisition, and the master story of the player – learning drafts and using them at the right places – is also Bobbin's story. This coming-of-age story structure fits the gameplay structure perfectly; not so much in a spatial sense, which Janet Murray mentions when picking out mazes and labyrinths as the ideal spatial structures for videogames (Murray 1997), but more in the temporal sense of gaining knowledge over time.

The interface of the game brings the player and Bobbin even closer by removing a degree of mediation between them. What the player and Bobbin do is not far apart: both play music – and neither of them *touches* the living world. The player is clicking his mouse on a very iconic representation of the distaff<sup>12</sup>; Bobbin is playing the notes.

This immaterial, intangible way of negotiating the world contributes to the dream-like atmosphere of lightness and lowered physicality<sup>13</sup>. No wonder Weavers metamorphose into birds on a regular basis.

In *Loom*, player performance has a direct effect on the fictional world, as opposed to the verb-oriented interfaces of the classical point-and-click adventure games, in which the player “gives instructions” and watches them being carried out. But *Loom* took a very different way of removing mediation than *Myst* – the game that marked a turn to direct manipulation in adventure game genre. As Clara Fernández-Vara writes in her work about adventure game interfaces:

*Myst* incorporated in its interface most of the features of direct manipulation, as proposed by Shneiderman – ease of use, visual representation of the objects to be manipulated, “rapid, reversible, incremental actions,” whose form of input was in some form analogous to how those actions were performed in the real world [...]. All these elements favoured the feeling that the player was actually in the gameworld. (Fernández-Vara 2008, p.223)

Instead of getting rid of the avatar and pushing the character further into the gameworld, which the designers of *Myst* did, *Loom* does the opposite – it posits Bobbin partially *outside* of the world. The usual distance between the player and the avatar is conceptualized in the fiction of the game by distancing the avatar from the world. Thus, the player and the avatar share the same space – the Void, which can be interpreted as the usual gap, the bumper space between the player and the game world. Bobbin's magic, coming from the outside (remember, in our interpretation, he is made out of Void), is paralleled to the magic of the computer game that allows players to manipulate objects in the fictional world. It is, however, a very limited kind of magic – we don't have *physical* agency in the fictional world, just like Bobbin does not have physical agency in the tapestry. The parallel is very consistent.

## The metaphysics of *Loom*

How does it fit into the broader cosmology of *Loom*? Although memorable, the game's secondary world is very sparsely sketched. We get to know that it takes place around year 8000 (but is it 8000 AD?); we get to know the history of the guilds. There is some stock fairy-tale imagery, such as the very familiar-looking dragon cave, but the next minute the game amazes us with the surreal glass castle and the giant levitating forge. Quite often, *Loom* doesn't seem to be really sure whether it is a game for children, or adults. It is easy and slightly humorous, but also includes unexpected and shocking gory scenes and metaphysical and allegorical dialogs. All in all, *Loom* seems to be a haphazard pastiche of different sources. We are even not allowed to see the world as whole: Bobbin hardly ever gains knowledge about what he cannot see for himself and he only travels to a few very little islands<sup>14</sup>. What unifies them is the fictional world's metaphysics. As for its source, Moriarty says that the fundamental inspiration were the associations of the word *loom*:

Out of this line of thought came the Weavers, an ancient craft guild secretly managing the fabric of reality. Throw in a dose of Mythology 101<sup>15</sup>, an undead

bad guy and my trademark fondness for extra dimensions, and you get what eventually became *Loom*, the game. (Mamen – Jong 2006, italics added)

We have talked about the extra dimension – the Void – as a fictional parallel of the player space and the conceptualization of the gap between the real and the fictional world. But it also serves to connect the quite disparate islands within the game into a coherent world. Towards the end of the game, Bobbin floats in the Void and returns to the places he has already visited. Each of these little islands can be entered through a hole that connects the two dimensions. Once Bobbin finishes the tasks in a given island, he is supposed to close it by the *closing* draft. This makes for a great metaphor of one of the typical features of the point 'n' click adventure game genre, which is the synecdochic<sup>16</sup> representation of their game worlds. In these games, parts of a larger fictional world area are represented by a smaller, typical location – very much like *Loom's* islands in the Void. Also, typically, once all puzzles have been solved in a location, it becomes “used up” and comes to a closure. Again, *Loom* includes in its fiction a very subtle metaphor of its own game mechanics.

And the ultimate joke is the Loom itself. Although it is revered and respected by the Weavers, they are not able to control it. Even though they can alter the fabric of the living world and change a lot of singular things in the fictional world thanks to their mastery of music, they have no control over the Loom. When the Chaos, the ultimate antagonist of the game, had entered into the fiction at the time of Bobbin's birth, the Weaver elders thought it was the young child's or his mother's fault. But, as we learn from Dame Hetchel, the pattern was failing “of its own accord”. It seems that the Loom has its own will and even the Weavers are ultimately subject to it. There is another parallel here: the Loom can stand for the game itself (also called *Loom!*), which, by design, constrains players' freedom (Weise, forthcoming). The fact that the danger came upon the lands just when Bobbin was born is not just a random coincidence. It is a challenge made specifically for Bobbin, and therefore also for the player, who, as we have seen, is closer to Bobbin than in the usual player-avatar relationships. It is then no wonder then when the game is over, the world is torn apart.

I would not like it to appear that *Loom* is a game whose fiction hovers on the meta-level. No, it is captivating even at first glance. There is no guarantee or, for that matter, methodological need, of knowing that all the parallels between what's happening in-game and outside of it were intentionally designed. The opposite might just as well be true. I also don't mean to proclaim my interpretation the “correct” one. But I hope I offered an explanation of why the game feels so special and different to their fans. By tailoring its narrative to its interface (and vice versa) and stealthily embracing its gameness in its fiction, *Loom* emerges as a unique, magical experience, whose technique of bringing the player into the game – or rather Bobbin out of the game – is remarkably well executed and still inspiring. It is a short adventure, and fairly trivial in terms of puzzles, but there is a lot at stake. It is easy to become Bobbin. Trust me, the cloak will suit you.

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## Notes

- 1 While *Guitar Hero III* (Activision, 2007) might have a narrative arc, it is not the primary attraction of the game. And while there are many narrative games that take advantage of the Nintendo DS touch screen, only isolated parts of them are usually mimetic (for example taking notes on the map in *Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* (Nintendo, 2007) or taking footprints in *Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney* (Capcom, 2007)).
- 2 Many non-avatar-based games, i.e. strategy and god games, also usually use indirect control.
- 3 The game's avatar, wolf-goddess Amaterasu, is actually not *seen* drawing these, but the dialogue hints at the fact she does so.
- 4 Another example of a game with a drawing interface would be *Drawn To Life* (THQ 2007), in which the presence of the player-creator is acknowledged in-game, as he is directly addressed.
- 5 Out of the many version of the game, the original 16-color EGA DOS version is the one to play, as it preserves the original vision of the lead artist Mark Ferrari. Later versions are more pleasing to the eye, but by adding color and detail weaken the symbolic potential of the game brought about the sparseness of the artwork.
- 6 Interestingly enough, Oleg Roschin (nickname JazzOleg), the reviewer I am quoting, is a professional musician, or at least his MobyGames user profile says so.
- 7 From this point on, I will use *Loom* in italics when talking about the game and Loom without italics when talking about the in-game device.
- 8 Distaff is a tool used in spinning of wool and flax – a staff designed to hold unspun fibers and making the process easier.
- 9 In contrast, most adventure games are pretty much built around hoarding objects.
- 10 There are exceptions. Two objects, the book of drafts and the distaff itself, can be picked up. Conversation and examining objects is also music-free.
- 11 A linear sequence of symbols that reads the same from both ends, for example *abba*.
- 12 Similar spellcasting techniques (based on composing words out of runes) were employed in Loom's contemporaries like *Dungeon Master* (FTL 1987) and *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* (Looking Glass Technologies 1992), latter of which also included an artificial language to be mastered; *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* (Nintendo 1998), released eight years after Loom, had similar music-based puzzles. But none of these games was primarily based on this kind of interaction within the game world.



- <sup>13</sup> The game maintains the illusion that the magic of music is consistently applicable to the fictional world. There is a varying scale of actions you can perform with the same draft. You can dye and bleach sheets and fill and empty cups just for your pleasure. There is, of course, still a very limited number of objects the player and Bobbin can interact with, but numerous in-game events are, in terms of the game's narrative, unnecessary. They are present for another reason. They contribute to the secondary belief in the fictional world.
- <sup>14</sup> The world *islands* is used metaphorically here.
- <sup>15</sup> The metaphysics of the world of Loom remind us of many mythological, philosophical and mystical concepts. The concept of creation by song is a part of a man-made mythology of J. R. R. Tolkien (1977), which might have been in turn influenced by the Finnish epos Kalevala (Lönrott 1999). The idea of in the world being melodies – or vibrations – that can be sensed, appears for example in some sufist authors (Khan, undated). The existence of the Void, a place outside of our world, from which the latter can be manipulated, hints at the aboriginal myths of Dreaming or Dream Time – a spiritual realm that saturates the visible world with meaning (Barber 2000). Its monism (all is one tapestry) suggests the Pre-Socratic, such as Parmenides with his “All is one” (although he would strongly protest against the existence of a Void, that is outside the one) (Warren 2007).
- <sup>16</sup> Synecdoche is a reference to a whole by a part of it.