

## ***Max Payne* – the intricacies of visual referencing in computer games**

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### **Abstract**

It is already clear and well documented that, nowadays, many children that live in developed countries see more images than most adults have, until now, seen throughout their whole lives and that these images are extremely diverse in content and support medium. In the contemporary world, computer games are another contributor to this intensive visual and audio production. As such, it is important to be able to contextualize and analyse the relationship they have with previous audio and visual mediums and understand computer games as a multi-modal multi-referential text. The main objective of this work will be to understand the third-person shooter computer game *Max Payne*, developed by Finnish Remedy Entertainment and originally released in July 2001, in which the player assumes the role of the titular character (the detective Max Payne), in relation to its strong *film noir* aesthetics, use of graphic novel drawing style in place of animated cut-scenes to narrate the game, use of Hong Kong action cinema genre camera work, and allusions to Norse mythology, particularly the myth of Ragnarök. Furthermore, this computer game allows a second mode of play – the matrix mode – in which the avatar of the title character is substituted by a «Neo-like» avatar, from the film series *The Matrix*. Presenting such a wide range of visual influences, this computer game is, in fact, an extremely interesting example of the pervasiveness of imagery. *Max Payne* received very positive reviews from critics and was praised not only for its exciting gameplay but also for its use of *noir* storytelling devices and innovative aesthetics. Adding to this, as of March 2008, the *Max Payne* franchise has sold over 7 million copies and has been ported from the original Windows release to Xbox, PlayStation, Gameboy Advance, and Macintosh. This data attests the game's acceptance by the public, which reinforces the relevance of a critical reading.

**Key Words:** Computer games; *film noir*; graphic novel; action cinema; myth of Ragnarök.

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After several years in development by the Finish company Remedy Entertainment, *Max Payne* was published for PC in July 2001 by Rockstar Games and 3D Realms and later on for PlayStation2 and Xbox (December

2001) and finally for GameBoy Advance (December 2003). At the date of release, the game's summary stated:

Max Payne is a man with nothing to lose in the violent, cold urban night. A fugitive undercover cop framed for murder, and now hunted by cops and the mob. Max is a man with his back against the wall, fighting a battle he cannot hope to win. Prepare for a new breed of deep action game. Prepare for pain...<sup>i</sup>

Max Payne turned out to be a very successful game. First and foremost, the game's got several popular appeal elements: it's heavy on atmosphere, story driven, shows a credible New York environment set in early XX1st century, firefights leave bullet holes and spent bullet cartridges spatter on to the floor, there are muzzle flashes from guns, grenade explosions and bodies are thrown around when something explodes.

It also explores the players epistemophilia. Several layers of references overlap to sustain interest, providing openings for the many different knowledge they have accumulated and that spring up here the same way it might have happened around a cult film.

Using *Casablanca* as a case in point, Umberto Eco discusses what are the characteristics that turn a film into a cult object and notes that the film must be encyclopedic, provide resources that allow viewers to construct their own fantasies over it, push forward several thematic threads and present "a completely furnished world"<sup>ii</sup>. This allows the film's fan audience to master its world, quoting characters and dramatic action sequences and feeling they are a part of it.

In order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, regardless of their original relationship to the whole. (...) [It creates] a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a déjà vu.<sup>iii</sup>

Eco argues that the cult film is quotable because it is, in itself, made of quotes, archetypes, allusions and references taken from a range of previous works. This attitude of borrowing can be quite unselfconscious, as in *Casablanca*. But Eco goes further and adds that in the age of post-modernism, when all films are read against previous ones, "cult has become

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the normal way of enjoying movies”<sup>iv</sup>.

Along the lines of film production, game development is an expensive, collaborative project and several groups within the production process – concept artists, animators, game designers – can pursue aesthetic goals common to other media. So, similarly to the reading of *Casablanca* as the classical cult film, *Max Payne* can be explored as a cult game, since the player can, as well as the film fan audience before him, experience it “as a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visual icebergs. (...) [without] a coherent philosophy of composition”<sup>v</sup>.

Of course, being a post-modernist cultural artefact, *Max Payne* takes intertextuality with eyes wide open, “with Finnish developer Remedy’s stated intention being to take storytelling in games to new heights through reference to both written and film media”<sup>vi</sup>. Indeed, taking into account Stam’s notion of intertextuality, arguing that [it] “does not limit itself to a single medium; it allows for dialogic relations with other arts and media, both popular and erudite”<sup>vii</sup>, strongly puts forward that these concepts and analysis approaches can be useful and appropriate when dealing with computer games.

Furthermore, Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, as a literary materializing of time in space which is based on the idea that spatial and temporal dimensions are as inseparable here as they are in Einstein’s theory of relativity and that, taking on specific configurations, gains representational significance, that is, from a narrative and compositional point of view, a

place where encounters occur [...where] the webs of intrigue are spun, denouements occur and finally – this is where dialogues happen, something that acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, ideas and passions of the heroes”<sup>viii</sup>,

can be used as well in computer games to distinguish important generic variations, the principal symbolic and metaphorical patterns of a certain title.

Hence, a review of the principal intertextual archetypes assembled in *Max Payne*, considering as Eco proposed that an archetype is

“a pre-established and frequently re-appearing narrative situation that is cited or in some way recycled by innumerable other texts, and provokes in the addressee a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a déjà vu that everybody yearns to see again”<sup>ix</sup>

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and an intertextual archetype is “a topos or standard situation that comes to be particularly appealing to a given culture or historical period”<sup>x</sup>, could go as follows:

1. The flashback – the long flashback and the brief flashbacks; flashback as content and flashback as form;
2. The voice-over – an aural and visual device;
3. The renegade hero / reluctant hero – built upon the “American culture's traditional dichotomy of individual and community”<sup>xi</sup> that has made a constant out of the opposed pair of competing myths, the outlaw hero and the official hero;
4. The graphic novel – stylized visuals for a stylized narrative;
5. The action movie – bullet-time;
6. The chronotope of rise and fall – from the top of a skyscraper, to abandoned buildings, parking lots, the underground, and back to the top again;
7. The unhappy love – a nostalgic unattainable object of desire vs. a dangerous present;
8. The end of the world – Ragnarök myth.

To analyse them we must understand the construction of narrative within computer games. It should be considered, at this point, that computer games are not, as a form, wholly presentational, but rather a form in which the sense of agency of the player is central to the unfolding story. In fact, one of game design's main principles is to begin the creative development process taking gameplay as your main focus instead of narrative. This centrality of gameplay and gameplay tension throughout the game, that differs from dramatic tension, as the first is created by the player's doubt of overcoming a challenge and the second by being faced with an emotionally unresolved dramatic situation, puts forward the dual mode in which the player reads the narrative spaces.

Marc LeBlanc's concepts of embedded and emergent narrative in computer games call attention to this duality. He was the first to point out that embedded narrative in computer games is the non-interactive, presentational part of the story and that emergent narrative is the one being built upon player events, and how they differently affect the progression in the game, as well as by in-game events<sup>xii</sup>. So, although a storyline still has to be dramatically meaningful for the player, his interaction, even if he cannot change the direction of the plot, also has to be credible and significant. Bearing this in mind, the embedded narrative's primary function is to present to the player those elements in the game that he has no control over, introducing him to the situation of the game, it's main challenge, and the

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world in which the avatar will move.

In *Max Payne* this is done first of all by setting the game as a foldback story. That is, since it begins with the final confrontation scene, the whole game will then be played in *media res*. In this first sequence helicopters are flying over New York city while several police car units are heading towards a skyscraper on top of which stands Max Payne holding a rifle. The city is covered by snow. As the camera pans up to a backlit close-up of Max's face, his monologue starts in voice-over:

They were all dead. The last shot had been the exclamation point for all that had lead to this moment. I took my finger from the trigger and it was over... But for everything to make sense, I had to start from the beginning, three years ago... The night where pain began.

This introduction is so powerful, and motivating to the player, because it clearly states all the layers around which the visual pleasure of the game is going to be constructed upon.

From the very beginning Max is revealed as the prototypical reluctant hero, with the side lit enhanced profile, the characteristic silhouette of the raised raincoat lapels, and the backdrop of the cityscape as a place of moral ambiguity, where the good guys, the police force, are in fact the evil ones and the lone rogue cop is the not so bad one. In fact, the game's entry monologue sequence is a direct quote of the *noir* genre, often associated with urban settings, with a visual style that puts emphasis on low-key lighting and extreme camera angles, where characters portray cynical attitudes, that are themselves derived from the hard-boiled American criminal fiction of the depression period, also inheriting its deep unease with the femme fatale and a generally fatalist mood that is of-set by the character's constant escape into aggression. In point of fact, Max Payne closely follows *The Big Heat's* storyline, a 1953 *film noir* directed by Fritz Lang, where the protagonist is a cop, Sergeant Dave Bannion, who takes on the crime syndicate that controls his city after the brutal murder of his beloved wife.

Being an action game, sub-genre third-person shooter, the game has simply set, clear goals and victory condition, progresses through a series of levels that must be played in a linear sequence, with the occasional hidden shortcut, and provides different challenges where the player has to prove eye-hand coordination and reflexes. Specifically, the player has a partial or full view of Max, in medium or large shots, as he manoeuvres the avatar and takes action using a ranged weapon of choice and shooting at enemies at a

distance, which is of course very important since he must see and react to events in the game very quickly. But more than these standard game features of the action genre, *Max Payne* attempts to blend its narrative development with the gameplay by minimizing the visibility of level changes, as a series of episodes, and instead enhancing a sense of flow. A major contributor to this aspect is the use of brief flashback graphical cut-scenes, inserted in the context of the larger flashback in which all the game is played, that return us to the night Max's family was killed.

So, on the one hand, the flashback is the quotation of a stylistic device; on the other, by evoking the power of memory, it marks Max's and the player's subjective moments within the narrative, as such, forcing the player deeper into the magic circle<sup>xiii</sup>. It is also interesting to note that the already double positioning of a spectator of a movie flashback, by simultaneously being in the past of the narrative and in the present of the film, is not lost in the game since the flashbacks maintain their confessional nature, are supposedly helping to answer an enigma, and act as a retardation device, allowing dramatic suspense to consistently intermingle with the gameplay. The game even takes this chronological tension further because it is being played, and can be re-played, each time re-constructing an emergent narrative.

The male protagonist retrospective voice-over also reinforces this present-past overlap, as the present is talking about the past that is talking about the past, with the image fading or dissolving from the present, to the past and even way back into the past, without undermining the narrative logic. This strategy in *Max Payne* follows the classic narrative plot structure of order – disorder – restored order, with *film noir's* nostalgic take on the past as an object of desire and/or despair. The high-angle extreme long shot in the introduction sequence when the police cars are arriving to the building where Max stands alone, points to this restored order possibility since, in spite of being severely outnumbered, he is in fact there, not only looking down from a vantage point, but also the one whose size and volume in the frame overwhelms all other elements.

The voice-over also recalls attention back to the visual characterization and framing because, as Max openly states:

I had taken on the role of the mythic detective: Bogart as Marlowe, or as Sam Spade going after the Maltese Falcon. To unravel all the mysteries, following a path of clues to that final revelation, even if it would take me down to the cold, cavernous depths of a grave.

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This in-game game of cross-referencing between the aural and the visual goes on when the aural voice-over is taken over by the speech-bubble inserted voice-over in the cut-scenes, that are conveyed to the player using sequential art in a graphic novel format. Constant references are made throughout to the “dark nature of the city”, the “predatory howl of sirens”, the “call of the night” and so on. Furthermore, Max's voice-over often flaunts a meta-reflexive humour that is just inescapable:

Weapon statistics hanging in the air, glimpsed out of the corner of my eye. Endless repetition of the act of shooting, the slowing down to show of my moves. The paranoid feel of someone controlling my every step. I was in a computer game. Funny as hell, it was the most horrible thing I could think of.

This attitude towards the theme is actually helpful for the game to gain a new level of depth, coming directly from this excessive style, since computer games are not the simplest medium to express character's feelings or complex meanings, given they are interactive and must be open to the player's actions, and bearing in mind that *Max Payne's* gameplay is about simple point and click combat.

In regards to camera work and positioning, Max Payne also takes a page from John Woo's highly stylized choreographed action movies allowing, at the press of a button, to invoke bullet time, a type of slow motion stretching of a sequence of events that allows the avatar to maintain speed, target multiple enemies and open fire while at the same time successfully dodging slowed enemy attacks. While covering Max Payne's exhibition at E3, Gamespot pointed out that the game implemented

a very movie-like technique that involves action sequences (usually featuring guns) being slowed down. Jump sideways while firing a gun and the sequence goes into slow-mo while you're in the air - bullets pumping, muzzle flashing and the bad guy doing the dance of death as the lead bites him. Then you hit the ground and the pace instantly picks up again.<sup>xiv</sup>

This is particularly interesting because, not only is it visually pleasurable for the player, but also because it has impact in the gameplay and the emergent narrative, going a little bit further than just the embedded

narrative presentational elements like the voice-over. On the other hand, the construction of the emergent narrative is also done by the way the player explores the world in which he has to take action, that is, it is deeply intertwined with his ability to decipher the space in which he moves the avatar. Don Carson, a theme park designer and games conceptual illustrator, argues that:

Unlike a linear movie, my audience will have choices along their journey. They will have to make decisions based on their relationship to the virtual world I have created [...] Most important of all, their experience is going to be a "spatial" one. It is the physical space that does much of the work of conveying the story the designers are trying to tell [...]. Armed only with their own knowledge of the world, and those visions collected from movies and books, the audience is ripe to be dropped into your adventure. The trick is to play on those memories and expectations to heighten the thrill of venturing into your created universe.<sup>xv</sup>

Therefore, by being an adept reader of the clues embedded into the space the player gradually reconstructs the plot. It's not difficult to see that a game like *Max Payne*, that is modelled on literary and filmic whodunits, is apt at motivating the player to uncover these clues and the visual style reinforces this by building layer upon layer of external references that are in themselves providing the player with deciphering codes.

Besides framing and camera point of view, in-frame movement is also relevant to the game's mood and visual style. Through level design, the use of a progressive downward movement of the title character from the top of the skyscraper, down to explore abandoned buildings, down to a cellar, a parking lot, the underground, the sewers, is, for example, indicative of his plunge from a blissful married life style to the gameplay's present where he is involved with a woman assassin, a femme fatale.

The loss of the wife and son is the pivotal moment for the beginning of the plot, when the ordered patriarchal world, at ease with the discourse of woman and the maternal, goes to pieces signalling the later appearance of the fetishistic, dangerous woman, phallic symbol in hand, that is, gun pointed at Max, that somehow must be repressed and contained for order to be restored. In fact, Mona Sax, the femme fatale, disappears at a certain point in the storyline, perhaps killed as well, or as *film noir* has taught us, having been punished for being active, powerful and in charge of her own sexuality, and

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thus allowing the return of order, or the reinstatement of the dominance of male subjectivity. The difference between these feminine opposing roles is visually patent in the light haired wife that wears a white shirt and flowered skirt and the dark-haired femme-fatale clad in leather jacket and pants, just as a man, just as Max.

Also, from this ordered past space of domesticity, Max Payne moves down and into impersonal, fragmented, insecure spaces, like the parking lot, or even transient spaces like the underground. As Vivian Sobchack argues,

Chronotopes are not merely the spatiotemporal backdrop for narrative events but also the literal and concrete ground from which narrative and character emerge as the temporalization of human action. [...] The characters generated by this chronotope are transient, without roots or occupation, in a world where murder is more natural than death.<sup>xvi</sup>

The chronotope of rise and fall explores the vertical dynamics of movement and is inseparable from this physical and emotional descent of the title character from the first introductory cut-scene of the game onwards. This downward movement, that Bakhtin suggested with the concept of Dante's chronotope, is how the strategies of visual storytelling are integrated in the game's time-space continuum through the interaction of player's actions or avatar's movements, that is, player's events, the embedded gestures of the characters, or in-game events and narrative events, with the spatial elements.

In terms of space, it must also be pointed out that the outdoor sequences, whether embedded narrative blocks or open to player events, are set in the city's worst blizzard. In fact, the urban landscape is covered with steadily falling snow. Not only does the snow fall down, emphasizing the in-frame verticality discussed above, but it can help recall the work of myth in the face of entropy. As Max 's universe has been torn into chaos, for destruction is inescapable, since the game is played inside a long flashback, he is on a quest to restore order. This end of the world is told in the Norse myth of Ragnarök:

Then Fimbulvetr, the winter of winters, will grip and throttle Midgard. Driving snow clouds will converge from north and south and east and west. There will be bitter frosts, biting winds; the shining sun will be helpless. [...] So the end will begin.<sup>xvii</sup>

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End and beginning are at the heart of this myth. After this terrible winter, there will be fire, “raging flame, swirling smoke, ashes”. In fact, *Max Payne* is filled with it, from muzzle flashes, to flame-throwing weapons to exploding grenades. Only those who survive the fire will in turn see light come back and experience the emergence of a new world, purged of evil and ready to begin again. This purifying cleansing and survival in the myth is perfectly matched by the victory condition of the game, which is to eradicate the city of drug trafficking gangs, henchmen, psycho cult members, backstabbing corrupt fellow police officers, and all kinds of evil-doers responsible for the murder of Max's family, while surviving their continuous attacks.

A last argument can be made about the several modifications built for *Max Payne*, the most important of them being the Matrix Mode, since bullet time was acknowledgedly created by direct inspiration from the slow-motion fighting sequences of the film *Matrix*. This mode of play is a simple skin, with no bearing on the actual gameplay, that transforms Max from detective into a Neo-like avatar and his enemies into clones of Mr. Smith. This derivative mode only exists because the players find intense pleasure in the recognition of characteristics taken from other medium.

*Max Payne* has now reached the stage of being translated into a different medium, cinema. Soon, it will be possible to judge the reverse influence, from game to cinema, in *Max Payne, the movie* that, although has not yet premiered, is already being thoroughly discussed in gaming blogs, from casting to adaptation merits. It will be another opportunity to “sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves and celebrating a reunion”.<sup>270</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Rockstar Games, July 2001, viewed on 10 April 2010, <<http://www.rockstargames.com/search/query/max%20payne#/game:38>>.
- <sup>ii</sup> U. Eco, 'Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage', in *SubStance*, Vol.14, No.2, Issue 47: In Search of Eco's Roses, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 1985, p. 3.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p. 4, p. 5.
- <sup>iv</sup> Ibid, p. 12.
- <sup>v</sup> Ibid, p. 4.
- <sup>vi</sup> K Berens & G. Howard, *The Rough Guide to Videogames*, Rough Guides Ltd, London, 2008, p. 136.
- <sup>vii</sup> R. Stam, *Film Theory. An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2004, p. 203.
- <sup>viii</sup> M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Ed. Michael Holquist, University of Texas, Austin, 1981, p. 250.
- <sup>ix</sup> U. Eco, op. cit., p. 5.
- <sup>x</sup> Ibid, p. 5.
- <sup>xi</sup> R. Ray, *A certain tendency of the Hollywood film, 1930 – 1980*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1985, p. 58.
- <sup>xii</sup> M. LeBlanc, 'Formal Design Tools: Emergent Complexity, Emergent Narrative', Proceedings of the Game Developers Conference, 2000.
- <sup>xiii</sup> J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Emecé Editores, Buenos Aires, 1968, p. 10.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Gamespot, 2001, viewed on 10 April 2010, <[http://www.gamespot.com/pc/action/maxpayne/review.html?om\\_act=convert&om\\_clk=gssummary&tag=summary%3Bread-review](http://www.gamespot.com/pc/action/maxpayne/review.html?om_act=convert&om_clk=gssummary&tag=summary%3Bread-review)>.
- <sup>xv</sup> D. Carson, 'Environmental storytelling: Creating immersive 3D worlds using lessons learned from the theme park industry', in *Gamasutra.com*, March 2000, viewed on 10 April 2010, <[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3186/environmental\\_storytelling\\_.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3186/environmental_storytelling_.php)>.
- <sup>xvi</sup> V. Sobchack cited in R. Stam, op. cit., p. 206.
- <sup>xvii</sup> K. Crossley-Holland, *The penguin book of Norse myths: Gods of the Vikings*, Penguin Books, London, 1993, p. 173.
- <sup>xviii</sup> U. Eco, op. cit., p. 11.

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