From Long Shot to Medium and Beyond – the Evolution of the Virtual Camera in the Long-Running Games Series Monkey Island

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ABSTRACT
The visual representation of video games has seen dramatic changes in the last three decades. Early text-based adventures and games using vector outlines to depict virtual worlds relied on the player’s imagination to create a compelling visual experience. Over time, video games have transformed into meticulously rendered virtual worlds that rival cinematic depictions. These dramatic changes in representational power have also affected the in-game virtual camera, which represents the player’s window into the game world.

Historic developments are best observed when a frame of references stays intact. The Monkey Island (1990-2011) series of adventure games provides such a stable framework, as the games’ creators attempted to keep the brand and visual experience recognizable throughout 20 years of development while continuously upgrading the technical standard, for example from a 2 dimensional depiction to 3D. Of particular interest here is the in-game virtual camera since framing and camera angle are chosen by the game’s designers, and thus represent a design choice rather than a depiction created by player action. This “automatic” camera provides an ideal object to study the evolution in visual representation.

The presentation analyses this historical development with a focus on the frame as an aesthetic category, taking clues from the established terminology in film studies. This
treatment aligns the computer game frame with perspectives on the frame in film studies. Indeed, the camera as a technical framing device and the resulting frame have long been analyzed by film scholars like Mitry (1965), Kemp (1996) or O’Rawe (2011). In comparison, many existing papers analyze in-game camera perspectives with a focus on technical developments or to describe the current state of the art (Ware and Osborne 1990, Halber et al, 2001, Salamin et al 2006, Christie and Oliver 2009).

This investigation is both a historical overview and a critical perspective on the use of cinematic techniques in videogames. It reflects and extends earlier work on visual perspectives in video games like Mandryk et al (2006), El-Nasr and Yan (2008), and Nietsche (2008). Finally, I will consider the question of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999) – is camera usage in video games purely derivative - or is there a new aesthetic vocabulary, which is original to video games?

Keywords
Virtual camera, in-game camera, cinematic frame, 2 dimensional plane, aspect ratio, framing, shot, depth, virtual cut.

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