Observation and Action: Finding Meaning in Novels and Games

By Anton Strenger

My life has been influenced by games I have played as well as novels I have read, but the influences do not feel the same to me. The way a game sticks with me is very different from the way a novel does. At the same time, I hesitate to say that these novels taught me lessons, or messages. It is more like, they allowed me to see the world from an unfamiliar perspective, and allowed me to see it in a way that I remembered and replicated for myself once the book was finished. Video games are great at the former, but for me, the experiences often lacked a follow through that made them as relevant, as *tangible*, to my life after it is over. My question becomes: can a video game ever move, teach, and provoke its player on the level that a well-written novel can its reader?

Novels have been around for centuries, and are often the first medium people think of for traditional storytelling. Like the game designer, the writer undertakes his art to communicate a mental experience (philosophical stance, feeling, portrayal of life) to his readers. Unlike the game designer, the writer does this communication all through an unchanging tangible artifact – a linear sequence of pages bound in a book – that he passes off to his reader. Like a multi-faceted gem, the reader can hold it, turn it over, examine it, and re-examine it. It has a stability that withstands multiple readings and, when well-written, reveals near infinite layers of depth and possibility.

Many gamers believe that games can hold even more meaning than a novel. They assume that interactivity inherently crafts a deeper and more meaningful experience because the player actively participates, instead of just being an observer as with a novel. This is not true. Interactivity is inherently more *engaging*, but this does not mean it is necessarily more meaningful. It all depends on what we mean by "meaningful." For example, sometimes I hear people talking about how certain games "changed their life." Surely we can agree that a work that changes one's life is meaningful. I wonder, though, how responsible the game itself is for that change. I think in these cases, the change is often spurred on by the game but not linked to the narrative of the game in particular. I do not mean to belittle these kinds of transformations. I played a game called Suikoden which "changed my life" because it opened up a whole new world of fantasy that I daydreamed in and absolutely loved. Ultimately, it convinced me to become a game designer. That was a very significant transformation, and I am grateful to the game for that. But the way that games can change lives seems different than the way novels can change lives.

Video games are a very different medium. There seems to be a tangible unchanging artifact – the game disc and its code – but by itself it is incomplete. We must interact with it and become almost a co-author. We cannot simply observe with the objectivity of an outsider, as we can with novels. We become part of the experience. We become the essential element of that experience, without which the game doesn't seem to exist in the same way. Think of what happens when people look at a book or a game on their shelf. Characters in novels seem to have a life of their own; when we see it on the shelf we are reminded of the characters and their unique traits, and they seem to hide inside, alive in the pages. When we see a game on the shelf, on the other hand, I believe we think more about the subjective personal experience that we had with the game than about the story or characters in some objective way.

When I look at the game Suikoden on my shelf, I have a rush of nostalgia associated with the first time I played the game. The memories involve me as the player, and the actions I took, as much if not more than the story and characters of the game itself. The game convinced me to see the world from the new perspective of wanting to become a game designer. This perspective I took away from

Suikoden into my own life was largely incidental; there was nothing explicit in the game about being a game designer. The experience, the influence that I felt, was something that arose from the game but was not tied to it. It arose from me being an active player and interpreting my own meaning. "Interpreting" isn't quite accurate, though. *Interpretation* is done when reading novels: there is a set of immutable information (much larger, compared to game narratives) that can be explained and rearranged in many different permutations. What I did when I played Suikoden and realized I wanted to become a game designer was a *construction* of meaning. This mirrors the media; as novels are experienced through observation and games through action, we find meaning in these media through interpretation (more like careful observation) and through construction (more like action, interaction, interactivity) respectively.

So video games, which are based in interactivity and have the player as an essential element of their experience, rely on the player to construct meaning rather than interpret it. This is encouraging for the game designer, because he has an exciting realm of ways to communicate meaning to the player, while allowing the player to personalize the meaning in a very compelling and lasting way. It is also discouraging, because constructed meaning by nature does not include the story and characters of the game as much (the player gets in the way, and makes subjectivity inevitable), and so the story and characters of a game seem less important. Maybe that is not a bad thing. But much of the compelling themes and wisdom we can find in novels comes from the interpreted meanings of these stories and characters. Can games have meaning that is interpreted as well, and if so, can it be on the same order of magnitude as the interpreted meaning possible with novels?

Suikoden is a grey area for me, because it is the game that I have been most influenced by and so I hesitate to say that I cannot derive as much (or as varied) a meaning from it as I can from novels that have influenced me. As such, I believe it warrants closer analysis. In the game you control the son of a great general in the Scarlet Moon Empire. You come to find out pretty early on that not everything is quite right in the Empire; they try to kidnap your friend in order to manipulate his magical power. In an early tragic moment, your friend passes on the power to you. On the run from the law, you meet a small revolutionary group working against the empire. The characters eventually become convinced that joining them is the right thing to do. This first act is fairly standard Japanese RPG fare, but around this point the game takes some really interesting turns. You begin building up an actual revolutionary army. You recruit a strategist, generals, warriors, innkeepers...as you carve out pieces of territory your influence spreads, which brings more people to your cause, which furthers the revolution. There are 108 characters that can be recruited to join the cause, from magicians to laundry washers, some that join as part of the plot and others which can only be sought by the most hardcore of fans. The characters join you in a castle, part of the game world where you spend a lot of time. You watch it grow and evolve as more people join your cause. I remember spending a lot of time just exploring the castle, finding where my newest recruits had set up camp and talking to them to see what interesting things they had to say. The game has such a sense of scale; battles take place in the traditional squad vs. squad way most of the time, but there are also massive army vs. army battles and tense one on one duels. It uses mechanics that are really unique amongst a sea of similar RPGs, and in my own extremely biased opinion I think it deserved a lot more attention that it got.

Toran Castle, the axis mundi of the Suikoden world

Why did Suikoden mean so much to me? I have always had the sense that this was an important personal cultural artifact in my life. It set me on the path to become a game designer. As I mentioned before, this was a meaning that I derived from the game not through interpreting the game's story or characters, but rather through a construction of my own meaning outside of these elements, through my interaction. This isn't a very satisfying explanation to me, because it means that the love I have for this game and the meaning I drew from it has little to do with the game itself. It was a product of the time of my life I was in when I played the game. I didn't start wanting to become a game designer because of anything specific about Suikoden, its story, or its characters; I started wanting to become a game designer because I played a role-playing game and was engrossed in it, and because Suikoden just happened to be the first role-playing game I played. My imagination was active and wild, and indeed almost any fantasy world, any set of characters, any story would have worked just as well.

But there is another meaning I derived from playing Suikoden that *is* specific to Suikoden's story. A few weeks ago, for some reason or another, I remembered back to something that happened when I was nine years old living in Missouri. I had recently learned that my family and I had to move to Georgia for my dad's job. It was the third time I had to face the challenge of moving to a new house, in a new state, going to a new school, and making new friends. I remember being in our living room and telling my mom about a cool invention that I wished I could make. It was called the friend suitcase. What it would do is that when I had to move to a new place, I could somehow shrink down my friends and place them as miniatures in the friend suitcase. That way, I could take them with me wherever I went, somehow restoring them to full size when I arrived at my new home. The physics of how this would happen were not clear to me, but I knew that I wanted to have my own friend suitcase more than anything. At the same time, I was old enough to suspect that such a contraption could not possibly exist. How would my friends continue to live out their lives if miniature copies of them went with me? A year or two later I was living in Georgia, and discovering Suikoden for the first time. I was amazed by it and flooded with desire to make my own games someday, but underneath these currents of enthusiasm, something else was hiding. By recruiting characters in Suikoden and bringing them to join my castle, I was acting out my desire to have a similar kind of control over having my friends close to me. The castle became my virtual representation of the friend suitcase.

This meaning that I derived from Suikoden is much more along the lines of a meaning extracted by interpretation than one extracted by construction. Like an original interpretation of a novel, the metaphor of the castle didn't sink in when I was playing the game, but was instead revealed upon observation and reflection after the fact. It seems that games can have interpretive meaning in addition to constructed meaning; the two processes are not mutually exclusive.

Returning to the medium of the novel, this makes perfect sense. We do not think of a novel as interactive, but an attentive reader is actively engaged in a dialogue with the novel while reading, relating parts of his own life to what is happening and using his previous experiences to construct some sort of understanding. Similarly, life-changing novels are powerful not because of the meaning we interpret but because of the experience we have reading the novel and making it relevant to our own life. We remember certain books because they found us at a key phases in our lives; they had themes and characters that were relevant and perhaps even well-written, but the power came from us as readers meeting the novel halfway, inventing and constructing our own framework around the story and absorbing it into our own life. In this way, if a meaningful work is defined to be one that changes one's life, then meaningful games and novels both have constructed meaning at their core. By constructing meaning, we take a mass-produced piece of media, bring it into our own workshop, and tailor it with our own uniqueness to make it a custom fit. It keeps us engaged and gives us a sense of ownership.

Suikoden had a powerful influence on me, but it did not teach me as a child how to deal with loss, transience, and what the Japanese call "ichigo-ichie." Other media, like novels, have helped me to see this problem and others from new perspectives. They communicate wisdom to me in a way that games have not yet been able to do. These interpreted meanings have a timelessness to them; they communicate wisdom about the human condition that transcends the specifics of people and place. Suikoden allowed me to act out my fantasy of a world where my friends were united, but it did not do anything to teach me how to deal with the real world where my friends are not united. Games do allow players to experiment with unfamiliar situations and fantastical worlds, but I think much of game design is so in love with this powerful and imaginative part of video games and the constructed meaning it allows for (and this part does deserve to be loved) that opportunities for communicating wisdom and allowing for interpreted meaning have been neglected. At the same time, the wisdom of interpreted meaning will not last if it is not made compelling and personal. The most influential novels and games are not those with the most powerful interpreted meaning, but rather those that become personally relevant through constructed meaning. This is why interactivity is so powerful. But powerful experiences arising from constructed meaning are no guarantee for the kind of multi-faceted and timeless wisdom that more naturally flows from the less objective interpreted meaning. A great game, a game that imparts wisdom, must leverage both these processes of meaning.