

Time Tech and Tales: the fall and rise of the popularity of narration in games seen through *Monkey Island 2* and *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*

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The game, the player, the gameplay: definitions

I am writing this a few weeks after Tim Schafer raised almost three and a half million dollars on Kickstarter by expressing the mere intention of making a point-and-click adventure game. He didn't say anything about the game itself, just that his company, Double Fine, would make it. He also said that no publisher would ever fund such a game. And tens of thousands of people gave him over ten times as much money as he had asked. He needed 300,000 dollars for the game itself, he got over 3.2 million. There seems to be a divide going on here about what some people want, what some other people want and what people whose role it is to know what people want think. In other words, when potential players say they want games based on narration, no one is listening. Why is that?

I contributed to that Kickstarter project, maybe a little more than I should have. I have no idea if I would have if this had taken place a couple of years ago. The season for that is that I

gave up on games once. I don't mean that I had something urgent to do and I promised myself I'd keep away from playing until I was done. I meant that I stopped enjoying games and I gave up hope that I'd enjoy games again. Obviously, I was wrong, but that impression lasted longer than I would have imagined a couple of years earlier. I basically played almost no games, or no new games between 2000 and 2010. These were great years for games, some would argue. They'd go on, "Those were the years of *Halo* and *Call of Duty* and *Half Life* and *Guitar Hero* and *Grand Theft Auto* and *World of Warcraft*! If you don't like those, what do you like?" The answer for that would be *Monkey Island 1* and *2*, *Day of the Tentacle*, the *Gabriel Knight* series, *Cruise for a Corpse*, but also the classic Mario games and other platformers. I'm not saying that the games I listed first are bad. They were not just for me. They were games for "gamers." I had to accept that I was not, or at least no longer, a "gamer" and move on. In retrospect, that's not really what was going on.

In fact, there were many things going on. First of all, there is no such thing as a "gamer," or rather no fixed, standard definition for it. When I was saying to myself, "I am no longer a gamer," I was implying that people who "really" play video games were the ones who played shooters, or games with a lot of shooting. In 2000, *The Secret of Monkey Island* was no longer considered a "real game," at least not by my demographic. It was in 2D, it required lots of reading, it had no violence at all. A friend of mine told me that there was too much clicking. He was referring to the way one moved the characters on screen by clicking to where one wanted them to go as opposed to directing their movements with the keyboard or game pad.

The idea that games that rely strongly on narrative were not "real games" was at the time relatively recent. In the nineties, point-and-click adventure games were best-sellers. In the early eighties, text-based adventure games like *Zork*, *The Lurking Horror* and other treasures from Infocom were also best-sellers. So what happened?

Nowadays, games are sold in media stores and websites. They are next to the movies and music. But this was not always the case. It used to be that games were sold as software, not

unlike office software. Like any other piece of software, the features were listed as a list of numerical values on the side of the box. For adventure games, it was the number of lines of dialog, the number of rooms in the game, the duration of the music, the length of gameplay, the number of colors that could be displayed at a time. True, there are still such lists, but they are more akin to media content than to software features. At the time, one primary selling point of video games was technical innovation for the sake of technical innovation.

At first, this was not particularly harmful for adventure games. The fact that graphics were in VGA did not guarantee they'd be beautiful. But beautiful graphics existed, the ability to use VGA helped accomplish that, and beautiful graphics certainly added to the value of games.

I'd say that the beginning of trouble for narration in game came with Full Motion Video. This seems counterintuitive at first: surely video can only add to narrative content and having smooth animation or real-life actors offers much more powerful potential for emotional impact than the simple, minimal animation that were available earlier on. And that's certainly true, but using Full Motion Video also raised significantly the level of entry in game making. In other words: if you write a good game and have a few good artists and good programmers, you can make a good adventure game, but if you want to add video to the mix, you need actors, film directors, film editors, lighting designers, and many more tech people. And if any of them do a bad job, it's your entire game that's bad. And the best actors and directors were not originally that keen to put the best of their talents in games.

In the late nineties, Full Motion Video had become the main selling point of the games that featured it, rather than a tool, a medium for great content. Games like *Urban Runner*, or Sierra's *Phantasmagoria* are an example of games that maybe had a bit too much value pushed towards technical gimmicks than truly great content.

I would argue that the technical innovation that did the most harm to the appeal of games that focused on narration is 3D. Towards the end of the 2000-2010 decade video games were more or less synonymous with 3D. When there was mention of

“games” in a generic context for most of that decade, Flash games and Facebook games were rarely included, even though their popularity was exploding at the time. A useful comparison is romance novels, the type one can find in supermarkets. They are the most sold type of fiction in the world⁽¹⁾, but when one just says “novel”, the image that comes to mind is more likely to be *Moby Dick* or *Pride and Prejudice*. Before big financial successes like Zynga’s, the popularity of Flash games were not enough to make them fit in the generic *perception* of what a game was.

The look and gameplay that come from using a 3D engine can be very detrimental to games, especially in the early days of 3D. The bulky, boxy graphics that were necessary to make games run on the computers of the time were suited to games like *Half Life*. The original *Half Life* took place in an industrial compound with long corridors, machines and pipes. There was a lot of flexibility in what the world could look like and so it didn’t go against the theme to make it match the technical limitations of the computers that would run it.

For a game like the third Gabriel Knight title, *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, it was very different. The original *Half Life* was released in 1998 and *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned* in 1999. While *Half Life*, a shooter, required the player character to run across vast expanses in a huge laboratory, *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, took place in a small village in central France and required the player character to behave in a socially civilized manner, look carefully around several areas, and endear himself to other characters. In the former game, the ability to have full freedom of movement is liberating, running and shooting, hiding behind walls and crawling through pipes to sneak up on the enemy are a core part of the fun. For Gabriel Knight, it was an unnecessary complication. If I want Gabriel to pick up the phone, I want him to pick up the phone. Guiding him around the hotel lobby furniture is not part of the fun, it’s a major annoyance. But, apparently, it was thought at the time that adventure games had to be in 3D because from that point on, all games would be in 3D.

It is, in fact, possible to make a good 3D adventure games. The latter instances of the Tex Murphy series are a fine

example. But making the 3D fit in narrative-based games was and is still an extra complication. And it is not certain it is a necessary one. So why was 3D indispensable in the first place? Why was 3D like sound in film rather than color? When sound arrived, silent films very quickly stopped being made. But when color was made available, the transition was slow and the point could easily be made that it is still incomplete.

To understand the appeal of 3D, one must go back to the previously mentioned notion of what it is to be a “gamer.” That term is usually just used to mean “core gamer.” But not all people who play video games are core gamers. People who play *FarmVille*, *Wii Fit*, *Bejeweled* or *Angry Birds* are not core gamers. But the fall of the narrative-based game took place long before those became popular. And that is a crucial part of the issue.

Current core-player games focus on using complex graphics systems, themes that appeal to young males, a focus on speed and thrill. The large number of horror games and war games should serve as a testimony for that. They bring out thrill more than thought. Compare *BioShock* and *Loom*, for example. They hardly have any themes or mechanics in common. The slow pace of adventure games, the focus on reflection rather than thrill, these rebuke those who started identifying as gamers after the late nineties.

All this being said, games based on narrative continued to be made during the nineties. In many cases, narrative elements were slipped into other types of games. *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* were such examples, with their complex narratives behind an action interface. Tim Schafer tried to meld adventure game-like story and dialog into his platformer, *Psychonauts*. But even then, there were a few games that were successful while relying on narrative at the very base of their mechanic.

Let's compare a classic adventure game of the nineties with a more recent one. Let's compare *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* with *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*. *Monkey Island 2* was released in 1991 and *Phoenix Wright* in 2001, a mere ten years apart. Both were based purely on narrative and the two were released at very different times in very different contexts.

But before all that, let's describe each of the two games in chronological order. Then, let's give a look at how the gameplay of each game complements the game's story and aesthetics. Finally, I'll give a look at how the ten years that took place between the two games' release dates affected their design and content. For now, let's look at what the games look like, starting with *Monkey Island 2*.

***Monkey Island 2* and *Phoenix Wright*: either relics of the past or models for the future**

Monkey Island 2 and *Phoenix Wright* are both adventure games. But *Monkey* is a game about pirates, an American point-and-click adventure game, originally for home computers, that relies heavily on tropes from the great American storytelling traditions, whereas *Phoenix* is a game about urban lawyers, a Japanese game for a handheld console that deals with topics typical of cold, drab urban settings, spun into a world of lightheartedness and fantasy, and to which a strong element of Japanese mysticism was added. (On a side note, I am only knows the English-language localization of *Phoenix* and may not be aware of all layers of meaning of the original Japanese story and texts.)

Both *Monkey Island 2* and *Phoenix Wright* tell a fairly linear story. *Monkey Island 2: Le Chuck's Revenge* is a sequel to the original game in the series, *The Secret of Monkey Island*, released in 1990. In *Monkey 2*, the player character and hero, the comically named Guybrush Threepwood, says in the introduction cutscene that he intends to find a legendary buried treasure, Big Whoop. The game is divided into four chapters. In the first, Guybrush loses all of his money to the first antagonist he encounters, Largo LaGrande. Guybrush finds himself stuck on a small inhabited island and, in order to leave and progress in the story, he must find four items. The altercation with Largo that ensues allows Guybrush's current antagonist to resurrect Guybrush's nemesis, the titular ghost pirate LeChuck. A character called "Voodoo Lady," who acts as Guybrush's guide, tells him that he must continue his original quest of finding Big

Whoop to survive LeChuck. Again, in order to do this, Guybrush must find four more objects. This is chapter 2. Chapter 3 takes place in LeChuck's fortress in which Guybrush finds himself imprisoned. Chapter 4 is the discovery and the revelation of the nature of Big Whoop.

In Chapters 1 and 2, for each set of four objects to be discovered, the objects can be found in any order. However, every step that leads to the discovery of one, helps to the discovery of another. The player is therefore constantly offered the choice to seek one object or another. For example, in order to get a piece of clothing from Largo, the player must enter Largo's room to place a bucket of mud over the entrance door left ajar so that the mud will fall on Largo and stain his clothes. But while inside the room, Guybrush will also find a toupee that will provide him with another object on his list of items to find.

The game is played by choosing verbs at the bottom of the screen and then clicking on items in the main gameplay area. For example, clicking on "Pick up" and then on a shovel shown on the main game screen will cause Guybrush to attempt to pick up the shovel. Like most adventure game characters, Guybrush has no physical limit on what he can keep on his person. He will claim not to be able to pick up things that are too large or too heavy, like buildings, furniture or even a bowling ball, but at one point in the game, he picks up the large figurehead of a sunken ship. There is therefore a strong suspension of disbelief in which interactions are available to Guybrush, with an implicit understanding that whether something is forbidden or allowed depends far less on the story's intrinsic coherence than on the player's effective enjoyment of story and gameplay.

Guybrush wanders through beautiful areas, first hand-painted then scanned, that depict mysterious locations typical of the great pirate stories: desert Caribbean islands, mysterious swamps, a terrifying fortress somehow set in a perpetual lightning storm. There was originally no voice characterization. Most of the soundtrack, in addition to simple but effective sound effects, was the music. *Monkey Island's* music style was strongly influenced by reggae, to fit its Caribbean theme and locations. Furthermore, the lead game designer, Ron

Gilbert, thought that the overall experience would be more immersive if the music adapted itself to the player's actions. An original music system called "iMuse" was therefore developed, that allowed just that. Transitions, music styles and some background musical movements seamlessly adapt precisely to the action, no matter when the player chooses to make things happen.

The dialog is concise, precise and extremely witty. In fact, high quality of writing was a staple of Gilbert's games and the studio he worked for, LucasArts, in general. Some lines are often quoted by fans, myself included. The wit of the dialog is not gratuitous: some of Guybrush's actions that might generally be viewed as so unethical as to make the character too unsympathetic are somehow compensated for by Guybrush's funny and astute comments. For example, Guybrush, at one point, has to resurrect a man for purely selfish reasons. When the newly resurrected character asks if he's dead, possible answers include telling him he's "cold as leftover pork chops," "stiff as a frozen footlong," "green as year-old pickle relish" or "crusty as a stale bun." This type of dialog often causes the player to wonder how Guybrush will comment and react to whatever happens next and strongly contributes to immerse the player in the world of *Monkey Island* by permanently keeping expectations high and thus stimulate agency, without the need to reward the player with abstract self-contained metrics such as points or achievements.

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney is also an adventure game. Similarly to *Monkey Island 2*, the main objective of the game is not to defeat enemies in physical combat or score points by solving geometric puzzles: it is to further a narrative plot by controlling the main character's actions within a preset narrative context.

In *Phoenix Wright*, the player character is a lawyer. Unlike *Monkey Island*, the interface changes slightly based on context: if the main character, the titular Phoenix, is in court, there will be one interface, if he's out investigating his case, there will be another. During the investigation, there is a point of view that is very similar to first person, but not quite the same: it is more static and more abstract than a real first person point of view.

There are four possible actions in this mode: the first two are move to another location and look at an item on the screen; plus, if there is another character on screen, it is possible to show them an item or to talk to them. Like Guybrush in *Monkey Island*, Phoenix seems to have an infinite capacity for his inventory. However, Phoenix's inventory is referred in-game as the "court record" and it is never made clear if the objects in the court record are actual, physical items or records that such items exist. In some cases it's clearly one, in others it's clearly the other, but most of the time, it's left ambiguous.

Characters are all depicted in medium-shots, with very simple and very expressive animations. A character's animation follows their mood and state of mind. They will have an animation for happiness, one for anger, and so forth, and these animations quickly change from one to the other within each piece of dialog. Furthermore, all characters have habits and ticks; such ticks can be a visible compulsion to scratch themselves, a nagging tendency to glance at their watch or clapping their hands in joy. All of these animations are highly effective at giving life and personalities to the characters without relying too much on naturalism to do so. Their exaggerated nature helps make sure that the overall tone of the game, which is about solving murders, remains light and fun.

Similarly to the characters' animations, the game has a finite set of music pieces, less linked to locations, like *Monkey Island's*, and more to moods. There is a piece of music for friendly location, like Phoenix's office, as well as music for tense location, like the murder scenes, and so forth. The repetition the player feels when they hear the same music for different locales is not unpleasant: once the meaning of a music piece has been learned, the player becomes accustomed to recognizing the mood when it occurs.

The game was originally released for the Game Boy Advance and fared rather poorly on that platform. It was localized to English, but that did not help sales much. Eventually, it was re-released with an updated interface for the Nintendo DS, with an extra chapter made specifically for this release, and sales exceeded all expectations. That means that *Phoenix*, contrary to

what one ought to expect, became successful as an obsolete release: the game hardly took advantage of the DS's resolution, of its 3D abilities or of its faster processor. It did make extensive use of the touchscreen, however, and that may have been part of its success, but the game was in no way a technological marvel.

The game opens as a trial is about to start, almost *in medias res*. From the start, it is established that the legal system of the game bares hardly any resemblance to any kind of real-life judicial court. Phoenix seems to get all of the legal training he needs in a few whispers from his employer, Mia Fey, while he's already in court. His first opponent, for the first chapter, is a clumsy prosecutor who's easy to defeat. There are few witnesses, and each one has a gap in their testimony. The player has to point out the inconsistencies in the evidence presented to them in order to make the story continue. All the witnesses are for the prosecution. There is no concept of legal discovery: witnesses are called at the whim of each side, and the evidence is gathered as the story goes. Objects mentioned in trial become part of the court record, sometimes as physical entities, sometimes as abstractions, just like everything in Phoenix's inventory.

In trial mode, the witnesses' testimonies are broken down in small pieces; each piece is shown in its own dialog screen. The player, through Wright, can either "press" the witness or present evidence. These two actions are accompanied by the two staple lines of the game, "Hold it!" and "Objection!" respectively. Pressing is usually free of negative consequence. Apart from the potentially wasted playtime, there is no downside in pressing a witness who has nothing more to say about a specific point. Presenting irrelevant evidence, however, will cost Phoenix credibility with the judge. He has credibility points, similarly to how a character would have health points in a fighting game, and when their count reaches zero, the game is over. Technically, the stakes are very small: it is easy to circumvent this limitation by carefully saving the game often, but, emotionally, is very effective in giving a feeling of consequence and is key to providing great agency. When Phoenix is about to present evidence, his remaining points, represented by question marks in the first game and by a meter gauge in the sequels, show the player how many

times Wright can upset the judge before losing the trial and being sent back to the last saved game.

The way the characters are animated, with their overly-expressive ticks and detailed idiosyncrasies, combined with the way the dialog is constructed as witty, personal and expressive, give the person on trial a very effective sense of pathos. I have actually turned off my console because I could not bear to hear the judge condemn a character I had grown attached to. A guilty verdict is represented by jail doors closing on the screen and a verdict of not guilty by confetti dropping in the courthouse and huge cheer from the crowd watching the trial. It is not explained why a court system that seems to greatly favor the prosecution would keep confetti specifically for verdicts of not guilty, but that is part of the very large chunk of suspension of disbelief required to enjoy the game.

The detail put into giving life and pathos to character can slow down the action a bit. I don't know of any research on the topic, but by my observation, the large amount of text is far less likely to upset a casual player, who will be charmed by the characters, dialogs and animations, than a core player who will become frustrated by the lack of interaction for the first few dozen minutes of gameplay. The difficulty curve is extremely progressive. The first cases are rather obvious whereas the last one, the one that was added for the Nintendo DS re-release, is much harder and less forgiving of mistakes.

From one game to the next: the direction of progress

Now, let's take more of a side-by-side look at how these two games relate, first from an aesthetics point of view, then from a gameplay and narration perspective.

Monkey Island 2 and *Phoenix Wright* look very different from one another, but not quite as different as one might expect. The former was released in the early nineties, but even though the latter is made of technology that's several generations more recent, it was designed for handheld devices with low graphical capabilities and low resolution. *Monkey* has very Western graphics and *Phoenix* very Japanese ones, the most obvious

instance of that is how the characters are drawn in the “manga” style, . In the English-language localization of *Phoenix*, the location of the game is never explicitly mentioned, but there are many hints that it is Los Angeles, California. The game and its sequels nevertheless feature many characters in traditional Japanese costumes, such as kimonos, and a few signs in Japanese. This adds to the charming absurdity of the game, rather than cause any damage to the experience. Similarly, in *Monkey Island 2*, Guybrush finds a telephone in the middle of the Caribbean jungle where he can call the game publisher's helpline for a useless hint.

And here, *Monkey* and *Phoenix* are both remarkable in their ability to accomplish something similar and difficult: balance absurdity, humor and pathos in such a way that the player is immersed, is driven to carry the story forward, and disregards the more absurd elements of gameplay as being part of the intentional absurdity of the game. In neither game does the absurdity diminish the stakes. And yet, neither game keeps any score of any kind. That said, the recent re-release of *Monkey Island 2: Special Edition* does, in fact, grade the player. That addition to the game, rather than add to the effective agency of the original, actually points out the way keeping score goes against the essential nature of what a game like *Monkey Island* is about. One of the criteria in the grading system is the time taken to complete each part of the game. But that criterion does not measure a skill that is important for the gameplay. True, for a first-time player, fast completion shows great skill in figuring out the puzzles. But it also shows a sad lack of curiosity in exploring the world of *Monkey Island 2*, its quirky characters, its beautiful locations and its clever mechanics. In a game like chess, for example, rewarding a player for playing quickly makes sense, but for a narrative and exploration-driven multimedia experience like *Monkey Island 2*, that sort of incentive is not unlike rewarding the players for playing as little of the game as possible. It is similar to reading a good book quickly by skipping pages, or even for just reading as fast as possible. While fast reading does require skills, these are not the skills that are truly relevant to the reading experience, they make reading an *obstacle* to content. It is

similarly counterproductive to create a mood where the actual gameplay is an obstacle as well.

Monkey and *Phoenix Wright* take a daring approach in the way they choose to drive the player to continue through the game. *Extra Credits*, a webcast about video game design, made a presentation about the “Skinner Box” in one of its early episodes(ii). In it, James Portnow and Daniel Floyd explain how a cleverly constructed points system can encourage people to play games “well past the point where it [is] fun,” thanks to an elaborate system of in-game rewards and achievements. They go on to present their point of view that such systems are often the result of lazy design and a cheap way of artificially summoning agency. They present alternatives to those techniques as better ways to keep the player engaged. The first one is mystery. Both *Monkey Island* and *Phoenix Wright* use mystery at the core, not only of their stories, but to some extent their gameplay. In *Phoenix*, the very existence of a cross-examination system taking up half of the game is to find out which people are lying, what their personal agenda is, how it fits in the greater scheme of the story and, in the end, who the real murderer is, and how that truth can be proven. In *Monkey*, the way Guybrush goes to explore several locations early on in the game, and how the world he has access to is divided into three islands, along with the fact that his explicit goal is to find a hidden treasure, all of those elements are carefully placed to drive the player to explore, to try things, to take chances. In the *Monkey Island* games, like in all Lucasfilm-produced adventure games of that era, death and dead-ends were impossible. The player could try the most ridiculous, daring, dangerous action, and the only downside would be to miss a funny situation or dialog.

For example, at one point in the game, Guybrush is reunited with his love interest, Elaine Marley. He is supposed to attempt to seduce her, but, even though he still loves her, he's mostly seducing her because he needs something from her. That attempt will always fail. The player should be aware early on that the attempt cannot be successful because allowing the player to seduce Elaine would remove an essential element of conflict from the plot and a large part of the quest from the gameplay. The

player can choose what Guybrush will tell Elaine. If the player wants to skip that dialog, they can simply insult her and she will walk away triggering the action necessary for the game to continue. But the player can also choose to play along with attempt to seduce Elaine, in which case a funny pseudo-melodramatic love scene will occur. Elaine's sharp answers to Guybrush's self-serving sweet words are charming and help the player genuinely care about her.

The final result is the same: Elaine will trigger an event that will make the story go forward. The rest of the story and dialog will not be affected, as far as the way they are displayed on the screen. But the identity of the characters will be somehow different: rather than change the content of what follows, how this dialog is played changes the context. If Guybrush makes a sincere attempt to seduce Elaine, he will be an egocentric, but overall well-meaning and caring would-be lover, and his main obstacle in seducing her will have been clumsiness and unfortunate circumstances. If he deliberately insults Elaine, he is a jerk and deserves all the abuse he gets from her. And he gets a lot. Elaine's attitude can play either as her taking a well-deserved revenge on him, or as fate itself torturing Guybrush through Elaine, as a tragicomic hero. Both work; both are enjoyable; both have a meaning that resonates with an engaged player. And, more importantly, given the way they are presented, the player is likely to self-select the point of the view that they will respond to the most. So the difference is absolutely minimal in terms of gameplay as well as on-screen narration, but important in how the story that is presented to the player will affect them and their understanding of the game.

Linearity is an issue worth mentioning for both *Monkey Island* and *Phoenix Wright*. Neither game offers multiple endings. That is, unless one counts the "game over" screens of *Phoenix*, which are presented as verdicts of "guilty"; but they are not canon to the story. When the concept of interactive fiction comes up, people often associate it with stories where the player chooses or affects the outcome. But the two examples described here, both of them popular and critical successes in adventure gaming or

interactive fiction, have single endings. What, then, is the point of the interaction?

When telling a story verbally, a good storyteller will often try and exhort guesses from their audience. They will seek to be interrupted only to challenge the audience's assumptions. The character of Sophia in *The Golden Girls* does this often. "Sicily, 1932," she will say. "Three men are leaning over a camel." Then Dorothy will interrupt with, "A camel, Ma?" "It was cigarette!" Sophia will answer. This is funny to watch in a sitcom but it is even more enjoyable when it occurs in real life. Because one has the ability to interrupt the storyteller, a storyteller who refuses to be interrupted does not exploit his or her medium fully.

Adventure gaming and interactive fiction are very similar. One *could* read or watch the adventures of Guybrush Threepwood or Phoenix Wright, but the mysteries and clues are organized in such a way that having to find out what to do next, even if it is fairly linear, gives the player an absolutely thrilling and utterly enjoyable "a-ha!" moment when they figure something out. It is very similar to when a skillful story teller pauses to say something like, "And guess what she found inside...!" with just enough buildup so that it takes a couple of tries, some of which provide intermediary hints, and then the final answer is not only surprising but comes to the audience's minds seconds before they are actually told.

Bad adventure-telling, bad interactive fiction, is about giving the player a wide array of meaningless choices. They have a choice, but these choices don't mean much. Choice is not enjoyable unless it carries both emotional meaning and stakes rather than actual practical consequence. In good interactive fiction, the choices given may not fork the story at all, but the player has to be constantly guessing to figure out what to do next, feel engaged and immersed, be motivated by curiosity and engagement to want to guide their character just a bit further to the next point in the story.

We are far away from the issues of how accurate a 3D shader is, or about which weapon is best to shoot which enemy. After all these explanations, it should make sense as to why narrative-based games could not keep up with genres that could

be promoted through technical advances. A faster GPU won't help in making a player character's love interest have a more endearing personality.

Legacy

Monkey Island takes place over many locations and could originally only be played on a fixed computer. In *Phoenix*, by contrast, there are very few locations that can be visited by the player within the course of each case, relatively few characters and even less interaction. During the investigation phases, the elements of dialog that Phoenix needs to hear in order for the action to progress, and the physical clues he must find can be discovered in a somewhat variable order. Nevertheless, the player is much more guided than in *Monkey Island*. The setting is more familiar, a contemporary big city with male characters who wear ties and suits. The trial phases of *Phoenix* are extremely linear. Sometimes, the player will figure out elements of the story well before Phoenix does and will find what appears to be proof in Phoenix's court record. If the story requires that piece of evidence to be used later in the game, any attempt to do so earlier will be penalized, no matter how much it would make sense to a human observer of the game being played. And the fact that presenting the wrong evidence will lead to apparent harmful consequences adds great weight to those choices in the player's mind.

But such linearity, even though it can feel constrictive and frustrated to a well-seasoned core player, is comforting and snug for a casual player. They know they are not wandering too far at random on the wrong path. The game would not let them. *Monkey*, with its lack of death and dead ends, provides the same guarantees, but to a casual player, such guarantees are not apparent. When one is stuck in *Monkey Island*, one wonders if a bug has not allowed one to wander somewhere without an object they need to progress from there on, no matter how often we are told that such a situation is impossible. In *Phoenix*, the way progress is always available to the player is much more visible and more immediately apparent. This lowers the level of entry to the game greatly.

And this is really the sort of design choice that makes a game like *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, a rightful descendent of *Monkey Island* and games of that era despite their superficial differences. Rather than add complexity, which is how a naïve observer might assume they would have progressed, or multiply the number of possible endings, the creators of *Phoenix Wright* helped the player feel more guided and safer in making choices by going out of their way to lower the barrier of entry to the game. They keep the player engaged and motivated with a story that is filled with suspense, pathos and that allows just the right amount of suspension of disbelief. It is true that the amount of suspension of disbelief that *Phoenix Wright* relies on is very high, but it is never gratuitous. Absurdity in *Phoenix Wright*, or for that matter in *Monkey Island*, is never raised to such a level where the player ends up feeling a disconnect with the game and loses engagement. Some of the following installments in the *Monkey Island* franchise did just that, so did a number of other unrelated adventure games. *Monkey Island* and *Phoenix Wright* deserve praise for not going too far in that direction.

And so, *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* and *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* are two exemplary instances of how fiction can be interactive and what to aim for if one were to attempt to build a similar work. They rely on deep, meaningful, engaging stories, situations and characters, without keeping a tone that is so serious that it feels pretentious. They make the player's interactions *feel* meaningful, no matter whether they, in fact, have practical consequences or not.

The way *Phoenix Wright's* relatively large popularity coincided with the design decision to make the game simpler and more restrictive rather than more complex is to me one of many clear indicators that adventure games have become a genre that should be directed primarily towards casual gamers. And yet, it still carries its legacy identity of being a core gamer's genre. Trying to sell adventure games to those who identify as gamers has failed since about the year 2000, mostly because the demographic that is actually likely to enjoy adventure games, casual players, does not really identify as gamers at all.

Casual gamers tend not to care about pixel shaders, 3D sound or fragging in multiplayer. They would probably care more about plot lines being deep and yet flexible, about motivations being complex yet believable, about the world they'd visit being intriguing and yet reassuring. One would feel comfortable escaping to, and both *Monkey* and *Phoenix* provide such escapism.

The recent success of Tim Schafer's Double Fine Adventure Kickstarter pledge drive has given new life to the debate on whether adventure games could be rescued. And this is where my choice of taking *Monkey Island 2* and the first *Phoenix Wright* games as case studies can be seen as slightly hypocritical. One is over twenty years old, the other is over ten years old. It's worth looking at what has happened since then.

There are much more recent games that have tried to sell themselves as recent successors of adventure games. One is the *Uncharted* series and another would be *L.A. Noire*. The *Uncharted* series ties complex, well-structured and often well-acted story to games that focus not only on action but also on exploration and mystery. *L.A. Noire* skillfully mixes elements of action games and driving games with detective stories and an investigation system rather reminiscent of the *Phoenix Wright* series. Are these the descendants of adventure games?

The answer to this question is subjective in nature and it would not be fair to present it as anything more than an opinion, although hopefully a well-educated one. I, for one, would argue that they are not essentially adventure games and for many reasons. *Uncharted* puts a strong focus on fighting and shooting. I was lucky enough to meet Neil Druckmann, one of the main designers for *Uncharted*. He told me that an aspect of the game that set *Uncharted* apart from other action games was that they always provided strong, meaningful context to the action sequences. So, in *Uncharted*, the adventure element is the context to the main aspect of gameplay which is more action-oriented. A similar argument could be made for *L.A. Noire*: yes, there is a heavy focus on story and investigation in it, but in the end, the game keeps score. The game is far more about winning than it is about exploring. While *L.A. Noire* may be an

excellent game in its genre, it is not, essentially an adventure game, or a game *based* on narration.

The Myth of the Universal Game Is Over

Until about ten or fifteen years ago, games were just games, they were for a small, very specialized market of children, teenagers and hard-core hobbyists. Even if that was not the case, such was the perception. Later, the game-playing demographic got split into core gamers and casual players. Perception took some time to catch up to that. Now, there is a third, more subtle category to take in consideration, still outside of most people's perception: niche games. The upcoming project from Double Fine fits in that category. The game that made that class of game popular was the 2009 game *Braid*. It was too technically simple to be a core game, far too complex in gameplay to be a casual game, and overall far too commercially successful to be ignored. Since then, more and more games have come to fit into that category. Narrative-based games may turn out to mostly fit there and to have retroactively fit there before it even was an explicitly established category.

In the very long term, I think that adventure games may be fated to become games for casual players, but in the meantime, their place really does belong among the niche game category. During the eighties, what made a great adventure was content. The fact that Infocom managed to gain huge respect by making text games is an example of how it was really about the story. In the nineties, the time of *Monkey Island 2*, technology had begun to be part of the appeal, and in the 2000s it had taken main stage. A low-tech adventure like *Phoenix Wright* being so successful in the West was an aberration, an exception to the rules. But now, a few years after *Braid*, time has mitigated the conflict between tech and tale. There are now more and more cases where the tech is no longer that important. Casual games are the most obvious example of this.

In niche games, technology is important but in a different way. It's layered deep beneath aesthetics, story and gameplay. Games with a strong focus on quality dialog, experimental story

and narrative-based gameplay will need, at least at first to fit into that category. It is the category that fills the gap mentioned at the beginning of this essay between what people want and what they are offered, the gap that explains why people are willing to give millions of dollars to Tim Schafer for a project that no publisher would agree to get near.

No matter what unfolds, narrative-based games in general and adventure games in particular look they have a future after all. Time will tell what it's made of.

Endnotes

(ⁱ) Romance novels statistics from the Romance Writers of America Website <http://www.rwa.org/cs/the_romance_genre/romance_literature_statistics> retrieved April 9, 2012

(ⁱⁱ) Extra Credits: The Skinner Box <<http://penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/the-skinner-box>>, accessed Wednesday, November 2, 2011, by James Portnow, Daniel Floyd and Alison Theus.