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Fahrenheit and the premature burial of interactive movies

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The role reserved for interactive movies in video game histories can usually be summed up like this: a short-lived experiment having created such great expectations that can only be compared to the consequent disappointment. The genre is pretty much considered dead and the appellation 'interactive movie' is even pejoratively used to describe games with too many non-interactive narrative sequences. The lesson to be learned from the experience, it seems, is that mixing video games and cinema can only lead to a product that is both a bad movie and a bad game. Interactive movies are, in the best cases, last-gen material.

Yet, almost ten years after the release of the last 'major' interactive movie games like *Gabriel Knight: The Beast Within* (Sierra On-Line 1995) or *Pandora Directive* (Access Software, 1996), a game is published claiming to be "a unique combination of gaming and cinematography […]".[1] The game is *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream 2005), published in North America as *Indigo Prophecy*. This 'original' concept seems to please since the game reaches top positions of best-selling charts and now exceeds 700 000 copies sold.[2] Critical reception is also very positive if we are to believe the compiled scores from Metacritic.com: 85% and Mobygames.com: 83%.

In his *post-mortem* published in the *Game Developer* journal, David Cage (2006) insists on the game's special blend of cinema and video games:

> The cinematographic approach in Indigo Prophecy was an essential aspect of the game concept from the very beginning. The idea was to manage to recreate a richness and diversity of emotions comparable to film by using similar mechanisms (narration and characterization), but ones that are also peculiar to the medium (interactivity, immersion).[3]

Even if the connection might seem obvious, the term 'interactive movie' is never mentioned. On the contrary, Cage heavily insists on the game being an 'original concept'.[4]

Although we can easily understand why he wouldn't want his game being associated to such an infamous genre, the fact remains that *Fahrenheit* resembles an interactive movie in many aspects. In the following text, we'll try to see if this game, instead of being the completely new videoludic experience Cage claims it to be, isn't essentially a refined actualization of the interactive movie model. In which case, the success of the game would raise questions about the supposed death of this genre. Could it be that some features of interactive movies still have relevance beyond the ephemeral technical fascination it inspired in its early times (the amazement of seeing full-motion video on a computer screen)? In order to test this hypothesis, we'll first do a short historical review of interactive movies to see if we can determine the characteristics that would allow us to identify one. We'll then speak of *Fahrenheit* to see if it fits the

definition. If it does, we'll examine how it manages to improve on the model to please contemporary audiences and discuss the (perhaps) untapped potential of interactive movies.

Interactive Movies

'Interactive movie' is an ambiguous term that can be used to designate very different cultural objects. Perron and Therrien (2007, p. 397) distinguish two large families: interactive movies and movie-games. The first category includes new media artworks mainly composed of filmed material and offering an eventual 'spectactor' various ways to alter the course of diffusion in a free and exploratory process. Movie-games, while using the same technical means, add rules to the experience and ways to measure *player* performance. They are games, product of the video game industry, and are intended for entertainment rather than self-expression and aesthetic communication (although that can also happen along the way). In this article, which is concerned with the latter of these two categories, will use the term 'interactive movies' to refer to what Perron and Therrien have described as "movie-games".

In the context of video games, the interactive movie label refers to a specific historical corpus. It designates video games that used FMV (full motion video) as the core element of their *mise-en-scène* and gameplay. These games appear somewhat as the children of the laser disk (CD-ROM), the technology that truly made them possible. With their unprecedented capacity of storage and the possibility of non-linear access to information, CDs allow for rich pre-filmed or pre-rendered video sequences to be displayed in the order determined by the software, and ultimately the human user. In 1983 appears what is often considered to be the first interactive movie: *Dragon's Lair*, an arcade video game constituted of hand-drawn 2D animation sequences (Perron 2008, p. 128). It will take a few years before this technology is made available to home computer users and we could situate the genre's 'golden age' in the early to mid 1990s with games such as *Rebel Assault* (LucasArts 1993), *The Seventh Guest* (Trilobyte 1993), the MS-DOS version of *Mad Dog McCree* (American Laser Games 1993) or *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger* (Origin Systems 1994).

The previous list raises the issue of the generic status of interactive movies. Indeed, we find in the same category an adventure game, a puzzle game, shooters and a space flight simulator. This is very symptomatic of the general confusion regarding video game genres which are sometimes based on modalities of visual representation (e.g. the first person shooter), or on pre-videoludic thematic categories (e.g. horror games) but also on gameplay characteristics (e.g. platformer). Although we agree with Apperley (2006, p. 7) that the latter criterion is probably the most pertinent on which to found coherent and consistent videoludic generic categories, the interactive movie is obviously a genre defined by its representational characteristics. When comparing the different games put in that category, it seems that the only remaining common denominator is the use of film footage or pre-animated video sequences as the main device of representation.

Reliance on pre-made content has a deep structural impact on 'interactive movie' games. In this genre it is often the case that the game mechanics made available to the player will have to operate within the boundaries of the games filmic aesthetic. In consequence, these are games that are more scripted and linear, than procedural; and consequently are often smaller in scope. For example, a space shooter like *Star Wars: Rebel Assault* (LucasArts 1993) could be reasonably expected to offer a very procedural experience of play, with dynamic enemies flying around and the player navigating in an open 3D space. Each game session would vary greatly according to the game-world's reactions to the players' actions. However, *Star Wars: Rebel Assault* was made as an interactive movie, which means that the experience has been shaped very differently: the navigational aspect has been narrowed to moving within the strict boundaries of the pre-rendered paths on top of which the more traditionally procedural enemies are overlaid as 2D sprites. However, this limit movement meant that the game's visual quality far exceeded what was available in the more 'open' space shooters of the time, such as *Star-Wars: X-Wing* (Totally Games 1993).

Figure 1: Rebel Assault

Figure 2: Star-Wars: X-Wing

At first, interactive movies sparked an enormous interest. They offered a much richer visual content than what was previously available and seemed to finally achieve video games' long time ambition: to provide an experience that combines the audio-visual quality of movies with the freedom of action of games. These great expectations lead to a general disappointment as the public discovered games that usually combined B-grade cinematographic productions with very restrictive gameplay. Interactive movies were often criticized for their low resolution, poor acting, fake backdrops, and the very little impact the player could have on their tree-based narratives whose few branches quickly met again (Perron 2008, p. 127). This disappointment was made even keener by the simultaneous arrival on the video game market of first person shooters like *Doom* (id Software 1993). These new games offered fully immersive 3D worlds with highly dynamic, multi-user and open-ended gameplay. For most people, a game like *Doom* was certainly more representative of the essence and future of video games than mere visual renditions of the 'choose-your-own-adventure' model. As soon as 1996, most developers had abandoned the interactive movie format.

If FMV and pre-rendered sequences were no longer used as core and structural element of games, they certainly didn't disappear. On the contrary, they were increasingly used in an even greater variety of video games with always improving definition and production quality. In fact, they were simply removed from the center of the game to its periphery. As observes Nitsche (2008, p. 70): "[…] the combination of full-motion video and gameplay has grown – for better or for worse – into the tradition of the cutscene[.]" Generally living outside of the gameplay moments, high-quality non-interactive cutscenes became instruments to convey and hold together the games' narrative structure, as well as element of reward (Howells 2002, p.113).

Fahrenheit

Fahrenheit is a video game developed by Quantic Dream and released in 2005 for the PS2, XBOX and PC platforms. Several characters are sequentially controlled by the player: beginning with a young man who has just committed murder while under the influence of a mysterious force; followed by the two cops in charge of solving the crime. The game has been particularly praised for the richness of its plot and characters, as well as for the quality of its *mise-en-scène*. The soundtrack, composed by Angelo Badalamenti, best known for his work on a number of David Lynch movies, adds a lot to the game's uneasy atmosphere.

From a game design perspective, *Fahrenheit* offers two main mechanics: the first is the ability to navigate a visible character in a 3D environment in order to get close to 'hot spots' that trigger the display of choices of action. The player then has to select one of the few proposed actions by imitating with his controller the gesture shown next to the icon depicting the action. In conversations, one chooses from dialogue options in the same fashion. The other main modality of interactivity appears in the action sequences: a set of colored indicators is overlaid on the screen and the player has to push the button corresponding to the highlighted color within the allowed time. The better the player succeeds at doing this over the whole sequence, the better the outcome. This same mechanic may allow the character to successfully dance, play basketball, or fight. There are some variations like keeping a gauge balanced by using the right and left buttons.

Figure 3: The player can choose to activate the sink by doing a left to right gesture

Figure 4: In this action sequence, the player has to push the requested buttons at the right time to prevail.

Our brief analysis of the interactive movie has given us only one objective criterion that would allow us to identify one: the use of pre-recorded footage or animation as core element of visual representation. At first glance, *Fahrenheit* doesn't seem to fit this description as it makes intensive use of a real-time 3D engine to render environments and characters. Yet there is still a fundamental distinction between *Fahrenheit* and a first-person shooter or a third-person action-adventure game: its visual representation isn't a complete procedural response of the software to the input of the player, taking into consideration the game world and logic. Instead, it is almost always a pre-scripted response, displaying pre-recorded content. The game's real-time 3D rendering should not obscure the fact that what is seen has (almost) always been pre-conceived. Character movements were sampled from motion capture devices, facial animation was pre-animated on the basis of the recorded dialogues and the camera's positions and movements were pre-arranged to ensure dramatic framing. In other words: for every play session of the same segments (even by different players), the vast majority of what is seen on the screen is identical. The same would be true if the game's visuals were based on filmed content or pre-animated sequences, just like *Dragon's Lair*. On the contrary, the same would not be true for a standard first-person shooter (FPS). Even if these games also make use of motion capture for character animation, they use very short loops of movement arranged in procedurally determined sequences responding to real-time gaming conditions that vary in each session. More importantly, the camera is operated by the player and therefore what is seen on screen is always unique.

The only true element of procedural animation in *Fahrenheit* is the character's movements in the 3D environment. Only then that the player has direct impact on the position and motion of the character. However, even in these moments, the camera is so fully managed by the game's art direction that the player's impact is limited to positioning the character within predetermined visual compositions. Unlike most 3D games in which the movements of the camera are the result of an algorithm responding to the player's actions, in *Fahrenheit* the camera is fixed to virtual rails. According to Cage (2006), this was a very important aspect of the game's design:

"*The other important point in the project specifications was that the camera should be free to provide top quality directing (so no views from behind).*" However, the fixed camera in *Fahrenheit* did mean that the visual quality of the game was extremely high, which is a stark contrast with any game in which the cameras are completely procedural, which don't have much to offer in terms of composition. However, pre-directed cameras aren't always fully functional, and the player in *Fahrenheit* may find themselves in the delicate situation of moving the character *towards* the camera and this not being able to see what is in front of them. Certainly, in all of the actions of the game, even in the moments of 'freedom', the framing of the game through film is palpable.

In some regards the designers have used *Fahrenheit*'s 3D engine as a virtual film studio rather than as a tool to develop a fully explorable virtual environment. The game's filmic aspirations, far from concealed, are exacerbated and fully claimed by David Cage and the Quantic Dream team. This is made obvious by the game's main menu mimicking a movie DVD menu in which 'chapters' refer to saved games and that even includes a 'bonus' section. When the game is paused, the interface displays a series of icons that remediate symbols traditionally associated with magnetic tape media: the 'play' arrow and the 'stop' square, as if the game was watchable linear content. Throughout the game, a visual noise is superimposed on the game's graphics, remediating the grainy appearance of actual footage. Quantic Dream has even named its in-house development tool the Movie Maker Module, which Cage (2006) compares to Adobe's editing software *Premiere*.

Figure 5: Fahrenheit's main menu

Moving away from the visual aspect of the game, we could also argue that its main mechanics also belong to the traditional repertoire of interactive movies. Structurally, the player is making choices along a tree shaped narrative in which certain branches lead to dead-ends and others re-join later on with the main trunk, with only a few truly distinct paths available. The effects of the player's decision are communicated by short segments of pre-produced content. As for the action sequences, it is simply an

actualization of the Quick Time Events (QTE) principle: the player is given brief moments of control during a sequence which is otherwise non-interactive and he has to push the right buttons at the right time to influence the sequence positively. It is, in fact, an update of a principle initiated by *Dragon's Lair*. As was the case with all acknowledged interactive movies, the game is in fact a network of pre-recorded scenes on top of which are overlaid the interactive procedural elements such as player movement and QTEs.

A Premature Burial?

Although the developers might not have intended it that way, *Fahrenheit* could be labeled an interactive movie. Some critics noted the connection immediately: "*Indigo Prophecy is the savior for interactive movies and adventure games*" (G4TV 2006), "[*Fahrenheit*] *raises the bar as far as 'interactive movies' go*" (Orry 2005). The question is, then, how can we explain *Fahrenheit*'s sales and positive critical reception if interactive movies are supposed to be "as exciting as a burst of acne"? [5] Let's explore two hypotheses: first, *Fahrenheit* has refined and improved the original model and, secondly, some of the characteristics of the original 'golden age' interactive movies remain relevant and attractive.

According to Perron (2008), the main complaints about the early interactive movies were: the limited freedom allowed by their branching narrative structure, the lack of interactivity, the poor quality of film production and their low resolution. By using a real-time 3D engine in the manner of a virtual movie studio, *Fahrenheit* manages to avoid most of these shortcomings. The game is displayed in full resolution and the quality of its 3D models, although not staggering, is more than acceptable by the standards of its release time. More importantly, the use of a virtual studio, of virtual actors and, especially, of a virtual camera, gave Quantic Dream much more flexibility than traditional shooting to produce a large number of sequences without compromising quality. In a virtual studio, sets, lighting, costumes and camera framing can be modified at any moment of production. Voice acting and motion capture are more fixed, but a specific actor performance can be easily re-recorded at any time, in isolation. Every aspect of the production is modular, making it more flexible and probably cheaper. In the case of interactive movies, more sequences means more available choices, a better illusion of freedom and of player impact on the narrative. Spatial exploration, decision making by gestures instead of clicking and the inclusion of 'quick time events' all participate in offering a richer interaction with the game.

As we have seen, the use of pre-recorded content has survived the demise of interactive games in the form of cutscenes. At the time of its development, *Fahrenheit* could already build upon years of experience in dealing with cutscenes in video games. A major point of criticism regarding the insertion of FMV or high-quality pre-rendered animation between in-game segments was the disruptive contrast between both regimes of representation (Howells 2002, p. 155): "as the game strives to make players *believe* the imaginary, computer-generated – and often blocky and pixelated – game world, the transition to full-motion video reminds gamers that this is, in fact, *not* real, breaking the suspension of disbelief." In later games, with the improvements made to the games' 3D rendering quality, this problem was solved by scripting non-interactive narrative segments directly within the game's engine, thus

preserving the homogeneity of the representation. This is exactly what *Fahrenheit* does: the fact that the game is mainly a string of articulated cutscenes is obscured by the transparent transitions between interactive and non-interactive moments.

Fahrenheit also benefits from a change in the public's perception of 'interactive movies' because of the material improvements over the 10 years since the 'golden age'. When the first interactive movies were released, both developer ambitions and player expectations were based on a somewhat naïve perspective on the remediation of cinema through video games. Interactive movies were fantasized to be video games that could still, somehow, succeed at being good movies. The outcome was that those who read these productions as 'cinematic' content were generally disappointed, whereas videoludic readings were more nuanced: some games were fun, others not. King and Krzywinksa (2002, p. 6) have already noted that: "to judge or appraise games in terms of their 'cinematic' qualities, shortcomings or potentials, is, as Aarseth suggests, often to miss the point: that they are games, first and foremost."

Fahrenheit's public in 2005 could be expected to have a much clearer idea of videogames as an independent medium with its own grammar. As such, they would not read the game as a movie but would nevertheless appreciate the games' many cinematic references and citations. The Quantic Dream team had also worked in full awareness of the medium and things like the fake video granularity and Hollywood-style editing had not been intended to fool the audience that they were actually playing a movie, but rather to invite the player to willfully accept the idea that the action of the game is taking place in something resembling a movie. To frame this according to Bolter and Grusin's remediation concept (1999), *Fahrenheit* functions in a hypermedial relationship to cinema and remains a videogame in essence and perception. Being more videogame-literate, the players of 2005 would not be disappointed by expecting a movie instead of a game. On the contrary, they can create rapport with the developers via the shared appreciation of the cinematic figures quoted in the game.

The apparent disappearance of 'interactive movies' is perhaps more dependent on a specific historical context than on inherent flaws of this type of video game. The original interactive movies were being released at the same time as one of the most important technical breakthroughs in the history of video games: the apparition of fully explorable, immersive and multiplayer real-time 3D games such as *Doom*. In comparison interactive movies looked quite poor: they were games of already old and familiar mechanics imitating awkwardly the representational modalities of an older media. They certainly didn't seem like the future of games. However, notwithstanding the general impression, interactive movies never disappeared. One simply has to consult the [Ludicine](#) database or the 'interactive movie' category of MobyGames to discover that this model has been used again and again, even very recently. It is just as false to claim that all interactive movies were failed games. Some of them are still celebrated among players. The best adventure games list of [GameBoomers](#) in 2009 features *Gabriel Knight II* in 7th position alongside much more recent games. An informal survey of favorite adventure games on the [AdventureGamers](#) forum in 2004 reveals that many gamers still count interactive movies among their favorites, mainly *Gabriel Knight II, The Pandora Directive* (Access Software Inc 1996), *Blade Runner* (Westwood Studios 1997) and *The Last*

Express (Smoking Cars Productions 1997). This last production, *The Last Express*, has also known a form of mini-revival on Gamasutra with two dedicated features in 2008 and 2009.

What we can learn from *Fahrenheit* is that some aspects of the apparently antiquated interactive movie model can still be relevant today. By structuring a game as an articulation of pre-produced sequences of content, a videogame can increase its potential in aesthetic and narrative depth. The 'pre-produced' aspect is key to this. Most games are composed of procedural behaviors taking place at every level of the experience: what is seen, what is heard, the actions of the game-objects and NPCs, the specific game states and outcomes. This doesn't mean that a FPS cannot be beautiful and engage the player in a form of narrative immersion, but simply that these elements generally have a generic touch to them. The interactive movie format allows developers to specifically craft every aspect of the experience, possibly giving a more detailed and precise visual rendering and a more 'human feel' to game events. Even though a massively procedural 3D game can be visually stunning, it relinquishes the expressive power of a directed camera and the elaborate *mise-en-scène* available to the developers of an interactive-movie-style game. Even if AI actions and reactions can be very credible, they are rarely as individually interesting as those of a character whose every interactions have been specifically written for particular circumstances.

These advantages come at a very high price: there is not much than can be done that wasn't already put in the game. Interactive movies do not foster emergent gameplay, behaviors and strategies. A common complaint is that they offer very limited freedom of action. If this affirmation is true in some ways, it concerns only some aspects of freedom in videogames. A FPS might offer the freedom to shoot, run and jump whenever you want, but it doesn't offer much opportunity to do anything else than that. In adventure interactive movies, the time and place of available actions might be fixed, but they come in a much greater variety (Fernández-Vara, 2008). In how many games can the player take the subway, visit a museum, make friends with old German aristocracy, and even figure in an Opera? *Gabriel Knight II* offers this opportunity. This format can be a good vehicle for games with a smaller scope, less 'freedom of action', but more depth, richness, texture in every action. In a recent article on *The Last Express*, Cross (2009) expresses well how these features of an interactive movie can still be attractive: "When I think of games that seemed even partially or plausibly meaningful to me, I think of games that create detailed, compelling microcosms, smaller carefully connected situations and spaces that continue a strong narrative. *The Last Express* is by far the best of these".

As the audience for video games keeps getting larger and more diverse, it seems reasonable to expect games structured around the premise of an 'interactive movie' to continue to be produced (although probably not under that name). *Fahrenheit* has shown us that many people are willing to adhere to a pre-scripted game with limited choices in exchange for a good story, non-stereotyped character actions and beautiful camera shots. Even though we might see more of it in real-time 3D, as this technology allows more flexibility and cheaper development, real footage will certainly not disappear either. The recent release of *Casebook,* a new series of filmed interactive movies in 2008 by the independent developer Aero, supports this point of view. The much anticipated completion of *Heavy Rain*, Quantic Dream's

upcoming game, will certainly tell us even more about interactive movies' future, or perhaps should we now say 'interactive drama' as it was labeled by Sony (Purchese 2008).

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Notes

[1]   Quoted from the publisher's web site (Atari 2009).

[2]   Figures taken from the developer's site (Quantic Dream 2007).

[3]   David Cage is listed in the credits as "director", a title which seems to encompass the tasks of game designer, writer and project manager.

[4]   In the short article, "original concept" or "original project" appears eleven times.

[5]   Ichbiah (1997, p. 287) quoted by Perron (2002, p. 450), free translation.