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The Animation of Gamers and Gamers as Animators in Sierra Online's Graphic Adventures

This paper aims at re-defining the relationship between gamers and the computer/video games they play, a relationship that formed during the 1980s in the computer games released by the American company Sierra On-Line.

Animation has been a part of computer/video gaming since the early stages of the latter's development as a software category. Moving images could be found in early experimental games as *Spacewar* (1962), and early commercial games as *Pong* (1972). When the animated images that are under the gamers control – essentially the gamers' or avatars – are examined, they pose the interesting question of who exactly animates them. While all the possible modes of movement of such images (walking, running, punching, etc.) have been drawn and programmed into the game by its developers, the gamers are those responsible for executing these movements through their input. Moreover, the sequence in which each gamer executes these movements is not necessarily identical to that of other gamers who play the same game; each gamer animates his/her avatar according to his/her own style of playing.

An examination of the terms of Scott Bukatman's characterization of the animator's as role as a struggle against physical reality (2011) in the context of gaming reveals an interesting paradox: the game developers, who serve as the more traditional role of animators, do their best to emulate the physical boundaries of reality by setting up environments filled with obstacles that gamers need to overcome and even pose a pseudo-physical limit on the movements that gamers/avatars can perform; on the other hand, the gamers are those who struggle against the obstacles meant to emulate physical reality, set by the developers. The titles developed by American publisher Sierra Online during the 1980s demonstrate how this paradox became a standard for animation in gaming.

Founded in 1979, the company became famous for developing games in the adventure genre – interactive stories that gamers completed through dialogue and object-oriented puzzles. The games developed by Sierra Online introduced visuals to the adventure genre, previously known to be based on written text. With the 1984 release of *King's Quest* the company went further in introducing adventure games featuring onscreen protagonists controlled by the gamers, and a full visual environment, featuring other animated characters, for these protagonists to explore. This new standard for the genre quickly spread across many different kinds of back plots – fantasy (*King's Quest*), science fiction (*Space Quest*), sex comedies (*Leisure Suit Larry*) and others.

One notable innovation which contributed greatly to this concept, introduced in the first *King's Quest* game and all the other company's games, was defined by Maher (2013) as the addition of the z-axis to the on-screen movement of the games' avatars and all other characters, allowing movement around onscreen objects. This new dimension practically divided the gaming experience into two different levels: the textual input by the gamers and

the text messages in response to this input have both migrated from the text adventures to the new graphic adventures, but the new graphic environment allowed gamers/avatars to wander around and explore with no regard to either.

Since the actions required from gamers to successfully complete the narrative that the games' developers have implemented in each game relied on textual input, and on-screen graphic movement was only needed to bring the gamers/avatars to certain spots to perform these actions, gamers were encouraged to move around each screen and between screens to find the next spot in which they can advance the narrative, but in the process they could ignore the narrative altogether - and just explore their digital surroundings regardless, creating their own new narrative through the animation of their avatars, often challenging the boundaries aimed at emulating physical within the games they played.

While parallel perspective view is less common today for big-budget game productions, many 3rd-person perspective games – including those outside the adventure genre, a notable example being the pioneering *Tomb Raider* (1996) – adopt the same environmental principals in letting gamers/avatars explore their virtual surroundings. Open world games as the popular *Grand Theft Auto* (1997), that allow gamers/avatars to freely wander across their virtual environment, also have their roots in the adventure games of Sierra Online. The influence that the company's games had can be attributed to their success to transcend their genre, and focus on the animation of the gamers – and turning the gamers into animators.

Biography

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Raz Greenberg has received his PhD from the Hebrew University. His thesis aimed at putting together an overall theoretical basis for the study of animation in the media, the fundamental principles of which have been published in the article *The Animated Text: Definition* (2011) in The Journal of Film and Video. Other articles by him have appeared at Literature Film Quarterly, Animation Studies, The Animation Journal and Innovative Research in Japanese Studies. He teaches a class on Japanese Animation at the Tel Aviv University, and his current research interests include Jewish and Israeli animation, the Fleischer brothers' animation and animation and gaming.