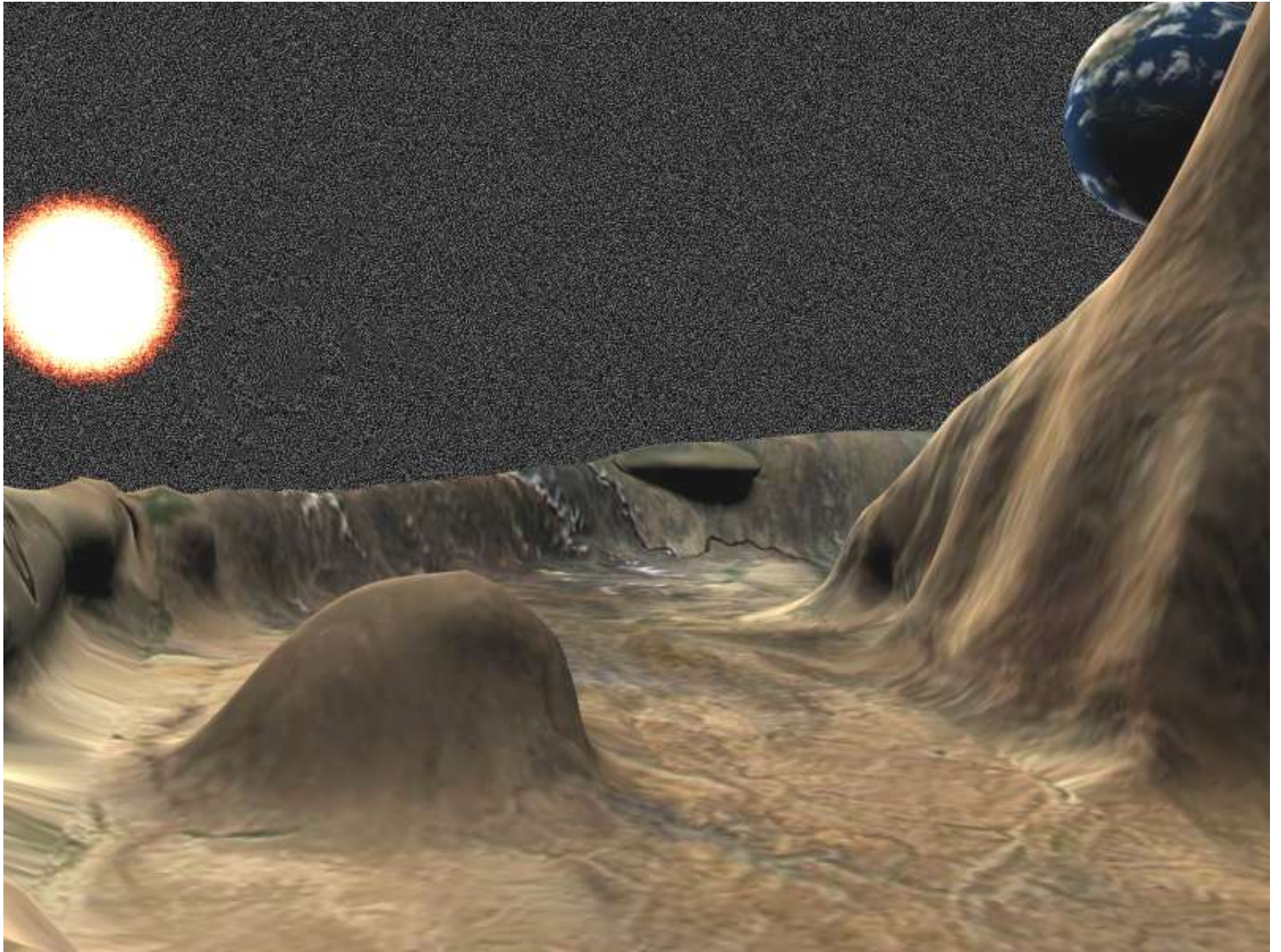


TELLING A BETTER STORY

How computers and video games have enhanced our ability to spin a good tale.



A new story by Dale Broadbent, Fall 2004, ARS 257

Lunar landscape

Cover image rendered by Dale Broadbent for GC 496N Fall 2004

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The endless dark surrounded him, broken only by the beam of his flashlight. A tremor ran through the darkened base adding to the feel of urgency created by red emergency lights, sparking wall panels, and the distant wailing siren. Another tremor jolted him just as his headset suddenly activated, filling his ears with the shrieks of men dying in close-quarters combat against superior forces.

“Code red!”

“They’re coming through the portal!! Oh God! Help me! Aaaaaa!!”

“Attention all personnel: We are under attack by an unknown enemy. Fall back to Marine HQ and await further orders.”

Movement fading in and out of the shadows caught his eye: his hand whipped the flashlight left to illuminate the zombie shuffling in his direction. His headset had covered up the sound of its moaning. Stowing his flashlight on his belt and leveling the shotgun plunged the scene into darkness again, but he had his sights and fired where the zombie had just been. “Ungh ungh!” told him his shots were finding their target, and on the second shot, the zombie collapsed a mere two feet in front of him – they moved deceptively fast! Silence returned for the moment. He jogged across the room to its only exit, feeling pursued.

The reactor core he had just left was littered with the bodies of hellspawn – Imps and cacodemons, several zombified maintenance workers, and one Hellknight. The Hellknight was ten feet tall and moved like a viper. The gash in his left arm was evidence of its deadliness. Adrenaline pumping, he peered into the gloom through the door – nothing moved in the next room so he reloaded his shot gun and cautiously took two steps into the room. Too late, he noticed two burning eyeballs peering at him from the dark just to the right of the doorway. The fireball exploding into him knocked him through the door onto his back. Blood turned his vision red.

“Agh!” Derek exclaimed, his heart racing. On the monitor in front of him, he maneuvered the marine to get up and aim at the demon which crouched in the doorway at the beginning of a powerful forward leap. The first blast caught it at the start of its leaping attack and the second blast brought it down in a crumpled heap. Derek pushed away from his computer and looked around the room for a minute. This old ID Software computer game from 2004 was sure managing to keep him on edge, despite its age. He wondered what would happen to this space marine.

Derek was a newcomer to the moon base *New Los Angeles*¹, having just moved there a few months ago in 2105. When the Chicago bureau had announced an opportunity to come and write about life on a moon base, he had jumped at the chance. But the recurring earthquakes and unreliable power had put him on edge. So this evening he just planned on a nice quiet night at home, maybe

¹ Near the end of the twenty-first century, New Beijing was established as the first moon base. New Los Angeles soon followed, located in a crater two kilometers away and linked by rail. The third one was currently being built by a consortium of European countries just over the next ridge.

reading a book and playing a computer game. He loved computer games – sometimes, he thought, more than books – and enjoyed keeping up with the newest ones as well as experiencing the stories of the old ones. At 29, he wasn't old enough to remember when computers first began to come into their own as an alternative to the main forms of entertainment, but his dad had told him all about it. Being a computer game programmer, his dad knew a lot about the evolution of computer games.

He could still hear his dad's voice telling him about it. In the late 1980s, video games had been played mainly by children. Their storylines were usually developed after the game was complete, and were normally a paragraph or two in length. "By 1999, when your grandfather was around 20," he had said, "videogames had gone from being 'toys' to being the favorite pastime of tens of thousands of young adults worldwide. That year, Americans nominated videogames as their favorite form of entertainment for the third year in a row. The year after that," he continued, "the average age of American videogame players was about twenty-eight; of them all, forty-two percent of computer game players and twenty-one percent of console game players were at least thirty-six years old."²

Light coming in through his window brought him out of his reverie and told him the sun was up again. The heat of the sun baked the portions of the moon exposed to it and caused recurring earthquakes. For some reason, they seemed to be getting worse. The sunbeam seemed to point to his prized collection of books. One of them, "Trigger Happy," circa 2002, had introduced him to *Final Fantasy*^{2a}. The long series of games had played a major role in increasing the role of the storyline in computer games over the last century.

Final Fantasy VII³ in particular was regarded as one of the best. While its graphics were quite poor, its storyline was amazing – one of war, romance, vengeance, and environmentalism. In one of the more memorable scenes, Cloud Strife, the hero, had finally found his girlfriend Aeris, for whom he



Figure 1: Cloud and Aeris

had been searching. But at the moment of her discovery, an unseen force took over Cloud's mind and forced him to assault her. Visibly fighting the alien influence, Cloud lowered his sword to his side. But just as it seemed he had won the fight and rescued Aeris, Sephiroth, Cloud's nemesis, dived down from the sky and drove his sword through her back. The sword came out of her chest and her body slumped against the blade. Sephiroth launched back into the air leaving Cloud to gather Aeris up in his arms. He

² Poole, 6

^{2a} *Final Fantasy* is a franchise created by Square Co., Ltd. The first iteration, for the Nintendo Entertainment System, appeared in 1990.

³ *Final Fantasy VII*, Square Co., Ltd., 1997

carried her to a nearby lake and gently settled her body on the water's surface. The scene panned around and zoomed in to show Cloud lowering his arms and allowing her body to sink into the depths (fig. 1). Her theme song played mournfully in the background.

Five years later, in *Final Fantasy X*⁴, the creators of the game made the main character, Tidus, into a playful, daring hero who was easy to like. But in the end, he dies leaving his girlfriend Yuna behind. A touching scene shows him post-death as a ghost, embracing Yuna and then running to leap into the air and fade away into the mist (fig. 2). The Japanese soloist, Rikki, croons *Suteki Da Ne* (Isn't It Beautiful)⁵ in the background:

*My heart was swimming
In words gathered by the wind
My voice bounded
Into a cloud-carried tomorrow
My heart trembled
In the moon-swayed mirror
Soft tears
Spilled with a stream of stars
Isn't it beautiful?
If we could walk, hand in hand,
I'd want to go
To your town, your home, in
your arms...
My dream of your face
That I softly touch
Melts in the morning*



Figure 2: Tidus and Yuna embrace in *Final Fantasy X*

Derek smacked himself on the forehead – Terra was coming over for dinner! They had met last month at the base library where she worked. She loved books just like he did and that commonality brought them together. He hurried to the kitchen and began making the meal they'd soon share. Twenty minutes later, the food was cooking and he was straightening up a bit when she arrived. “The food's just about done,” Derek said with a smile as she entered. “Come have a seat while I set the table.” During dinner, they caught up with each other and eventually, as always, their conversation drifted to books and stories.

“I found a classic book in the Universal Library⁶,” Terra said.

“Oh?” Derek said.

“Yeah, *2001 – A Space Odyssey* by Arthur C. Clarke⁷. Very good book. But I wish I could find it in book form.”

4 *Final Fantasy X*, Square Co., Ltd. 2001

5 Nobuo Uematsu and Shiro Hamaguchi, *Suteki da ne* (Isn't It Beautiful?), July 2001 Square Sounds Co., Ltd.

6 In 2065, the major libraries of the world collaborated to form the Universal Library whose mission was to complete the digitization of all public writings and histories throughout the world. An unforeseen benefit of their actions was the world-wide increase in literacy levels, which in turn led to a dramatic increase in technological advances and the colonization of the moon.

7 1965. He also wrote *2010*, *2061*, and *3001 (The Final Odyssey)*

“Yeah there’s nothing like being able to lay on the couch and read a book,” Derek remarked. “I mean, you can’t do that very well with a digitized version. Plus, I just miss the smell and the texture of the paper.”

“Yeah,” Terra replied, “I agree. And you know I love books, but digitized books don’t warp, fade, tear, or deteriorate like real books. But if the power goes out, you can’t pass the time reading them by candlelight. So what’s your favorite book?”

Derek proudly pointed to the bookcase which sagged under the weight of his set of the 12 *Wheel of Time*⁸ books by Robert Jordan, finished in the early twenty-first century. “They’re about a young man who was fated to destroy the world in order to save it.”

“Sounds like a great story! For me, I’d have to go with J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*.”

“Yeah, I love those books too.” Derek said. But I like Jordan’s books more – they are just as good as Tolkien’s, just longer. But you know what makes for a better story?” Terra shook her head. “Computer games.” Terra looked skeptical.

“Well, they didn’t start out as great story telling devices. You wouldn’t believe how primitive early computer games were.” He enthused. He snatched a scrap of paper from the coffee table and drew two rectangles parallel to each other with a small square in the middle. “At first, all they could do with computers was play things like tennis,”⁹ he explained. “The square represents the tennis ball, and the two rectangles - tennis racquets - slide left and right. They also had various interactive puzzle games, one of the most popular of which was solitaire.”

“I assume they got better,” Terra prompted him.

“Sure they did,” Derek replied. “In fact, in 1985, a Japanese company called Nintendo made history with their Nintendo Entertainment System¹⁰. Through the genius of Shigeru Miyamoto¹¹, they developed several franchises that were not only amazingly great, they became the company’s bread and butter for over a century.

8 The *Wheel of Time*, book 1 printed January 1990. Book 12 printed November 2009.



9 *Pong*, Released by Atari in 1972 (Poole, 47)

10 Released in 1985, the NES ran on a 1.79 Mhz NMOS 6502 CPU, produced by Ricoh. During its 10 years, a total of nearly 700 16-256KB cartridge-based games were made. It could display a total of 16 out of a possible 256 colors on screen at once.

11 Shigeru Miyamoto (1953-) originally designed toys. But since his first game *Donkey Kong* in 1983, he has directed and produced over fifty games for Nintendo (www.miamotoshrine.com). He is also responsible for bringing video games back to life after the collapse of Atari, and inspiring multiple generations of video games.

Check this out,” he said, launching a program on the computer. A program appeared with a list of games on it. Derek selected *Super Mario Bros.* and the title screen popped up (fig 3a).

“Ugh,” Terra said, “that looks about as bad as Atari.

“You’re right,” Derek replied, “But this was just the beginning.” He took control of Mario and ran the little guy to the right, jumping on goombas and turtles and collecting mushrooms. Then he switched the game to *Mario Sunshine*¹² for the Nintendo Gamecube¹³ (fig 3b).

Well, that looks much better,” Terra quipped.

“And they kept improving,” Derek continued. “One of video game’s most loved character is Link¹⁴. And this,” he said, clicking on a game, “is what he looked like. You see him there, riding his horse through the forest? (fig 3c) But when the world first saw Link in *The Legend of Zelda*, he looked like this (fig 3d).

Nintendo had other aces up its sleeve as well. *Metroid*, *Starfox*, *Pokemon* were all huge breadwinners for Nintendo. But it was the third party games from companies like Square and Enix that really advanced the role of storytelling in video games. Their games would take the average gamer over 40 hours to complete. Along the way, the person would meet literally hundreds of people and have conversations with them. The dialogue alone in the storyline for those games would fill volumes of books.”

“Well, it sounds like they began to get better,” Terra remarked.

“Exactly,” Derek responded. “This was just the *beginning* of interactive stories. Later I’ll show you *Final Fantasy*. Before they could work on better stories, though, they had to overcome certain technological obstacles.” Derek continued. “Remember that last game I showed you? Now look at this,” he said, launching *Doom*¹⁵ (see right). Terra *ahhed*.



Figure 3a-d (top to bottom)



¹² *Super Mario Bros.*, Nintendo, 1985, for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) (also released in 1985).
Super Mario Sunshine, Nintendo, 2002, for the Nintendo Gamecube (NGC) (also released in 2002)

¹³ Nintendo GC, released November 2001, ran on a 485 Mhz IBM Power PC “Gekko” processor and a 162 Mhz graphics processor. During its 5 years, nearly 500 games were made, each manufactured on a proprietary 1.5 GB mini DVD. It could display true color resolution (hundreds of thousands of colors).

¹⁴ *The Legend of Zelda*, Nintendo, 1986, For the NES. *The Legend of Zelda*, Nintendo, 2005, for the NGC

¹⁵ Myers, 104: *Doom: Knee-deep In the Dead*, released by ID Software in 1993

“I’ve heard about this game,” she said. “Heard it was pretty advanced for its time.”

“Yes it was,” Derek said. “It broke new ground in graphics technology and created a revolution in games¹⁶. The game was played from a relentlessly first-person perspective which would serve to increase physical tension in the player and add greatly to the level of immersion he experienced. Face-to-face confrontations with frightening monsters were constant, and as the game progressed, the monsters became more and more deadly and ferocious. The mortality of the player in these games was quite high, and the typical game player would constantly save his game, die, and start from his last save. This save, die, and reload process could occur literally dozens of times in a single game level. Over time, the tension and stress incurred during successive play sessions built up in most player’s bodies and led to repetitive stress disorders in their fingers, hands, and forearms. But they’d come back to it over and over again due to this type of game’s *signification of opposition within a visceral sensorium*.”¹⁷

“It’s what?” Terra laughed

“It’s visceral sensorium,” Derek replied, smiling. It’s just something I read in a book that talked about this kind of game and the effects it has on players. I think the author was trying to say that the game has certain aspects that make the player come back over and over again, one of them being the achieving of victory, which brings on a sense of pleasure and accomplishment. You can’t get that from a book. At best, a reader could identify with the victories of the story’s characters. But participation in that victory was found at best in one’s imagination.”

“Anyways, nearly 12 years later, the same company that made *Doom* remade this game¹⁸. The story, originally contained on a single page of the instruction manual, was fleshed out by a well-known horror story writer¹⁹ and probably filled a full-length novel or two. And the graphics underwent a huge overhaul as well. It was scarier than any horror movie or book created at that time. As the storyline goes, in 2145, humans were toying with alien teleportation technology they’d found at the first human base on Mars. When they fired up the teleporter, can you guess where its destination was?” Terra shook her head. “Hell.” Terra’s eyes widened in surprise. “The base was overrun by demons and everyone was killed. Your job is to infiltrate the base and destroy the portal. Here, check this out...” Derek clicked on *Doom 3* and entered into a previously-played area of the game. On the screen, a hellish image loads: he is on a tiny island in a sea of flames. “You teleport from that Mars base I was just telling you about to here.”

On the screen, the marine turned around and picked up a shot gun from the ground. Looking up, he spotted the teleporter. “Position plane lost” the display read.

16 Myers, 104, *Doom* represented “a peak in the development of the 3D shooter.”

17 Myers, 109

18 *Doom 3*, released by ID Software in 2004 was a pure retelling (and embellishment) of the original game

19 Matthew J. Costello is the author or coauthor of fourteen novels and numerous nonfiction works. He scripted the bestselling CD-ROM interactive dramas *The 7th Guest* and *The 11th Hour* (1995).

“Welcome to my domain,” a loud voice boomed out of the air. Terra jumped. “Behold the shape of things to come. The time has come for the forces of hell to escape their prison and drive mankind into darkness...I am everywhere and you will NEVER find that which you seek!!”²⁰

“How awful,” Terra breathed. Derek starts down the narrow strip of land toward the castle, flames leaping twelve meters into the air just to his right, but Terra said “I’m scared. Are you going much further?”

“Not much,” Derek replied. “Just far enough to show you one more thing.” On the screen, the marine walks



The Fiery Island on which the teleporter sits. “Position plane lost” is the second line from the bottom of the screen.

down the narrow strip between walls of flames and comes to some enormous gates. Next to the entrance on the ground, human tools lie (fig 4).

“Wait a minute,” Terra said. “You mean there are people in there?”

“Yes,” Derek replied. “They had been sending scout teams through the teleporter after its initial opening as soon as they could organize them. But the scout teams didn’t survive long down there. Of those that managed to return through the portal, most suffered from paranoid dementia within days of their return and quickly died.”

On the screen, the marine spots a PDA on the ground and picks it up. Looking at the screen, he taps a button labeled “audio log” and a voice speaks.

This is the audio log of research specialist Simon Garlick dated August 8, 2145. It seems that I have misplaced the rest of the science team. I don’t know how it happened. This place... Well, I don’t know what this place has done with them. One moment there I’m taking samples and the next thing I know I, I, I turn around and everyone’s gone. There one second, turn around, and they’re gone. I can’t raise anyone on the com links and the only signs of the team I can find are tools and other personal effects that seem to have been left behind – almost as if they had stopped working midway through running experiments. This place does funny things with your eyes and your perception of time.

²⁰ Actual dialogue from the game.

Um, hopefully they just went into the next sector and are waiting for me to catch up. I am going off to find them now. This is Simon Garlick, signing off²⁰.

“Wow,” Terra said. “He got separated. How awful.” There was a second audio log on the PDA. The marine clicked it and Simon’s voice began again, softly this time, as if he feared being heard.

This is the audio log of research specialist Simon Garlick dated August 10, 2145. It’s been two days since I’ve seen any of the team members. I don’t know how I’ve survived this long or how I’ve got away. ... They were just, uh, um, torn apart. Um. Um. They can only be described as ... demons. I have never seen such a big thing move so quickly. Oh dear God what has happened to us? The teeth – that’s the last thing I remember seeing. Teeth. The sounds ... words cannot describe. I’m sure it’s just a matter of time before they find me again. I’m convinced they are toying with me, allowing me to stay two steps ahead of them. I, I can see them in the shadows sometimes. Why do they toy with me? I am not sure how much longer I, I, I, can ... I’m shooting at shadows here. And every moment I feel them creeping closer to me. Oh god. Oh god we should never have -²⁰

“Pretty wicked, huh,” Derek said, and Terra nodded. “Did you notice the way this story has made you feel? You gripped my arm, you were scared. When you heard Simon’s story, you were horrified. These kinds of physical reactions have been documented²¹ and the considerable stress people experience while playing is easy enough to see. The intensity of concentration that people exhibit is much more than what most display while reading a book. You were skeptical when I suggested that computer games make better storytelling devices, but perhaps now you begin to see just how powerful a tool they are.”



Figure 4 Little remains of Simon Garlick except a PDA and some supplies

“As you can see,” Derek said, “video and computer games had a lot on their plates. At first they were mainly concerned with improving the technology games were built on: better graphics, better sound, faster processing power, more data storage capacity. And during this beefing up stage, as I call it, they began to create better stories.” Derek then walked across the room and picked up a book his dad had given him entitled simply “Video Games,” by Arthur Berger, written in the early twenty-first century.

“This book,” he said, “introduced me to a game with a great story – Half Life²². What do you think about this story setting?” he asked, flipping to a page in the book. “*Deep in the bowels of the Black Mesa Federal Research Facility, a decommissioned missile base,*” Derek read, “*a top secret project is underway. A portal has been opened to another dimension, and human science has never seen anything like the world on the other side. You are Gordon Freeman, a young research associate in the Anomalous Materials Laboratory. You have limited security clearance and no real idea of just how dangerous your job has become, until the morning you are sent alone into the Test Chamber to analyze a strange crystalline specimen.*”²³

“Well, I guess it sounds very interesting. A good start to any story,” Terra replied.

“That’s just it. Computer games, like I’ve said, are perfect for telling stories²⁴, as you’ll see again. Now, let’s look at what it’s like when you can actually see the story...”

Derek loads the game up and the introductory sequence begins. On the screen, a commuter tram runs along a track in what appears to be a cavernous underground series of chambers. A female voice speaks over the intercom: “Good morning, and welcome to the Black Mesa transit system. This automated train is provided for the safety and convenience of the Black Mesa personnel...” She continues her narration for the next 5 minutes as the tram makes its way slowly through rooms holding helicopters, missiles, armed personnel, pits of green radioactive sludge, and black pits over which the tram rail runs.

“When the game came out,” Derek explained, “it was so real and life-like. You’re just a scientist who has been asked to come down and help with routine analysis of a crystalline specimen.”

On the screen, the tram finally arrives and the main character, Gordon, steps out. He is greeted by a security guard who escorts him to a nearby entrance and opens a heavily fortified door. Inside, scientists go about their everyday duties checking computers, monitoring equipment, using the bathroom, eating in the break room, holding conferences, etc. On approach to his destination, one scientist leans toward him and intones in an ominous voice, “They’re waiting for you, Gordon, in the **test** chamber...”

²² *Half Life*, November 1998, Valve Software, L.L.C. Combined with derivative works of *Half Life*, Valve has sold over 10 million retail units. Winner of over 50 “Game of the Year” honors and considered by most in the industry as the best PC game ever made. Storyline written by Marc Laidlaw – 19 pages of dialogue.

²³ Berger, 94

²⁴ Poole, 92: “Storytelling is the second oldest profession. Epic poetry, drama, the novel and the cinema have all become expert in [telling stories]. Why should video games, then, be any different? ... [some video game designers he’s met] see in the unique quality of videogames a potential revolution, a liberation from the shackles of old ‘linear’ storytelling.



Derek guides Gordon to the next room and is let into the test chamber by two scientists. In the middle of the room an enormous machine begins to rotate. While the scientists start up the machine, Derek says “This experiment goes terribly wrong and everyone is killed except you. This is ironic because you are the only one actually *IN* the test chamber where the tear in time and space initially occurs.” On the screen, the machine is emitting a loud whine as it runs and one of the scientists quips, “Um...it’s probably not a problem, but I’m showing a small discrepancy in... well, no, it’s well within acceptable bounds. Sustaining sequence.” Looking away from the monitor, Derek turns a page in the book and continues reading. On screen, the machine’s whine increases and explosions begin raining debris all over the chamber. “...*something goes wrong. Is it sabotage? An accident? Or is it something you did? All you hear is screaming; all you see is space-time shattering. The next thing you know, the entire Black Mesa Facility is a nightmare zone...*”²⁵ On the screen the machine explodes, and huge arcs of electricity fork across the room. Aliens begin to materialize out of the air and Gordon flees into the hallway he had just came from.

“Ultimately,” Derek said, “you have to escape from the facility. But on the way, you discover that the military has come in to contain this debacle and nothing is allowed outside – alive. You end up meeting a mysterious man who employs you to enter the aliens’ world and kill their leader.”

“Well, that sounds like a good story,” Terra said, “but you know you’ve heard similar stories, Derek.”

“True,” Derek replied, “but most people have never *played out* a story like that. Imagine being the one ducking for cover under a rain of gunfire or sprinting across an exposed area while paratroopers rappel down cables from a helicopter overhead. Imagine facing a bull squid or running for your life from a Garg.



On the screen, Gordon approaches an elevator shaft (fig. 5). The glass doors show there is no elevator waiting so he reaches to the button on the wall to call it. From above a loud shriek comes and the elevator hurtles past Gordon's floor. Inside are three scientists, looks of horror on their faces. The elevator slams into the base of the shaft with a crash. Derek maneuvers Gordon through the broken door and jumps onto the ladder fixed to the wall of the shaft.

"Have you ever climbed up the ladder along the inside of an elevator shaft or shut down a nuclear reactor before it melted down? When a player does these types of things, he is actively participating and causing changes in the unfolding drama of the story. No other storytelling medium offers this to its audience." He could see the light dawn in her eyes. She at least understood now what made games such great storytelling devices. "Of course, every player wants the pleasure of doing these things in a virtual environment. But they don't want the difficulty associated with the real task itself, such as fighting in a war or doing acrobatic stunts. They want the game environment real, but not so real they can't play the game."²⁶

"One of the concluding points of this book," Derek said, gesturing with Berger's book, "is that games are interactive, while movies are pure spectatorship. And that makes a huge difference."²⁷ Turning to the last page, he read, "It is impossible to guess where video games will lead us. They have the power to amuse and entertain us, and better than any other medium, to involve us (when we play these games) in their narratives."

"Let me show you what I mean. Move your chair right next to mine here," he said, pointing right next to him at the desk. Terra swiveled her chair next to his, which put her staring into the thirty-inch-wide screen. On the screen, Derek closed out of *Half Life* and launched a new game *Half Life 2*²⁸. As the game was beginning, Derek set the stage for his demonstration: "In this game, you are Dr. Gordon Freeman again, just like in the last one. On the run yet again, you are being passed around from safe house to safe house to try and escape the enemy and your travels have taken you to Ravenholm, a ruined town infested with zombies and headcrabs of the worst sort. I'm going to take you there and I want you to not hide your eyes." Terra looked a bit nervous Derek loaded up a saved point in the game and the town appeared, dingy and dim, at dusk. He was standing on a roof, surrounded by several other buildings. The wind howled and whipped tree branches, window shutters

²⁶ Poole, 63, "...a sense of pleasurable control implies some modicum of separation: ... You don't actually want to be there, performing the dynamically exhausting and physically perilous moves yourself; it would be exhausting and painful. ... You don't want it to be too real. The purpose of a videogame, then, is never to simulate real life, but to offer the gift of play."

²⁷ Berger, 105

²⁸ *Half Life 2* was released some six years after the original game in 2004. Hailed as "the best game ever created" by almost every magazine in print and online, and covered by even the most austere of publications, it was never bettered until the sequel came out in 2015. All 3 of these games greatly advanced storytelling in computer games.

banged against walls, and creaking, moaning, and skittering sounds enhanced the dread²⁹. He moved forward a few steps and suddenly a howling, whooping sound came from the street below. A zombie howling and screaming and flinging its arms around ran down the street at a dead run. He followed it with his eyes as it got to the base of the ramp and started up without slowing in the least, closing the distance to himself with alarming speed. Up, around and over the street - the metal catwalk he was on



shuddered and clanged²⁶ with the zombies frenzied steps. Terra gripped Derek's arm like a vice. Derek quickly fed 5 bullets into the shotgun's barrel. By now the howling of the zombie had risen to a shriek and without the slightest slowing, it flung itself the last 10 feet at him (fig 6), its body arcing through the air, its arms pin wheeling. Derek aimed and fired, but missed his target, and the zombie fell on him in a blinding frenzy of foot-long fingers slashing and clawing. He fired again once, twice, and the zombie crumpled to a heap on the ground with a groan.

“It was like you were really there – you, not some character the game creator made.”

“Yes, that's right!” Derek exclaimed. “You are absolutely right. It was well known back then that if you never showed the player the character he was controlling that he would be drawn into the game even more immersively. It was thought of as allowing players to play themselves in a game.³⁰ Another thing that players really liked was the human component of games. He loaded up another part of the game and on the screen was a scientist and a young woman. They were working in a lab of some sort.(fig 6a, next page)

“This is Alyx and Dr. Kleiner. Alyx is the daughter of one of the scientists you met back in the first game. You spend the last half of the game helping her rescue her captured father.”

²⁹ Poole, 68 “...a videogame player, unlike someone watching a film, needs to use information from the senses to decide what to do next. Any sound can become a clue, a spur to action...Many games...are already quite creative in using sound to enhance the player's involvement.”

³⁰ Sheldon, 44



“She’s pretty cute,” Terra said.

“Well, that’s just the point. Players really identified with her and the other characters of the game. You *wanted* to help her save her father. You *wanted* to keep your fellow resistance fighters alive. You watched affectionately as Dr. Kleiner absentmindedly searched for his pet headcrab. This new kind of human quality drew the player into the game’s story very effectively.” On the screen, Dr. Kleiner looked up from his computer. “Gordon!” he exclaimed. “It is you. It’s so good to see you.”

“I told you he was coming, doctor,” Alex replied with a smile. Turning to you, she looks directly into the screen and addresses you: “Come with me, Gordon. I’ll show you around.” (fig. 6b)

“Wow,” Terra remarks. “It’s like you’ve just met up with some old friends who are so glad to see you.”

“Yep. A meeting of old friends. No one ever tires of those kinds of reunions, even virtual ones. And these kinds of reunions and relationships were huge selling points of a different kind of game called the MMORPG, or massively multiplayer online role-playing games.”

“I can’t show any of them to you because they existed solely online and eventually were replaced by new versions. The companies that created these enormous games put equally enormous manpower into keeping them going. Every 6 months or so, they would release a game expansion pack that would expand the game world and its storyline, giving players new areas to explore and quests to embark on. Players could band together in groups to tackle especially hard goals or just for the fun of being together.³¹ Here, look at this,” Derek said, and got out of his chair to walk across the room and pull a page out of a pile of papers (fig 7, next page). “These games no longer exist online so they can’t be played anymore,” he explained. But they were significant in the evolution of storytelling in games.” He walked back to the computer to access an archived article from the developers of the game when a sudden jolt threw him across the room. Getting up off the floor, he shivered as he realized how close he’d come to hitting his head on the corner of the end table. “Are you okay?” Terra asked. She knelt

next to him and helped him up. “Yeah, I’m fine,” Derek replied. “Just a bit shook up, that’s all.” They walked back to the kitchen to grab some hot chocolate and while he was heating the water, he said,

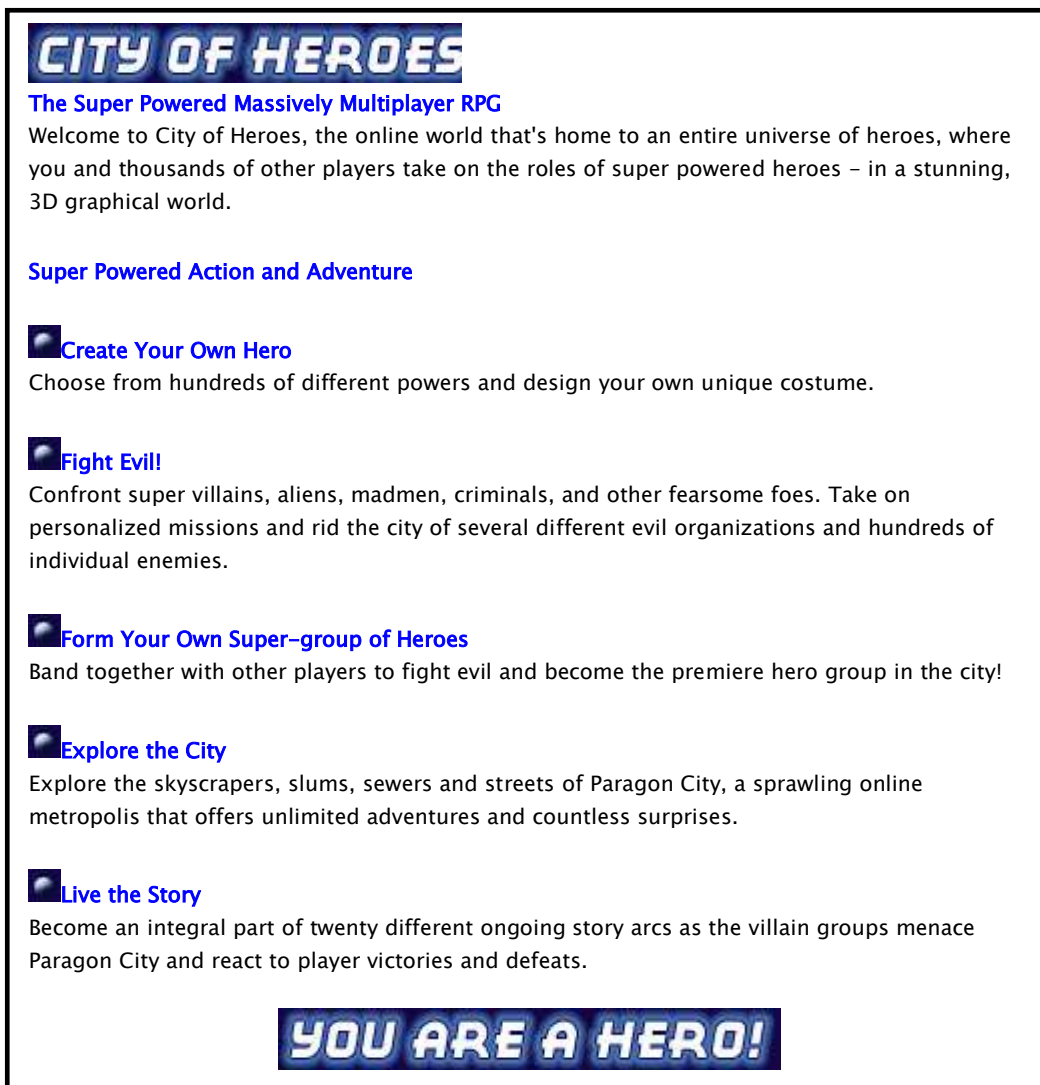
The image is a screenshot of the City of Heroes website. At the top, the title "CITY OF HEROES" is displayed in a stylized, blue, metallic font. Below the title, the text reads "The Super Powered Massively Multiplayer RPG" in blue. The main body of text describes the game as an online world where players take on the roles of super-powered heroes in a 3D graphical world. There are five main sections, each with a small blue square icon containing a white circle: "Create Your Own Hero" (Choose from hundreds of different powers and design your own unique costume.), "Fight Evil!" (Confront super villains, aliens, madmen, criminals, and other fearsome foes. Take on personalized missions and rid the city of several different evil organizations and hundreds of individual enemies.), "Form Your Own Super-group of Heroes" (Band together with other players to fight evil and become the premiere hero group in the city!), "Explore the City" (Explore the skyscrapers, slums, sewers and streets of Paragon City, a sprawling online metropolis that offers unlimited adventures and countless surprises.), and "Live the Story" (Become an integral part of twenty different ongoing story arcs as the villain groups menace Paragon City and react to player victories and defeats.). At the bottom of the page, the phrase "YOU ARE A HERO!" is written in a large, blue, metallic font.

Figure 7

“what I was going to tell you is that inside these games, dozens of storylines were occurring simultaneously and being played out by tens of thousands of real people across the world twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Brand new players have a Contact assigned to them to help them along in the early stages of their adjustment to the new world. This Contact, another more mature player usually, will assign them various tasks that incrementally reveal the foundations of the various

storylines available to the new player. The choices that person makes will shut off some storylines while allowing access to others.”³²

“Lately, I’ve been playing *The Sims: Lifetime*³³ which is one of these MMORPGs. But this one is different: You start out with an entire world already in existence and stored online. This world is populated with millions of sim humans whose lives can be altered by the game’s subscribers who log on and play god-like roles. When you start out the game, you spend some time looking around the world to see whose lives you want to help. They don’t know what is going on and they never suspect they’re being watched as they eat dinner and go to work. And whether your computer is on or not, their world continues to evolve with or without you. I’ve been playing this game for six months and have been especially involved with this married couple whose son was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis when he was born.” On the screen, the camera looked down on a suburban neighborhood and swooped in from the sky, aimed at one specific house. It went through the roof, through the second story level, and down into the living room area where a man and a woman sat on a couch watching twenty-first century era TV programs. On their TV, CSI Miami was playing. It was mid evening. A young man walked into the room and made his way into the kitchen, apparently looking for a quick snack. “I don’t have a lot of time these days, but I check in on them from time to time and help them along as much as I dare without making them look around and go ‘what the heck was that?’ Their son is doing well, thanks to my involvement. Six months ago he was four years old – I think he begins at that age. Then I went over to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation in California and gave their scientists some ideas which led to several breakthroughs. He’s now 25 years old and doing just great.” The speakers carried the sound of the young man asking his mom a question. He ducked his head back into the living room and laughed at something on the TV. “It’s an amazing story that changes every day I go back to it. I really care about these people. And this is the goal of game designers. One hundred years ago, when Valve created Alyx (fig 8 – next page), players liked her and felt protective of her. The human resistance fighters in the game, likewise were identified with by the player. Most players would feel very bad when a resistance fighter was killed. Likewise, it makes me feel really good that I’m able to do something like this, even if it’s not ...” He cut off at the sound of rumbling in the distance that was rapidly approaching. The ground began to shake and the sofa jumped up and down. Terra gripped the arm rest next to her as books flew off the shelves and their unwashed dishes crashed to the floor. He could hear things smashing in the next room and pieces of the ceiling rained down on them.

³² Sean Fish, “Ultimately, Cryptic's goal from the very beginning was to make the players feel like true heroes. The foundation of our system was to start many story threads in the initial City Zones, and then slowly weave them all together over the course of the game. This would allow players to choose between several paths, and would help bring them together as their individual stories began to intersect. It would also allow us to create individual pieces of gameplay that would combine to form a huge tapestry of story”

³³ Released in 2104



Figure 8 Alyx Vance

“Come on!” Derek said, grabbing her hand, and they ran and got under the dining room table. One of the beams from the ceiling splintered and crashed down on the sturdy metal table with a thud. The table buckled under the weight of it. Derek looked just in time to see the wall surrounding the front door to his apartment tilt outward and fall with a crash outside. The roof overhead sagged alarmingly and bits began to break off in the constant heaving of the earth. A squealing, as of huge beams of steel being twisted by enormous hands whipped his head to the other side just in time to see the exterior wall of his apartment buckle outwards around the thick window he had enjoyed so many views of Earth from. The exterior wall was weakening and being pulled to pieces by the vacuum of space! Rubble from the collapsed front wall and most other loose objects in the immediate area were beginning to be dragged across the room on the ground, the lighter objects began to lift off and fly through the air toward that horrible hole that was developing. Derek felt his feet lifting off the ground and grabbed the table leg, which had been jammed into the floor by the ceiling beam. “HOLD ON!” he shouted to Terra. The table leg began to scrape and slowly inch along the ground. “The table is moving!!” Terra screamed.

In the year 2456, on the terraformed Jovian moon Europa, Dr. Warren Plinthstone stepped into the teleporter in the lobby of the office building he worked at. It had been a long day at work and he was eager to be home.

Upon arriving in his living quarters 300 kilometers away, he took off his jacket and went into the kitchen. Speaking to the nanofactory, he ordered a glass of milk, grabbed it out, and shuffled down the hallway, kicking off his shoes as he went. “I wonder how Derek’s doing?” he muttered as he entered his study. Striding across the room, he sat down in the reclining chair and stretched out, setting the glass of milk down on the end table

and picking up the reality system laying there. Gingerly, he fitted the controller to his right index finger and placed the visualizer on his head. Images and sounds flooded into his brain. It always took a minute for his mind to decipher them, but within seconds he was looking into Derek's apartment on the moon in the twenty-second century some 200 years ago as the timeline of humanity went. At least, drawing from human history and the infinite data banks available to everyone, he had created this world that existed as twenty-second-century Earth. In his mind's eye he stood inside Derek's apartment. He was of human size, but completely invisible and indestructible – what the games of Derek's generation would have called “being in god mode.” Something wasn't right, though. The apartment looked like it had been hit by a tornado and debris flew through the air directly to a hole in the exterior wall! Derek and Terra were both were clinging to the dining room table just moments from being sucked out into the vacuum. Terra was screaming and Derek's mouth moved. The words came to Dr. Plinthstone's mind “Oh God help us!” Derek had no idea that the “God” he prayed to was in fact Dr. Plinthstone - but right now that was irrelevant.

The stepping into this hellish nightmare scene, taking in the danger, and hearing Derek's words had taken maybe 3 seconds for Dr. Plinthstone to process and he acted without delay. Using his system's controls, he stepped outside and reached with his hand to a nearby hill, scooped up several tons of sand, and carefully poured it against the exterior wall of Derek's apartment, completely sealing the leak. Sand suddenly poured in through the broken wall and Derek and Terra got up off the ground, relief evident on their faces. Later on, when they had time to survey the damage and wonder about Derek and Terra's fortunate survival, it would look as if the nearby hill had been shaken loose by the earthquake to slide fortuitously down and against the exterior wall of his apartment. Believers would hail it a miracle, and everyone else would just shake their heads in amazement and wonder if miracles were real or if their world was simply ruled by fate.

Epilogue

Derek and Terra dusted themselves off and got to their feet. A siren wailed in the distance and cries for help could be heard nearby. Looking around, he spotted the huge pile of sand that filled the rear of his apartment and pointed it out to Terra. They walked over to it and Terra reached down and scooped some of the Martian soil up in her hand.

“Someone sure is looking out for you,” she said.

“Yeah, I wouldn't have believed it had I not been here,” Derek replied. Then he laughed. “I feel as if one of those games has come to life right here,” he said.

“You and your games,” Terra chided with a smile. “I'm going to have to buy that *Sims* game later this week.

“Man,” Derek said, “look what I've started. Just don't waste so much of your time with it that I never see you anymore.” Terra looked startled, until she looked up at him and saw his smile. Winding

her arm through his, she led him through the hole of his apartment's front wall and out into the street. Debris littered the courtyard from the surrounding apartments. Vehicles were crushed and most people's gardens would have to be replanted. They made their way to Derek's neighbors and did everything they could to make sure everyone was okay.

Later that week, she did go and buy the *Sims* game and began to understand more and more the attractive quality of this new world of computer games. She met Derek online and together they shepherded a family in the same neighborhood as Derek's first. She realized that more than anything else, she loved the human quality, the bond with the characters that formed during her play. She'd come over and watch Derek play some of the other games from time to time, and this player-character bond was evident. Derek really cared for Alyx in *Half Life 2*, along with Drs. Kleiner and Vance, and Barney Calhoun, the security guard. Together they formed the core of the resistance and helped save the world from alien domination. Best of all was the constantly evolving storylines that she got to participate in.

Stepping back into the apartment once more, Dr. Plinthstone took just enough time to make sure his charges were okay and stepped out of the world. Clicking his tongue in exasperation, he silently berated himself for being so lax and not watching over Derek. It had been a while since he had entered the world visibly to have coffee with Derek at the base. They'd talk for hours about history and about games and stories and good books. If Derek only knew he was speaking with his own guardian angel, so to speak. But all he saw was a buddy from work. As time went in that world, Derek would grow old and die within the next couple years of Dr. Plinthstone's life. Maybe he'd leave behind children. Things looked promising between him and his girlfriend Terra. Dr. Plinthstone felt a great surge of relief that he had intervened in time - he had been involved in Derek's father's life, and that man's father's life before him. Maybe tonight he'd begin work on another story in a different time period - maybe fifteenth-century Italy - for there was always another good story to tell and not enough time to do the telling. And besides, he had always wanted to meet Leonardo da Vinci.³⁴

³⁴ Simply as a note of trivia, in *Star Trek Voyager's* episode entitled *Year of Hell*, Captain Janeway created a virtual world in the ship's holodeck where an aged Leonardo da Vinci lived and worked. There, she retreated to his study for counsel from the aged scholar in her time of desperate need.

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