Games, Montage, and the First Person Point of View

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ABSTRACT
Interactive montage combines the elements of play and visual representation. The analysis of four examples of interactive montage in reference to a first person point of view highlights the importance of control and spatial reference between player-character and virtual environment. Both emerge as conditions for meaningful interactive montage. The resulting visualization style adjusts to the new conditions and refers to but often breaks cinematic rules. A critical view at the value of classic film theory for this style concludes the paper.

Keywords
montage, cinema, first person, video game, point of view

MONTAGE AND GAMES
The visual fragmentation of the interactive playground through levels larger than one screen and explorable 3D worlds introduced cinematic elements to games. Framing, mise-en-scene, and montage entered the video game world. Addressing this development, academics examined camera control in virtual worlds [Drucker 1994; He/ Cohen/ Salesin 1996; Tomlinson/ Blumberg/ Nain 2000; Courty et.al. 2003], cross-referencing between games and movies [Bolter 1997; Manovich 2000; King/ Krzywinska 2002], and the use of cut-scenes [Klevjer 2002; Nitsche/ Roudavski/ Thomas/ Penz 2003] among other cinematic features. References to film have been applied to a degree that evoked the notion of 'cinema envy' [Jenkins TBP] and strong rejection [Eskelinen 2001]. But the element of montage in video games stayed strangely under-developed. Differences between the generation of montage in film and video games might be the reason for this vacuum.
Montage in film, here, is understood as the technique and result of selecting, editing, and piecing together separate film clips into a linear sequence. In contrast, 3D video games generate the picture on the fly, usually picking from a number of rule-driven viewpoints. Interactive montage leads to even less predictable results as it depends on the player's interaction. This complicates the traditional categorization of montage as a *result* of the editing and as a distinct process of cinematic meaning generation. Following this logic, Manovich identifies an 'anti-montage tendency in GUI' [Manovich 2000, 143].
But montage as *modus operandi* remains an active force in games. Moving images are assembled and the resulting montage is not only aesthetic but also functional. Poole recognizes this but argues that camerawork in games is unlike that in film, as it should use only the 'most useful angle' [Poole 2000, 93]. Yet aesthetic elements can surpass and question such a plain

'usefulness'.

INTERACTIVE MONTAGE AND THE FIRST PERSON POINT OF VIEW

In interactive montage every cut is initiated by the player and is an essential element of the gameplay. Montage as a *play* element has not been developed at all (e.g. missing in [Salen/ Zimmerman 2003] or [Crawford 2003]). Yet it is here that event creation through interaction and cinematic visualization meet, merge, and generate new effects. Any 'annihilation' [Eskelinen 2001] of a discussion of cinematic features in video games would be misleading – any approach based predominantly on film theory [Wolf 2001] risks to lack game specifics. To avoid asymmetric concentration and to limit the scope of this text two restrictions apply:

1) The editing has to be integral part of the functional gameplay.
2) Only cuts to or fro a first person POV are taken into account.

These restrictions narrow the range of games but allow for comparison between them and provide a dense starting point for the preliminary analysis.

Examples: four cuts

Four main camera positions dominate video games: the first person POV, following cameras (and related views such as over-the-shoulder cameras), overhead views (and related views such as isometric style), and predefined third person POVs (fixed or moving). Thus, resulting possible cuts for the first person POV are:

- First person POV to First person POV – example: *Goldeneye 007* (Rare Ltd., 1997) included a 'sniper view' that cuts from a first person POV to a zoomed-in view. The cinematic pendant would be a zoom cut – a rare feature.
- Following camera to First person POV (and back) – example: *Siren* (SCEI, 2004) gives access to multiple first person POVs as a main gameplay element through a "sight-jacking" feature. While the exploration phases of the game are presented in a following camera style, "sight-jacking" allows the player to look through the eyes of the enemy creatures lurking in the dark ready to kill the player character. Players have to switch between these POVs to create an escape strategy. A cinematic parallel might be the mind-reading feature in Bigelow's *Strange Days* (Katherine Bigelow, 1995) but cinematic establishing shots are entirely replaced by first person POVs tied to computer-controlled characters.
- Overhead view to First person POV (and back) – example: *Doom* (id Software Ltd., 1993), the seminal First Person Shooter (FPS) provides a vectorized 2D map overview. Notably, the view is not merely representational as players stay in control of the avatar and can explore the world further. In fact, finding secret passages often depends on the map-view. Comparable map views are found, for example, in classic adventure movies like Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* series. But the cut from the map-view first has to establish the new surrounding through a establishing shot instead of first person POVs.
- Predefined third person POV to First person POV (and back) – example: *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly* (Tecmo Ltd., 2003) combines predefined camera angles during the exploration phase and user-triggered cuts to a first person POV during the fighting phase. In this case, the first person POV is motivated by the game's weapon: a photo camera.

Discussion: spatial reinforcement

Although the visual language of video games often relates to cinematic styles it is obvious that

none of these editing strategies simply copies cinematic traditions. So how do they operate?
Despite its visual unfamiliarity the sniping rifle cut became an instant classic and omnipresent feature in FPS games. The reason is the reinforcement of the player positioning in the game space through the interactive cut. Player characters in FPS are situated in the virtual world by the position of the camera. The sniping view re-enforces their location. The cut builds on the established game set-up and becomes accessible in return. Interactive access and player positioning are applied and reinforced.
The same spatial reinforcement is at work in *Fatal Frame II*. Again, the game montage differs from cinematic traditions and might even break them. Players can switch into first person POV at any moment, even if the resulting cut threatens the basic cinematic rule not to cross the axis of action. The axis has been established by the predefined third person POV as the line between the player-avatar and any approaching enemy. Players trigger a cut to the character's POV and *onto* this axis. Depending on the avatar's orientation the result might be highly disorientating – far from Poole's 'most useful' view or a Pudovkin-like optimized observer POV. It can demand frenetic adjustment of the viewpoint by the player to find the axis of action necessary to master the situation, a task that is complicated by minimal lighting and lack of visual landmarks. Mastering the first person POV becomes integral part of the title's functionality and gaming experience. Ultimately the cut does not violate the game situation's spatial continuity but instead operates *with* it through the interactive feature and thus enforces the player positioning.
Doom's 2D map exemplifies the same reference visually through an arrow that indicates the player-avatar's position and orientation in the 3D game space. Because the player stays in control of her avatar's orientation and position a relatively seamless montage between the 3D first person POV and the 2D map overview is possible. Limited field of view, difficult orientation, bending of basic cinematic rules or minimalist 2D vector graphics do not lead to an incomprehensible montage as long as the spatial continuity between point of interactive access and cinematic visualization is guaranteed.

Conclusion: 'new montage'

How applicable are traditional film theories to the here outlined features of interactive montage in reference to the first person POV?
Instead of an assembly of different visual attractors [Eisenstein 1998] the player-character position is the single most dominating reference for the cut's efficiency. Instead of a guidance of the audience through the camera [Pudovkin 1959] the camera has to be guided by the player. Elements of Bazin's realist cinema seem to be closest to the demands of interactive montage – especially his demand for long takes, eye-level camera perspectives, and unobtrusive editing [Bazin 1967]. Such a reference makes sense in the light of the new "reality" that the playing of a game constitutes and the simultaneous visualization of it. Players realizing the event and its visualization might retrace Bazin's ideals not only in the event-creating gaming situation but also in the cinematic presentation and montage of it.
The reinforcement of the player positioning through interactive access has been identified as key element for the evolving montage in connection with the first person POV. Interactive access and spatial reinforcement are the joints around which this kind of interactive montage develops. But is this conclusion not inherited from the outset that focused on first person POVs?
Siren illustrates that this reference cannot be taken for granted. Using multiple first person POVs in combination with following cameras *Siren* asks players to orient themselves in the game world through complex and changing visualizations beyond their control. Compared to *Fatal Frame*, *Doom*, and *Goldeneye* the visual result is less legible as the player has difficulties to know through whose eyes the world is presented, where this viewer is positioned or oriented. The

weakening of the player positioning makes the title one of the hardest to play in its genre. The problems of playing *Siren* do not grow from the idea of 'sight-jacking' – which was praised by critics and players [see e.g. www.metacritics.com] – but from the difficulties to understand the montage and reconstruct the virtual space from it. The interactive feature was laudable, its visual implementation too demanding.

One interpretation would be that *Siren*'s visualization is too advanced for today's 'casual' players. Like in film and television, the development of montage is an ongoing process in video games and maybe players and designers need further 'education' before we can unlock more expressive forms. One more reason to start the debate on montage in video games.

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