Sim sin city: some thoughts about grand theft auto 3

currently working at Powerful Robot Games. He's also a former head of videogame production at Cartoon Network LA.

As an academic, Frasca edits Ludology.org and co-edits Water Cooler Games, a blog about games with an agenda. His research focuses on game rhetoric and political games. His latest game, September 12th, explores certain aspects of the current war on terror.

Theft Auto 3

by Gonzalo Frasca

A preliminary note: games as weapons of mass distraction

There has been a lot of controversy about *Grand Theft Auto 3* (*GTA3*) mainly because of its extreme violence. Certainly, this game was not designed with children in mind. Personally, I consider most of the debate on the effects of media to be fruitless. Any quick look at media history tells us that scared adults who did not bother to pay close attention to the subject of their fears have been responsible for causing all sorts of media-phobia. Historically, rock'n'roll, comic books, films and even novels have been blamed for corrupting the young. I am sad to let you know that you, my dear reader, were born under the sign of dangerous videogames.

Let's pretend for a moment that violent videogames do actually encourage violent behaviour. If that was the case, how many deaths do you think videogames have caused so far? One hundred deaths? Maybe even 1,000? It is a big world out there, so let's assume there have been 100,000 undocumented cases of people killed or seriously harmed because of videogames. I hope any videogame detractor would agree with me that this is an outrageously exaggerated figure.

Let's now think about the millions of people whose deaths are linked to books. *The Bible*, *Mein Kampf* and *Das Kapital* are documented to have killed dozens of millions of native Americans, Jews and a bunch of Communists, non-Communists and anti-Communists. Do the math. There is actually proof that books are extremely dangerous. They should be considered weapons of mass destruction. If you are really concerned about media effects, forget videogames: you should start burning libraries right now. Please also encourage illiteracy among your family and friends. If you happen to be a researcher, please apply for a grant for studying "the devastating effects of printed texts". People will thank you. And there is one more thing that can really contribute to saving humanity from this paper-based menace: PLEASE keep books away from children.

Liberty City's best job

Every once in a while, an important game is released. By "important" I mean a game that can change our idea of what games are supposed to be. What follows is a set of thoughts regarding *GTA3*. I will try to isolate some of the design characteristics that, I think, partially explain its success. As a complex game, *GTA3* is also a complex system, so the game is actually bigger than the sum of its parts. This is why I do not plan to fully explain nor exhaust my object of study. In order to showcase why *GTA3* succeeded where other have previously failed, I will compare it to *Shenmue*, another ambitious game with a similar scope.

I conducted a non-scientific poll among my friends asking which word described *GTA3* the best. The answer was practically unanimous: "freedom." Freedom is the ultimate promise of so-called new media: virtual reality, the internet and videogames aim to empower their users with freedom (or at least the illusion of freedom).

Certainly, *GTA3* allows you to perform a lot of actions in an immense playground. To mention just a few: you can hit and kill people, carjack and drive an enormous variety of vehicles, use several cool weapons, play vigilante, be a taxi driver, repair and paint you car, listen to several radio stations, have sex with prostitutes and burn people alive. And these are just some of the possibilities.

Traditionally, this kind of freedom was only available in roleplaying games (RPGs) and, more recently, in massively multiplayer online worlds. I have played several RPGs but I never really enjoyed them mainly because they always stick to the fantasy/ sci-fi genre but also because I was put off by their interface conventions (I know, I know. I am the guy who cannot stand Tolkien. Although I did kind of enjoy parts of *The Two Towers* movie). While these games offered me a lot in terms of freedom of action, they demanded too much in terms of both their interface and mechanics (again, this is just me. I know many RPG players who live very nice lives and feel extremely fulfilled by their RPG experiences). The person who was able to fully express the particular kind of disappointment that I always associated with RPGs was an *Ultima Online* player that I interviewed a couple of years ago. He told me that, at first, he really enjoyed the game. However, it quickly became boring mainly because of the repetitive tasks and because of the time he wasted making errands across long distances: "I started getting this feeling of being in a bad job." Ouch! I knew exactly what he was talking about because at the time I was growing tired of *The Sims* for the exact same reason. We all eventually lose interest in a certain game, but you know there is something wrong when it swiftly brings back your worst summer job nightmares.

The worst summer job I ever had was printing and manually folding thousands of junk mail letters (Yes, it is true. I confess. I did work in direct marketing for a while. I come from a poor country where jobs are scarce. I REALLY needed the money. I hope you understand. I have been doing tons of community work since then in order to make it up). I had my share of wacky jobs (including dancing on TV inside a chocolate egg costume) but the junk mail job was the worst one because it was so tedious (and let's not even mention the paper cuts). What do people do when they face repetitive tasks in order to prevent insanity from taking control of their minds? They play. You can bet we did play, too. We played beat-the-clock, of course. "Let's see who can fold more letters in 15 minutes" or "I bet I can print 500 letters without running out of toner". I know it sounds pathetic. It certainly was (Did I mention I really needed the money?) Only play made my burden bearable.

It is easy to compare *GTA3* to *Shenmue*. Both are single player games set in a huge city and both promise high doses of freedom of play. The main difference is that *GTA3* became a best-seller while *Shenmue* ended up being a flop. Despite its fantastic production values, the game never delivered its promises. What is worse, with *Shenmue*, Yu Suzuki, the game's lead designer, played Sega's last card in order to save the Sega Dreamcast. Sadly, the game flopped and that contributed to the end of one of the best consoles ever made. Just like *GTA3*, *Shenmue* looks impressive: the environment is both gorgeous and huge. However, I easily got tired of wandering through its streets and trying to talk to people: I always got the same answer. The same applies for knocking on almost every single possible door in town just to realize that nobody was home. Why would the designer allow me to knock on doors if I could never get in? I imagine that this is the part of this article when some reader on the other side of the world smiles and accuses me of having no idea of what I am talking about, since she happens to know that there actually are some doors in *Shenmue* that will open after you knock on them. My answer: I wasted more than an hour of my life with the secret hope of getting inside one of those little houses. I do not know about you, dear reader, but now that my junk mail days are over I do sort of have a life and one hour is simply too much time to waste. Thanks for your understanding.

Space plays a key role in videogames (Aarseth, 1997). As anybody who has attempted to drive in Los Angeles knows, the problem with space is that it takes time and other valuable resources to go from point A to point B. Every adventure or first-person shooter player knows the frustration of realizing that they needed to literally walk back to the other end of the world (again) to get that blue key. Generally, this is a waste of time that becomes even more of a waster of time if the player gets lost, something not unlikely to happen in complex videogame environments. It is no fun when you become the game designer's "errand boy."

Most of the games with huge worlds are guilty of this "errand boy" syndrome. However, I believe that *GTA3* is an exception and this explains at least part of its success. When teleporting is not an option, most games force players to simply walk or run to their objective. *GTA3*'s great achievement was to allow the player to do what most people with lousy jobs do: turn their dull activities into a game (remember my junk mail job?)

When you need to go to the other side of Liberty City, you do not waste your time: you actually enjoy it. The means of transportation is fun: you carjack a nice car and then drive it according to your mood – either smashing other cars, using the wrong lane or being chased by cops. Driving in *GTA3* is a game in itself.

This may seem obvious: after all, *GTA3* is a driving game. However, it this good driving experience that makes players forget about the "errand boy" syndrome. It could have been easily been implemented in other games with this problem, such as *Shenmue*. Imagine that you could travel around the city on a bike with, say, *Paperboy* gameplay (for those who have a truly good excuse for not being aware of it, *Paperboy* is a classic Atari game about riding a bike while delivering newspapers). That would certainly make long trips more enjoyable (except that *Shenmue's* main character may not be totally compatible with a newspaper delivery boy attitude but, hey, I am not paid to do Yu Suzuki's work).

As should be clear by now, one of *GTA3*'s particular design characteristics is that it succeeds at transforming a traditionally boring activity (moving through space) into an enjoyable game (car simulation). This is an elegant design solution which is coherent with the game's premises and do not disturb players from their particular goals.

"My father is evil and he wants to take over the world"

Another holy grail of so-called interactive narrative is dialogue. Designers dream of building characters that would make Alan Turing proud. In the fantastic world of so-called interactive narrative, players can have interesting conversations with non-playable characters (NPC). Of course, as any player knows, most actual NPCs are nothing short of autistic. It is too common to get the same answer (or set of answers) from an NPC. Surely, it may be due to a technical constraint: we like to believe that in the future artificial intelligence will allow us to create intelligent agents. Nonetheless, the problem of having intelligent NPC is even more complex than AI because it implies developing an intelligent agent that is also a good actor and can improvise while remaining in character, without spoiling the whole "narrative" experience. Personally, I do not even think that humans can achieve this for too long that but this is not the subject of this article (see Aarseth, 1997).

There are design tips for dealing with this issue. Janet Murray (1997) thinks that

the key is to have procedural characters – characters with specific behavioural rules. This would explain the success of chatbots such as *Eliza*. While this is certainly a good design recommendation, it constrains the kind of characters you can portray: it works well with stereotypical characters but fails to provide the diverse, unexpected actions that typify interesting characters.

Generally, in most computer-based adventures or RPGs you play the good guy, the typical hero. You may also play an evil character but, generally, in a setting where good and evil coexist. From this point of view, *GTA3* is quite particular. Not only can you control a crook but you also do it within an immoral environment. The PS2 game version's back cover warns you against "mob bosses," "crooked cops" and "street gangs": there are no good guys in Liberty City. Not even the walking people on the streets deserve your pity: their total lack of interaction (except for fighting against you) removes any humanity from them. They are just moving targets.

GTA3 provides a great game experience by renouncing any form of verbal interaction (with the exception of cut scenes). You do not get the same NPC answers over and over simply because you cannot ask them questions. This is because both the game's main character and the setting can afford this: you control a violent protagonist in a violent world; there is no need for negotiation. Car crashes, baseball bats and flamethrowers are the tools for "communicating" in this world. You never regret not being able to talk to NPCs simply because they are not worth talking with: it's much better to kill them. In contrast, compare this to what happens in narrative, a detective character cannot survive without talking, asking questions, making inquiries. Action heroes can certainly get away without all the chitchat (Update: this was written before Arnold Schwarzenegger became Governor of California. It seems action heroes can get away with anything these days).

Shenmue aimed for a higher degree of interactivity: its NPCs were attractive and you felt more compelled to talk to them (besides the fact that you actually had to talk to them in order to learn more about that mysterious black car you were supposed to look for). And that is exactly why *Shenmue* failed so miserably: I have seen hamsters with better communication skills than *Shenmue*'s NPCs.

This is *GTA3*'s second major design accomplishment: creating both a main character and a world that allows the game to live practically without any form of verbal communication. *Shenmue's* NPCs' discourses are so limited that they keep breaking the immersion: players are continually reminded that they are dealing with a bot. *GTA3*'s lack of talking puppets allows players to focus on the action. Of course, this dehumanizes and objectifies NPC characters (I guess this is fine, since nobody wants to think about humanitarianism when you are crushing those guys' heads with a baseball bat).

The narrative connection

Both *GTA3* and *Shenmue* tell a story. Yes, here you have a ludologist publicly saying that games do tell stories. Spread the news! Or even better, read my Level Up conference article (available at ludology.org) on why the so-called ludology versus narratology debate never really took place (it is actually the product of confusion, stereotypes and disinformation). I am through with that discussion, which was taking up too much of my free time, which I now badly need in order to beat *Warioware*.

As I was saying, both *GTA3* and *Shenmue* tell a story (however, this is essentially different than saying that they are stories). Storytelling plays several roles in games. It "grounds" the setting mainly by bringing a set of rules and values into the game. The criminal underworld narrative setting provides a huge amount of "common-sense" genre data that would be impossible to describe in an instruction booklet. For example, such data may be the fact that "people listening to operas are probably Mafia guys"; "Cops will chase you after you commit a crime" and "Bullets hurt." In addition to this, narrative settings also help improve the roleplaying factor ("I can pretend to be a criminal. Cool!"). Last but not least, you have cut scenes, which serve – when they are well used – as an elegant way of letting players know what the mission objectives are.

If I had to abstract *Shenmue* into a single, simple game, I would say it is a riddle. Actually, most adventure games are extremely goal-oriented towards the resolution of a mystery and/ or problem. That is one of the main characteristics of traditional, classical literature: it always tends towards the achievement of a goal. This is true for, say, folk tales ("the prince must save the princess") but does not reflect the rules of a big part of modern literature. For example, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an encyclopedic world made of short anecdotes that is not driven by teleology (which is a fancy word that means "goal-oriented"). Somewhere in between these two would be *The Lord of the Rings*, which also gathers hundreds of anecdotes within an encyclopedic world but is also goal-oriented (I did sleep during most of the first film, but I sort of understood that "somebody must destroy the ring"). Pop culture generally favours teleological stories and the same applies for games. Goal-oriented stories can be condensed into a few phrases in the same way that teleological games can be condensed into a walk-through.

The outstanding characteristic of *GTA3* is that it does not attempt to show your progression through the underworld in a linear, goal-oriented way. Surely, there are some bits of linearity, but basically you can accept jobs from different bosses and most of the time it is not a big deal if you do not accomplish a quest. Luckily,

the designers did not want us to follow a script. *GTA3* is more concerned with simulating crime than with telling us a story (sadly, this changed a bit in *Vice City*, *GTA3*'s sequel). This is certainly an exception in today's videogame world. It does not really matter if you can actually "win" *GTA3*: the main pleasure lies in the simulation of crimes and not in achieving a Hollywood ending, such as getting the girl or becoming Liberty City's new don. Of course, the search for these endings is what drives many players but it is not the only available (and encouraged) form of playing the game.

CONCLUSION: Freedom in Liberty City

Games do not grow in a cocoon. Groundbreaking games always owe a debt to older games. Sometimes it is useful to think about the existence of primitive games that are present in different combinations within new games. Solving riddles, juggling balls, racing are just some examples that can be found in adventure games, real-time strategy games and arcades. The labyrinth is another game primitive that is present in so many videogames, from *Doom* to *Monkey Island*.

Any claim that *GTA3* is "this" or "that" would seriously limit the game's rich diversity. However, I think that comparing it to other games helps us better understand it. After playing *GTA3* I was surprised by the freedom of play that I was granted. It was freedom to explore but also freedom to experiment. I kept trying to remember if I had a similar experience with another game but I failed to realize which one it was. Suddenly, I made the connection: it was a genre I had not played in over a decade. Structurally, *GTA3* plays very much like a flight simulator.

I had never been a flight sim buff, but I played my share of them on 8- and 16-bit computers. I loved the sense of freedom that the system provided. I also enjoyed the fact that I could set my own goals: flying under a bridge, landing on a road or gliding after I ran out of fuel. Sometimes I took pleasure in following military flight sims' missions: basically bombing this or that objective or landing under harsh conditions. However, most of the time, the fun was simply in flying around. Even though *GTA3* involves more roleplaying, the feeling of driving around Liberty City reminded me of my early friendly virtual skies, not only by the way it deals with space but also because of its rules. *GTA3* has several clear quests but the player is not forced to follow them. Every time I felt a bit disoriented, I did not mind taking the game designer's hand and following him through a mission where my goals had been clearly stated. Yet, most of the time, I enjoyed using the environment as a giant laboratory for experimentation, where I could test the system's boundaries and set my own creative goals.

When designers create a simulation that encourages experimentation, they are taking a huge authorial risk: trusting their players. Traditional authors are like overprotective parents: they do not trust their children enough. Within a traditional adventure game, the designer remains in control: she can have a pretty decent idea of what the player's experience will be. Since simulations depend more on the player's decisions, there is no certitude that the game session will be as fun as the designer intended. That is where the fallacy is: there is no such a thing as a predictable experience. Actually, players know that they will not have 100 percent excellent game sessions, no matter how good the game is. Chess is an excellent game, however I have played several awful chess sessions – but that did not prevent me from playing it again.

GTA3 provides a great balance between simulation and quests. The game was designed by people who understood the fact that this is a participatory medium and, therefore, authors should trust their players to, well, participate. It should be obvious, but most of traditional storytelling bags of tricks do not perform well in games. Game designers should not play at being the next Spielberg or Coppola because game authorship is not about crafting sequences of events but about modelling worlds with rules.

As a player, most of the time I do prefer games that are not too goal-oriented and allow me to experiment. As a researcher, I am fascinated by games like *GTA3* that move closer towards simulation while struggling to leave the narrative carcass behind. I was disappointed to see that *Vice City*, *GTA3*'s sequel, tried to improve the game by adding a more complex story (although the sequel did improve and expand certain aspects of the original game). Please do not get me wrong: I have nothing personal against stories. It is just that I do not like my games to be interrupted by animations that are not relevant to the gameplay in the same way that I do not enjoy television commercials (but again, I am not saying that all cut scenes are needless). Rockstar's team, with their bad-boy attitude, made themselves a good name in the history of videogames.

References

Aarseth, Espen J. (1997) *Cybertext: Perpectives on Ergodic Literature.* Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press.

Murray, Janet. (1997) *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace.* New York, Free Press.

Sim Sin City: some thoughts about Grand Theft Auto 3 (30 Dec 2003) There has been a lot of controversy about Grand Theft Auto 3 (GTA3) mainly because of its extreme violence. Certainly, this game was not designed with children in mind. Article URL: http://gamestudies.org/0302/frasca/. Read 23 more articles from Game Studies sorted by date, popularity, or title. Next Article: Trading Gold for Days. This site is a labour of love built by Chris McEvoy.

Discover and download for free all the best custom worlds for the Sims 3. Whether you're looking for cities, mountains, deserts or small towns, you'll find it all here! Â Below are some of the best custom worlds for the Sims 3 for you to choose from. You can use the filters on the left to help narrow down your search. Sort by popularity Sort by latest Sort by price: low to high Sort by price: high to low. : SimCity BuildIt General Discussion. : Sim city buildit London update actually trolls theft to gamer status. Sim city buildit London update actually trolls theft to gamer status. by SandDragon99. Go To.Â the game designers update is an absolutely dishonorable theft to their customers and fans on the part that this is actually a demotion in your current gamer status. What if for example your car was taken to shop and it was returned to you in half the status it used to be.Â It will also improve performance in the Global Market, which some of our players have been frustrated with for a while now. We know that this might change the way you trade, so to make sure you can still sell as much as before: â€¢ The time an item is advertised for has been increased by 300%: from 3 hours to a huge 12 hours!