Gameplay Journals

The purpose of the Gameplay Journals is to exercise your ability to critically analyze a game. This means describing it accurately and presenting an informed opinion of its strengths and weaknesses that can be backed up by specific observations.

Choose a video game. It can be a game which you have never played before or a game that you are already familiar with. Then play the game for an appropriate amount of time. What constitutes an "appropriate amount of time" depends on the game. For example, 20 minutes would probably be a sufficient minimum time for *Super Mario Bros.*, but a much larger game like *World of Warcraft* will require at least a few hours. Over the course of the semester you are encouraged to choose a game that you love, a game that you hate, and a game that you have never played before.

Note that you must play the game before doing this assignment, even if you have already played it before. Obviously, this requirement can only be enforced by the honor system, so please be diligent.

After playing the game, you should write about your experience.

The writeup should:
- Be submitted as a PDF file.
- Include your name at the top.
- Use 12 point font.
- Have 1 inch margins.
- Be single-spaced.
- Be at least 1 page long, but no longer than 3 pages.

You should start by identifying the game, its publisher, its release date, and any other important identifying information. You should also describe how the game fits into various genres, explain its basic mechanics, and describing your play experience. Personal stories about what it is like to play the game are very helpful.

You should avoid evaluations like "good," "bad," "like," and "dislike" when describing the game. Instead, you should point out specific properties of the game using the vocabulary given in *Rules of Play* and other critical texts. Keep in mind that a game's properties may appeal to some kinds of players and not to others, and you should identify these groups when possible.

You do not need to discuss the entire game. This is not a book report for a video game. It is best to choose between 2 and 5 features of the game that you find especially interesting and spend most of your time talking about those particular things. How are they unique? How to they contribute to the overall experience of the game? What influence have they had on subsequence games or gamer culture? These are the kinds of questions you should consider when writing. Remember to use critical vocabulary when discussing the features you choose to focus on.

You should do more than just identify important features of the game. You should discuss *why* those features are important. Consider how the game would be different if those features were missing or implemented differently. Consider how other games implement similar features. Discuss how the feature changes the experience of the game. Speculate about why the game designers chose to do it that way. Offer suggestions about how it could be improved.

You may structure the writeup however you see fit. You do not need to organize it according to the rubric—indeed, you probably should not, but all elements of the rubric must be present somewhere in the assignment to receive a high grade. You do not need to answer all the questions identified above; they are only suggestions to help you think critically about your experience. However you decide to organize your writing, you should present a central thesis which is clear at the beginning, middle, and end of the paper.

You are encouraged to include images. Images do not count toward the length of the assignment. For example, if you have 1 page of images, the total page length of the assignment should be between 2 and 4 pages.

You do not need to worry about spoiling the game for your instructor by revealing its content.

You are highly encouraged to make use of the university's writing lab to help you proofread your assignment for coherence and grammatical correctness.

Grading Rubric for Gameplay Journal Assignment

Student: _____

___ / 1 : Includes student's name.

___ / 1 : Uses proper formatting.

___ / 5 : Uses proper grammar and spelling (-1 for each mistake, max of -5).

___ / 1 : Identifies how the game fits into various genres.

___ / 4 : Accurately describes the game using the RULES schema.

    ___ / 1 : Defines the relevant rules.

    ___ / 1 : Identifies the game's core mechanic.

    ___ / 2 : Frames the game using at least 2 sub-schemas of RULES.

___ / 3 : Vividly describes the game using the PLAY schema.

    ___ / 1 : Describes the author's personal experience playing the game.

    ___ / 2 : Frames the game using at least 1 sub-schema of PLAY.

___ / 2 : Insightfully describes the game using the CULTURE schema (2 of 3 below).

    ___ / 1 : Identifies the influence of others games on this game.

    ___ / 1 : Identifies the influence of this game on other games.

    ___ / 1 : Frames the game using at least 1 sub-schema of CULTURE.

___ / 1 : A central idea is presented at the beginning, middle, and end.

___ / 1 : The writing is well-organized and flows nicely from paragraph to paragraph.

___ / 1 : The writing is convincing.

Total: _____ / 20

The Past and Future of Adventure Games, as Seen in *The Secret of Monkey Island*

By Stephen G. Ware

The Secret of Monkey Island is an iconic point-and-click graphic adventure game first released by Lucasfilm Games in 1990. It has appeared on various lists of the most important video games of all time due to its influence on the development of the adventure game genre. *Monkey Island* was the first PC game I ever played, and to this day the opening theme song from the 1991 CD-ROM version, played on wood pipes and steel drums, evokes in me a visceral reaction of excitement and mystery as the title screen reveals a Caribbean island at dusk.

The Secret of Monkey Island Title Screen

Set during the early 18th century in the Golden Age of Piracy, the games tells the story of young Guybrush Threepwood and his comical misadventures during a quest to prove himself a worthy buccaneer. Players explore numerous settings, including a Caribbean port town, two pirate ships, a desert island, and a hellish underground labyrinth. The setting, characters, and plot borrow heavily from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* theme park ride, though with a healthy dose of parody consistent with creator Ron Gilbert's previous work on *Maniac Mansion*. The detailed background art combined with high-quality ambient sound effects (including lapping waves and seagull cries) create a sensory experience of pleasure that prompted subsequent games in the genre to increase their production value. Several more of the gameplay pleasures identified by Marc LeBlanc are also evident in the game, including narrative, conflict, challenge, and, most of all, discovery.

The game is an interactive story with roots in text-based adventure games. Its core mechanic shows this influence by being very literary. The player interacts with characters and items in the game world by forming simple sentences. First the player clicks on a short list of verbs (e.g. pick up, push, pull, look at, talk to, give) on the bottom left of the screen. Then the player clicks on an item in the game world or in Guybrush's inventory, which is shown at the bottom right. The resulting sentence, like "Look at rubber chicken," is then acted out by the protagonist and results in immediate visual and textual feedback to the player that makes the results of their choices clear. This interface avoids the common "guess the verb" pitfall of text-based adventure games, making the player's actions more discernable.

The game's interface, showing verbs on the bottom left, inventory on the
bottom right, and the crosshair cursor used to interact with the game world.

The primary challenge of the game is solving plot-based puzzles in order to advance the story to its climax. Many other adventure games of the time, like *Myst*, feature small, self-contained puzzles that are separated from the primary experience as mini-games (a more recent example would be the *Pipe Dream* puzzles used to hack machines in *BioShock*). *Monkey Island* has no mini-games; all its puzzles are integrated seamlessly into the larger fabric of the game world and can often be solved in non-linear order or simultaneously. This provides a more integrated experience that produces meaningful play in a narrative-based game.

It is impossible to die in *Monkey Island*. The only way for a player to lose is to become so stumped by a puzzle that he or she gives up and stops playing. This is in sharp contrast to the games of Lucasfilm's main competitor, Sierra Online, in which death was common—indeed one of the many narrative pleasures of those games was discovering all the myriad ways to die. Lucasfilm's choice to disallow death affects the experience in two primary ways. Firstly, the player is under less pressure to make correct choices, shifting the pleasure of the experience from challenge to exploration. Secondly, it relieves the need to constantly save and re-load the game out of the fear of making mistakes. By discouraging this kind of meta-gaming and increasing emersion, the game is more likely to lead to a flow state. The inability to die was subsequently adopted by most other adventure games produced after *Monkey Island*, including those of today's adventure game renaissance, which is best typified by the work of Wadjet Eye Games. *Monkey Island* became an open system by helping to redefine the adventure game genre as it transitioned out of text and into 2D and 3D graphical worlds.

Though puzzles in the game usually involve multiple actions, places, and things, there is always only one solution. Most items have only a single use. This means that *Monkey Island* can best be understood as an Information Theory system. The puzzle solutions can be seen as messages which the player is attempting to decode based on common sense reasoning and clues provided by the game (which are often puns). For example, when Guybrush finds a large pot he comments that someone has previous cooked a head cheese in it. This provides a clue for later in the game when the pot must be used as a helmet. The amount of information present in any given puzzle depends on the number of items and characters available, which is usually between 10 and 100. To add challenge, some items are introduced purely as noise, such as a staple remover which is carried for most of the game but never used in any puzzle.

Puzzles each have a single solution because the relationships between items are defined on a 1-to-1 basis. They are tightly coupled and rarely context-dependent. This is the greatest weakness of *Monkey Island* and of most adventure games in general—they seem like they should offer opportunities for emergence but rarely do. The items that fill the game world and the protagonist's pockets have semiotic values that suggest when they should be used. Sometimes this helps the player solve puzzles, but more often it leads the player to try solutions which seem like they should work but don't. To gain entrance to the giant monkey head temple, Guybrush must train a monkey to swing continuously from a lever which opens the gate. Why can't the lever simply be tied down using the rope Guybrush has been carrying for several scenes? *Monkey Island* fails as a simulation system in this regard, which frustrates players by forcing them into an exclusively embedded narrative when some amount of emergence is expected. (One adventure game which has succeeded where others have failed is Emily Short's *Savoir Faire*. The core mechanic of this game is magically linking two items to behave similarly. To open a locked safe, the player can link it to any item which opens, including others doors or even a cuckoo clock.)

In conclusion, *The Secret of Monkey Island* represents a critical moment in the development of the adventure game. Its roots in the fantastical settings and ultimately text-based interface of its predecessors link it to the past. Its rich sensory pleasures, simpler interface, and feeling of safety defined the future by shifting the genre toward exploration, which seems a fitting change of course for games that purport to offer adventure. Unfortunately, it passed down its weakness along with it strengths. The plot-based puzzles require the player to decode the author's occasionally obscure intentions, leaving them frustrated at the lack of emergence. The challenge for adventure game designers going forward will be to learn from *Monkey Island*'s success while finding new ways to innovate the player's experience of exploring a fantastical fictional world.