

# **Cinematography and Ludology: In Search of a Lucidography**

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## 1. Introduction

Notwithstanding the present dispute between the narratologists and ludologists (nor to mention the ongoing struggle for paradigmatic methodology within the field), it is fairly safe to say that computer games and cinema have much in common. Both are concerned with images, movements, space, narrative, and, perhaps on a higher level, visual culture, tactile presence, 3D object manipulation, and experiments with sequential structure. However, if films similar to books are realised actions – one can not alter the linear progression of words and images; then games are much rather framings of events and sequences. While films aim at screening events in time and space; games are occupied with facilitating events open for user-oriented interaction. A film is simply there. A game is, in a certain sense, only complete once (and if) it is played. The material of a motion picture calls for observation and hermeneutic investment. This is true of games also. As intervention tools the eyes (and the brain) are important in films. When it comes to games, it is the fingers on the keyboard, joystick, controller, game pad, etc. that do the trick. As game researcher Markku Eskelinen points out, “in art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure” (Eskelinen 2001). Vital discrepancies put aside, the fact that the spatiality of games and the cinematographic expressions and editing mechanisms of films can be pooled means that they both institute what Lev Manovich calls “fake spaces”. In these erroneous spaces the user is “‘present’ inside a space which does not really exist” (Manovich 1998: 190). Manovich further suggests that “cinema can be thought of as an interface to events taking place in 3-D space” (Manovich 2001: 362f.).

The business of this paper is to enquire more deeply into the various intermediations of games and films. First, I chew over the interface or screen level (the explicit level), and second, I deal with how games thematize or – even – ‘think’ film; and vice versa. My proposition is that not only do computer games

inherit some of the well wrought aesthetic and functional means of cinema; moreover, both films and games continue to copy forms of attraction from each other in an increasingly rapid pace.

So, we are in search of my title neologism: *lucidography*. What happens when one tries to figure out the relationships between games (*ludology*) and films (*cinematography*)?

In short, the following lucidographic typology encloses three captions:

1. Film elements in the game (cinematographic ludology)
2. Game elements in the film (ludological cinematography)
3. Game motives in the film

Whereas 1 and 2 belong to the explicit (screen and interface) level; bullet 3 is sited on the thematic (implicit) level.

## **2. Film elements in the game**

Basically there are two cinematographic logics in computer games: i) a filmic representation that uses the potentials of interaction; and ii) a cinematic mode which covers “any non-interactive storytelling or scene-setting element of the game” (Hancock 2002). The first logic is especially associated with what is traditionally referred to as *gameplay*, which points to 1) the player-flow through a game’s sequence; 2) the system’s ability to handle input-output relations (how does the game react on the user’s interventions?); and 3) the visual, textual, and spatial representation of the player’s operational possibilities and constraints (are the clickable buttons of the game decisive for the chain of events?). Game designer Sid Meier speaks of *gameplay* as “interesting choices” and many players characterize a successful *Counter-Strike* run-through as a ‘cinematic’ experience that further unifies the three above mentioned *gameplay* logics.

Let us now look at two film techniques adopted by the game industry: *focalisation* and *montage*.

### *2.1 Focalisation*

*Focalisation* is a concept that covers the localisation and disposition of viewpoints. Where is the point (in space) from which a game world is observed; and how does the interface depict (or simulate) what can be seen within the corresponding angle? What is crucial here is the facilitation of the body in space in order to create two spatial forms (or, as it were, depictions of spatial simulations): that of the screen and that of the user (Walther 2003b; 2003e). The enduring idea in multiple games is exactly to bring forth the illusion that physical reality (i.e. the space that surrounds the screen whilst playing) is transparent with space perceived ‘on’ screen. Different modes of focalisation are briefly described in table 1 below:

Inner focalisation	Outer focalisation	Abstract (or no) focalisation
A world seen from the 'inside', e.g. Quake, Doom, the interior of race cars, e.g. Need for Speed, Gran Turismo, etc.	A world observed from the outside, e.g. Fifa 2003, Madden, Tomb Raider, numerous match and racing games, etc.	Examples: Tetris, Puzzles, Tic-tac-toe, etc.

**Table 1: Types of focalisation**

In *Unreal Tournament* one can easily become seasick because the processing of space happens (almost) simultaneously with one's observation of it. Another example – which further points to the great relevance of proper hardware – is the 'holes' in the flow that arise whenever the system fails to update space efficiently enough. Thus, while one races down a mountain with monster Ferrari's in the tail (and the opponent's MacLaren F1 in the lower half of the split-screen mode in *Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit II*) it is a somewhat peculiar experience to observe one's car vanish into a black gap followed by trees, bushes, crowds, and other textures. My point is that the space of focalisation – which primarily targets at a concrete representation *in* space – necessitates undeniable bonds between perspective, space perception, and space representation. The seasickness, then, is really a question of space 'happening' *with* the player, or the player 'happening' *before* space.

## 2.2 Montage

*Montage* is utterly important in cinema as an artistic means of expression (Bordwell and Thompson 1996). One distinguishes between *mise-en-scene*, which is the way the represented world is arranged and staged; *cinematography*, that points to the camera's filming of this world (sometimes cinematography is a term for all the areas of film production and analysis); and, finally, *montage*, which concerns the editing (compilation or disruption) of scenes, sequences, etc.

Often computer games use montage. However, it works differently compared to films since the editing of the spaces and sequences of the game needs to be in line with the interaction possibilities of the user. As Poole notices, camera shifts, for instance, are only offered to the gamer in order to provide the most expedient point of view (Poole 2000: 82; cf. also Sørensen 2003: 55). Many times cuts are troublesome as regard the game's flow. The problem is thus to balance between aesthetic and functional montage requirements. Still, we can distinguish between three montage forms in computer games:

- *Cinematographic montage* occurs in those games that are already cinematic in terms of narrative and visual expression. A contemporary example is *Resident Evil* in which camera shifts and use of ‘subjective’ focalisation mark an intense aesthetic yet also a rather inept editing of game functionality. This technique was originally launched by the action game *Alone in the Dark* (1993) where the dynamic montage creates interesting angles in space and the characters that inhabit it. In *Grim Fandango* (1997) the player may choose his own montage by deploying either *character relative mode* or *camera relative mode*. In the first mode we see the world as our avatar (Manny) watches it from his place in space, while the other mode is represented by a camera that ‘records’ the space from a third person perspective. Finally, the adventure game *Myst* (1993) celebrates a montage style in its use of discrete image successions rather than seamless cinematic motion (as in 3D shooters).
- *Anti-montage* belongs to the largest group of computer games. They are “trajector[ies] through space” (Manovich 2001: 284). In *Doom*, *Quake*, and *Duke Nukem* there are no visible cuts and therefore no – at least not explicit – editing mechanisms. The continuity does not, however, prevent the games from making extensive use of *cut-scenes* (Hancock 2002; and section below). Anti-montage games do not refer to their native laws of activity; rather, they are framings of the act of motion itself. “A videogame is there to be played”, Poole concludes (Poole 2000). The anti-montage logic of the computer game answers to the technique known in cinematography as *plan sequence* that “refers to a long usually complex segment involving much camera-movement during which a whole scene is filmed in a single shot without cuts” (Jensen 2001: 316).
- Thirdly, there is *macro-montage* typically found in strategy and management games such as *Red Alert 2* and *Civilization*. The perspective is placed in a God-like position from which the camera looks down upon an isometric micro world in which the items on the x, y, and z-axis are identical in size. In modern computer games the user may in addition zoom in on or pan across the represented world – the player dives down into the world from his God-like camera cloud – yet still the zoom or pan technique is shaped as a plan sequence, that is, devoid of the utilization of montage and explicit cuts.

### 2.3 Non-interactive scene-setting

When it comes to the “non-interactive” narration and “scene-setting” initially evoked by Hancock I propose to differentiate between the following six game-cinematographic categories (of course they can be further combined which gives us an enormous amount of cinematic game possibilities):

1. Trailer
2. Cut-scene
3. In-game film
4. Flash forward and flash back (automatic transport)

5. Automatic replay
6. User movie

### 2.3.1 Trailer

The trailer is a strange entity aesthetically as well as in terms of narration. It shows the best pictures from the film or the game but it does not provide the complete overview. The trailer builds suspense, preferably through a tight combination of attention-grabbing music and aggressive cuts – but it does not deliver any reconciliation. It is a peek into a world that the trailer, in turn, has a certain detachment towards. The trailer is a gnostic art form in its own right, and yet it is nothing without the accompanying film or game.

In our days it is absolutely unthinkable to market a game without a trailer. Here, the game industry has relentlessly borrowed from cinema. The above mentioned tricks – the image stream, the suspense, the cuts and rhythms – are without further ado inherited from the film universe. The *Black and White* trailer (in itself a hybrid between shooter, strategy, and adventure) thus depicts martial art scenes (starring a stand-up cowboy-like cow and a frightening monster), exotic poly-rhythms, accompanied by delicious pans in adventurous landscapes.

### 2.3.2 Cut-scenes

Over the years cut-scenes have developed into an independent technology in computer games design (Klevjer 2002). Hancock defines it thus:

Primarily, the cutscene is there to make a game's world more real – not just by telling a story, but also by reacting to the player, by showing him the effects of his actions upon that world and thus making both the world more real and his actions more important. The cutscene fills the role of both prequel and epilogue: showing the player what the world is like before he enters it, what needs he has to fill, what he has to work with and what he has to face, and afterwards showing what the effects of his actions upon the world were, whether good, bad or both (Hancock 2002).

The aim of the cut-scene is to position itself amidst the interactive action sequences and events within the game. In this respect cut-scenes are interruptions of the game's flow, a kind of intermezzos showcasing increasingly impressive graphical design. On the other hand, cut-scenes function as motivational elements in the narrative unity of the game and are henceforth to be considered unnecessary as well as necessary. Hancock lists the following formats:

- *Conversation scenes*: Waste of time for the shooting crazy gamers. Often conversations have been labelled out as 'interaction killers' since the player is usually inactive while pre-scripted questions and answers flicker athwart the screen (cf. Juul 2001). One example of this is *X-Files The Game* where the user's alter ego, the FBI agent Craig Willmore, blocks the continuity of the game in order to talk and pursue information (and in the end ones gets very annoyed by the chain of events), while a nice counter-example is *Hal-Life* in which several NPC's (Non Player Characters)

communicate with the player (“Barney”) without resorting to the immediate looks and likes of cut-scenes.

- *Scene and mood creator*: A cut-scene can also be used to create a certain mood or perhaps make visible a special world for the player. The introduction to Eidos Interactive’s *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* prepares the user for phenomena like reincarnation and future universes, while the intro in the quest game *Diablo II* presents a heavy load of the gothic uncanny.
- *Cut-scene as introduction to plot or gameplay elements*: Now we are clearly inside the game itself. These cut-scenes are typically used as a visualisation of novel effects and new sub-missions in the game’s course. They might initiate a new level, new enemies to be defeated, or they may brief of a puzzle lying ahead.
- *Foreshadowing* consists in “hints of a particularly dramatic conflict or event to come” (Hancock *ibid.*). A prominent example is *Final Fantasy VII* where the image of the mythological main enemy Sephiroth is build from a number of flashbacks and cut-scenes using third person perspective. Also in *Myst III: Exile* we witness on several occasions pre-rendered scenes featuring the arch villain Gehn. The dodge in foreshadowing, Hancock informs us, is to provoke the player to game on by setting up images and stories that keep pushing the player towards closure, i.e. revealing the inner nucleus of the story, or merely winning the game.
- A final cut-scene which I shall comment upon is “*show effects on action*”. It functions as a reward for the player’s struggle with the game world (it is a kind of ‘in-game-entertainment-pause’ function). Show effects on action extends the interactive situations in the game. Consider for instance scenes with players and crowd in *Fifa 2003*. If the goal was elegantly performed (or much needed) the pre-scripted scene is not experienced as cut-scene but rather as ‘in-game’, i.e. the scene is naturally integrated in the user’s own patterns of action.

### 2.3.3 In-game films

In-game films are hard to spot since they are exactly designed to be invisible for the end-user. They act as post-rendering of the user’s movements. For instance, one might not jump far enough, so the game system needs to ‘take over’ and complete the jump. In the introductory tutorial level in *Hitman* (which, like most games today, is integrated in the story and action set-up of the game) especially complex motion patterns and combat techniques are performed by the system, i.e. the engine, and not solely by the user. Similarly, scripted examples of tackling, dribble, and shooting provide the soccer magic with a touch of elegance in *Fifa 2003* and *Madden*.

### 2.3.4 Flash forwards and flash backs

Flash forwards and flash backs can in certain games – especially adventures – be characterised as *automatic transport*. If the player is blocked from proceeding in the game’s action and story the game will push him forward and thus maintain and sustain the narrative drive (as well as hang on to the gameplay). In *Blackout* the player gets a blackout if he does not, within a fixed time range, manage to move on.

### 2.3.5 Automatic replay

Automatic replay is a technical appliance typically found in the so-called match and racing games. A good example is *Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit II* where well performed stunts with brakes and wheels are rewarded with a build-in slow motion replay of the action (which could, incidentally, be labelled the ‘wow-effect’).

### 2.3.6 User movie

Finally, there is the cinematographic device that I suggest calling *user movie*. As part of the game (i.e. gameplay) itself, the system visualises the player’s operations and choices through different slow motion, replay, and editing functions. Once again, *Fifa* can serve as an example. For some replays of e.g. an attack have an edifying character in terms of competence (what went wrong; what was good; and why was there off-side?); while for others the replays should merely be enjoyed for their filmic qualities.

## 3. Game elements in the film

What happens when game interface and gameplay are copied onto cinematography? A quick answer reads that the direct transfer from an interactive medium to a non-interactive medium is not without certain costs. The special ‘coolness’, ‘playability’ – or whatever term we wish to use – which is connected to games such as *Resident Evil*, *Super Mario Bros.*, and *Mortal Combat* – all of which have since been adopted to cinema – is precisely contained in the fact that they are games *to be played* (cf. also Pearce 2002). One produces in a certain sense one’s own film rather than simply watch it. Nevertheless, numerous games and films are today unleashed as simultaneous elements within a vast and very complex media strategy. Think James Bond movies/games here; think *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*; *Minority Report*; *X-Men*; *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, or *Enter The Matrix/The Matrix: Reloaded*. Another important difference that obstructs the direct connection between games and films – while at the same time manifesting the poles of both medias’ intuitive potentials of fascination – is the relation between *realised action* and *framed action* (Heide Smith 2003, in press). Both the book and the film are ‘finished’ forms, whereas the game produces some rules and object relations that the user can interact with and hereby ‘complete’ the material at hand. When one writes a book, one has already terminated the action (and, of course, the sequentiality by which the action occurs). When one designs a game, one has first and foremost created a frame surrounding the actions.

And yet the above dichotomy sounds more rigid than it really is. Of course a lot of games – especially the complex ones – possess tools to, at least, *steer* the development of the game. This is done by a control mechanism which is nested in the game’s code. As a player one must first open A before access is gained to B which, in turn, provides a hint of C, and so on. However, it is not all that can be controlled. For

instance, even carefully constructed cybernetic input-output relations can not alter the fact that some players may never *get* to A.

It is therefore more or less illusory to consider that one can safely move a gameplay from the game to the film – even though they hold the same title. What one *can* do – and which has been done so far with great success – is to take *parts* of the ludological techniques and remediate them in a cinematographic context. In the same fashion, one can export features from cinema to the game universe and thus create a ‘cinemaplay’, e.g. by using the cut-scenes and in-game movies as described above. Note, however, that we are solely on the level of the interface, i.e. we are only concerned with those elements from games and films that we can directly observe on the screen.

In the following I shall describe and comment upon three modes of game elements in the film (ludological cinematography): 1) The first deals with a game-like motion pattern and takes place on the film’s micro level. 2) Second, I shall focus on a special effect, namely *bullet time* in *The Matrix* (the film) and *Max Payne* (the game); and 3) thirdly, I show the ironic interface strategy in the motion picture *The Beach*.

### 3.1 Motion pattern on the micro level

One way of conceptualising the ludological effect on the cinematic language is to draw a distinction between micro and macro level. The micro level refers to the motion pattern of a specific scene or sequence, i.e. the spatial design of the film. Is there something within the choreographic succession that points in the direction of the gameplay? The macro level is linked to the structural disposition of the film and tells us something about its overall architecture. In concordance with this analytical distinction one can say that the micro level points to the visual expression of the film, while the macro level is associated with the narrative construction. In addition, the micro level basically concerns *space* whereas the macro level entails the *temporal* (and, perhaps, experimental) organization.

Micro level	Macro level
Motion pattern	Structural disposition
Visual expression	Narrative construction
Space	Time

**Table 2: Micro and macro level**

There is a central scene in *The Matrix* which, I will claim, is modelled after the choreographic unicity of the computer game. Also, a great deal of the cult like success assigned to the reception of *The Matrix* might stem from the film’s close affinity to games.

In the scene that commences the tempo, the image pulse, and the spatial composition, we tag on Trinity (Carrie Anne-Moss) on her mission inside The Matrix. After having beaten a couple of cops in the ‘false’ world – using a technique of which I shall return briefly – Trinity escapes determinately up on a roof, down some stairs, through narrow corridors and bleak streets, and finally she disappears inside a phone booth while calling Tank, the sys-op at Nebudcadnezar (the pirate ship in the ‘real’ world, 2199). What is interesting to note here is the choreographic precision with which the cameras record Trinity and her prosecutors, the so-called “Agents” (artificial intelligences). The point of view shifts from *tracking* (filmed motions through a track) that ‘geometrizes’ the film-space and delineates the z-axis (i.e. the lines into the depth of the image) to a kind of ‘vertical scrolling’ in which the camera pans in a straight line down the façade of a dark building. Hence, with the camera’s aid the contours of an interface are laid out within which we are able to locate paths, objects, and relations between them. Hereby game characters emerge into film avatars – with whom one can not interact, only observe – and, similarly, the spatial gestalt of a potential game is reconfigured into a cinematographic level design. The importance of the depicted space in *The Matrix* lies thus not in existential relations to people, places, and things; rather its value refers to the planes, coordinates, and tracks inhabited by game characters and level orientations. In short, the cinematic screen comes to resemble – it is – a game interface.

### 3.2 *Special effects*

Films like *Jurassic Park*, *Appolo 13*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Titanic* all make excessive use of various digital techniques. This is especially true of *special effects*. The funny thing about special effects is that they may be special – i.e. they transcend realisation within a world with natural laws – but at the same time they are intentionally undetectable. One is not supposed to see them when, for instance, a digitized sequence with president Nixon is mounted as back layer in a scene with Forrest Gump; or when the mountain landscape behind Sylvester Stallone in *Cliffhanger* in reality is made of colorized object relations in a mainframe computer. Hollywood uses the computer, and yet the idea is to conceal the latter in a “transparent immediacy” that in turn favours realism (cf. Bolter and Grusin 1999). Often the spectator *knows* that the computerised effects are present; however, that’s beside the point.

Nevertheless, there is a central scene in *The Matrix*, once more, where the film does not try to hide its special, digital effects. When Trinity is not overcome by the Agents in the scene referred to above it is largely due to her magnificent kickboxing skills shown just as masterly in a sequence that has since been dubiously copied to other films (e.g. the spectacular introductory plan sequence in *Swordfish*; and using intertextuality in the animation film *Shrek*). Right in Trinity’s powerful jump into a direct vertical tangent from the floor, the image is frozen, where after the camera slides in a circular sphere around Trinity who thus becomes a figure of immobility and speed at once. The Wachowski brothers placed two film cameras at the start and end point of the entire motion track and no less than 120 photo cameras along the curve of the total ride recorded by the camera. Once the scene with Trinity is shot the cameras record the action sequentially while the photo cameras simultaneously take 120 pictures of an exact place in space. Indeed this is an elegant way to combine a continuous and a discontinuous organization of space by

fusing film and photo in one and the same image set. Next, computer manipulation interpolates the discrete photo footages so that they look like a seamless animation anew. As is well known, the result is astounding.

Another example of bullet time that is worth spelling out is a scene in which Neo and Morpheus have jacked into the matrix and is now walking on the streets of a major city. At one time they pass through a random pedestrian. Morpheus – or, actually, Tank, the system operator – freezes the scene so that the urban location suddenly becomes a stylized cartoon scenario. Shortly after, Morpheus says “turn around” to Neo who turns around and looks directly into a gun held by the person they have just passed and who has now been transformed into one of the Agents of the matrix. The crowded city space becomes a ‘city scape’, a ‘liquid’ world or a variable interface that can be scaled and decomposed à la *SimCity* or the pause-menu in a first person shooter. The world is on standby. Had this been a computer game, it might have been here, at this moment, one should save the game; perhaps this would have been a signal to the system to download new levels into the memory of the computer, and so on. Now, instead, it is a motion picture, and Neo and the rest of us must wait to see what the director (or: system operator) has in stall for us.

The panoramic camera eye refashions itself into a Potemkin embellishment that is distinguishable from the avatars in the simulation software, the “loading program”. Neo and Morpheus are in motion while the rest of the programmed world is at a standstill. However, the movement that Neo and Morpheus thus demonstrate as opposed to the cinematographic bullet time is ironically suspended when the next sequence in the film shows us the ‘real’ reality where the two main characters are locked into position in their ‘cyber chairs’ while being loaded into the matrix.

Bullet time, which is a pregnant visualisation of the martial art tradition of the Hong Kong action movies, has since been utilized with great success in the computer game *Max Payne* (2000) in which several slow motion effects, calculatedly unrealistic close combat scenes and illustrations of “New York Minutes” occur.

At this point one should not fail to notice the flaws in my argumentation. What we have, is exactly an influence *from* the film and *to* the game, and not oppositely. This is not the entire truth, though. Rather, we are dealing with a delicate, mutual train of influence. It can never turn out complete, because the cinematographic layers most often are installed as zones within the narrative sequence of the game, and because the ludological events in the film similarly are unrealistic due to the absent possibility of interaction. But, as Poole remarks, the remediation points in both directions, from games to films, and from films to games. One can trace the inspiration to multiple combat scenes – including *The Matrix* – in computer games like *Street Fighter*, *Mortal Combat*, and *Tekken* (Poole 2000: 75). Further, *The Matrix* draws heavily upon genre characteristics of the Japanese *anime* tradition, most notably the adult cartoon *Ghost in the Shell* by Mamoru Oshii (1996) where the male protagonist, Major Kusangani, like Neo can jack in and out of cyberspace through a plug in the back of his head. Also, cinema, games, and animation point to a common consumer culture in which tempo, violence, and ballet-like precision movements are centred. Whether this is good or bad – in a moral agenda – I will leave unsaid.

### 3.3 The ironic interface strategy

The last example of a 'ludologisation' of cinematography is taken from director Danny Boyle's *The Beach* (2000). In the film we follow the young Far East backpacker Richard who stumbles across an unspoiled, paradisiacal choral island. On the island he encounters a modern hippie society whose patriarchs and matriarchs are eager to protect their secret from the threatening world outside. As in *Lord of the Flies* and with loads of intertextual references to *Apocalypse Now* ("there is nothing like the smell of napalm in the morning"), *The Marathon Man* ("is it safe?"), and Peter Weir's *The Mosquito Coast*, the island community degenerates into competing factions, and thus the catastrophe seems unavoidable. In the midst of this conspiratorial process Richard is excommunicated from the idyll and cast away into the woods where he quickly dissolves into youthful madness.

As I said, *The Beach* humorously deploys lots of intertextual references to a young generation's preferred media and entertainment culture. Even so, in the woods with Richard, the film cannot help but showing the remediation and the intertextual 'machine'. Boyle depicts lurking paranoia and the dissemination of the human self by recreating the cinematic screen into a Nintendo interface. Richard runs through the tropical woods, and in a cycle of shots he is malformed into something that resembles a game character in a 3D shooter – complete with GameBoy Advance point scores, inventory list, and menu bar at the bottom of the screen. In a short glimpse Richard is not a lively human being but a figure made of pixels, an avatar who gathers points, game objects, crosses obstacles, and who eventually becomes a mediated centre within a ludological framework. In Boyle's vision modern filmmaking's ongoing import of gadgets and objects of a broad leisure culture is shown to belong not only to a thematic level but manifests itself explicitly on the interface. The world that Richard takes shelter in as a shield against the outer world, and the reality with which he secures a base of references, is exactly that of computer games (especially the portable ones), the animations, and the 'neo-mythological' film classics. Therefore, it is totally natural that his intrapsychic condition is represented as a ludological interface, and, similarly, that the gaze of the film necessitates the internal world of Richard in the shape of a concrete image of the cited pop culture.

## 4. Game motives in the film

In our examination of the ludographic paradigm we have now arrived at the inspection of how games influence cinema in terms of thematics and structure. This means that we do not focus on the visible explication of ludological practices (i.e. the interface-screen) but instead direct our attention towards the underlying sequentiality, structure, thematics, and narrative disposition. We shall therefore look closer at *time* in the game-film, the macro level, and we shall furthermore distinguish between 1) structural and 2) thematical remediations of the game within the film.

#### 4.1 The structural macro level

A number of significant new films are heavily enthused by the way games are structured on a macro level. In this respect we shall dwell more deeply into the award winning German film *Lola Rennt* (1998) by Tom Tykwes.

*Lola Rennt* circles around an unfortunate male and a heroic female. Manni has just completed a smuggling job and has received 100.000 Deutschmark that he is supposed to pass on to his boss, Ronnie. Regrettably, Manni loses the cash in the subway. Now he rightfully fears the wrath of Ronnie; however, the problem is that he has only got twenty minutes to come up with the money again. Desperately he then phones his girlfriend Lola who, in the split-second after, rushes down the stairs, through the streets of Berlin to the bank where her dad is the manager. Her pledge for a loan is rejected, and she leaves the bank empty-handed. As Lola sees Manni again he has in the meantime robbed a mall and is killed shortly hereafter in a shootout with the police.

And then, all of a sudden, the story begins anew – and this time with the realisation of three different strings of event. In one version, Lola raids the bank and takes the father as hostage; in another Lola is lucky at the casino while Manni – lest we forget – is still nailed to the telephone booth.

*Lola Rennt* relates to the logic of the computer game in several ways. First and foremost there is the real-time mode which, as it were, is a sort of expanded or hyper-real real-time, since 20 minutes are shown as (in sum) 81 minutes. We are presented with a stylized film universe whose elements are pieced together by a bunch of media forms and film genres – and, of course, the computer game as well as a provocative hypertextual structure where the characters that Lola randomly bumps into function as ‘links’ to other worlds. *Lola Rennt* becomes a *sequentialised, non-linear story*, i.e. a cinematic, historical presence that pursues the (potential) paths mostly covered by traditional narratives. The non-linear aspect is thus manifested in the movie as symptoms of the ‘wrong turns’ frequently experienced by players (one turns right instead of left; shoots the villain too quickly; fails to retrieve one’s ammo, etc.). On the level of the interface *Lola Rennt* is no less appealing; cinematic techniques comprise pans, jump-cuts, slow and fast motion, split-screen, intercut color, animation, integrated title leaves, and much more.

Maybe realism and existential sincerity are mislaid in a movie like *Lola Rennt* because, as noted by Torben Grodal, it is altered from a “mimetic” to a “playful mode” in its rewinding to and forward recording from a central bifurcation point (Mannie’s death) (Grodal, no year). Notwithstanding the opening of the film’s palpable flirtation with ironic media codes and norms, *Lola Rennt* leaps from being realistic to being playful, i.e. it is transported from an environment (a space) that normally engrosses a linear plot to experimenting with the temporal construction of this very plot. Thus, *Lola Rennt* seeks towards an incongruous ‘testing’ of precisely those conditions of realism with which it was initially subsumed. The question is whether this ‘repair’ of an irreversible destiny that traditionally marks the linear medium (if one is dead, one is dead!) happens under the auspices of realistic or construed premises.

The latter claim – the interrogation of constructed worlds, stories, and timelines – accounts for why we presumably watches and understands movies such as *Groundhog Day*, *Sliding Doors*, and *Existenz* in a different fashion. In *Groundhog Day* the main character is forced right until the end to live through the same twenty four hours, day upon day. In *Sliding Doors* Helen (Gweneth Paltrow) catches the train in one story while the doors close in the other. The film follows through juxtaposition the two parallel stories that unfold from the same point of departure. Most of the action in *Existenz* takes place inside a future video game where the brain inhabits a realistic and, at the same time, bizarre and ‘physicalised’ mental universe that, however, at the end turns out to be yet another Chinese box in a deceitful reality game. In these films we somehow accept the twists and turns of the plot in repetitive branches since they are part of the suspension of natural laws that we choose to believe in. In conclusion, one could say that in *Groundhog Day* and *Sliding Doors* the iteration and the bifurcation of the plot and its temporal make-up is a *consequence* of the super-natural story kernel; while the repetition and the ludological composition in *Lola Rennt* is rather an *effect* of a certain toying around with ludological and cinematographical (i.e. lucidographical) structures.

#### 4.2 The thematic macro level

How does the film medium stage a wide-ranging popular culture wherein the computer game plays a central role? Let us return to *The Matrix* of which Steven Poole comments:

With a cunning script incorporating a kaleidoscope of Homeric, Christian and Gibsonian references, it starred Keanu Reeves as a computer hacker who learns that the world is something like an enormous game of SimCity run by computers to keep us enslaved (Poole 2000: 74).

In its allegory of a fiction within the fiction, *The Matrix* illustrates to what extent the paradigm of reality necessitates a contract of illusion in computer games: one is present and absent at the same time. One is the character, one plays. However, a distinction must be marked: one is precisely *not* the character, one plays. The interdependence of presence and absence in gaming exactly demands this dialectics: the concoction of identification (‘is’) and control (‘is not’). This delicate duplicity is exemplified by the “loading software” that Neo together with the hacker rebel Morpheus gains access to. In cyberspace, which is directly connected to their consciousness, they are equipped with adventurous combat skills, they can handpick weapons from gigantic resorts, bend spoons and throw themselves elegantly off skyscrapers – the latter now being common sense in blockbuster movies like *Spiderman*, *Daredevil*, and *Hulk*. However, as Mads Ole Sørensen remarks, in *The Matrix* one “reaches the ultimate relation to the virtual avatar, since if one is killed there [in the virtual space; BKW], one also dies in a physical sense” (Sørensen 2003: 80). Naturally, it is the ‘replay’ and ‘save’ operations that separate the two media from each other, the real computer game and the un-real virtual reality software in *The Matrix*. In the latter, the interaction may be de-embodied – the real body sleeps in 2199 while the mind is out on the loose in the 1999 space; yet, the mind seems to be fragile and fatal to such an extent that *The Matrix* comes close to signifying a very moral conclusion (cf. Walther 2002 and 2003a). If the personified simulation can be staged in infinitely repetitious loops in which reality is pliant and ‘gamable’; then the mind is the absolute ‘stop’-bottom of the game. When the mind is terminated, the game is over. Hence, the dilemma remains

whether it is the mind or the body who is really ‘game over’. Both, actually. *The Matrix* instates a two world system where Neo and Morpheus can do certain things in the virtual world and something else – and less – in the real world. But death, it seems, unites them both. If one dies in one place, one dies as well in the next.

There is little doubt that the era of *The Matrix* belongs to ludology, the computer games. The age of ludology invokes a frame of references and preferences, not alone for the effects and the cinematography played out in perfection, but furthermore for the paradigmatic interpretation of the film. Computer games are – one could insist with Kant (although he obviously did not think of this himself) – the transcendental condition for the movie in the digital era, the ‘optics’ that makes the film’s reality construction intelligible, perhaps even creatable in the first place. Without the presence of computer games there would be no ‘realities’ to stage and manifest. The Wachowski brothers’ blend of action-packed story and metaphysical thriller unswervingly addresses the media competences of a young audience who intuitively – though perhaps not knowingly – recognise complex epistemological themes as well as multiplication of universes known from writers such as Jorge Luis Borges and Phillip K. Dick. *The Matrix* consists of levels; the characters in the film have access to virtual sub-worlds; it is almost as if they interacted with an information system using controllers and joypads; and, finally, the rapid pace of the film can best be compared to a gameplay, a relentless flow through a space with hidden areas, dangerous places, and friends and enemies.

## 5. Outro

The basic elements of ludology as I have dealt with them in this paper are listed in the table below (Table 3):

Elements	Techniques
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<b>1) Film elements in the game</b>	Focalisation
	Montage
	Trailer
	Cut-scenes
	In-game movies
	Automatic transport
	Automatic replay
	User-movie
<b>2) Game elements in the film</b>	Motion pattern on the micro level
	Special effects
	Ironic interface strategy
<b>3) Game motives in the film</b>	Structural macro level
	Thematic macro level

**Table 3: Lucidographic matrix**

A number of contemporary films “try to learn from the a-chronological structure of the computer narration where time can not be solely controlled by the sender but is instead more open and uncertain (Ertlöv Hansen 1999: 73). Prominent cases of this deconstruction of time and story could, besides the already mentioned, be Quentin Tarrantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*, or David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. Such a statement about comparison is indeed arguable. Maybe the four films have more in common with Modernism’s decomposing of chronology (as in e.g. Godard and Bunuel). However, my point here is that these movies are catapulted into a media driven society where computer games represent a strong and essential form of story telling. Therefore, the issue is not to point at the potential intentions of the directors (did Nolan et al. think of games or not in the actual film making process?). More importantly, the computer game seems to frame certain models of analysis and horizons of interpretation that enable us to see and understand these films in new and challenging ways. What I am arguing for is basically that we should carefully avoid confusing the level of direct and indirect import-export in the works of films and games. Elements from films or games are visible right there on the screen – whether it be on the laptop monitor or in the movie theatre; and, in addition, there are elements and motives, structures, and temporal dispositions, who travel from one media to the next, from games to films, and vice versa. What we have is a dual challenge: First, to systematically approach the various levels and techniques of this media interplay, and second to design a toolbox for the interpretation of the contemporary marriage between games and films. In short: a

lucidographic 'reading' of the game-film requires both a rigid description of the deployed techniques and a multi-faceted cultural analysis.

However, the relocation of structural features of games and films is not sufficient to explain the range of experiences tied to popular and, at the same time, innovative hybrid genres like e.g. Fox Network's *24 Hours* (Walther 2003d). Here, one must predict that the lucidographic hypothesis will be seriously tested. *24* is properly just the starting point of a huge amount of media content where games and movies cross each other and work out new strategies as well as set new standards for design, interface, compositing, thematics, and so on.

The fact that games and films today make alliances on more than one level is not merely due to an explosion of technologies that enable swift production of special effects and spectacular (digital) stunts. Nor is the union the outcome of a culture of affinity that challenges narrative edifice. The intimate relation is also based on the fundamental *spatial* conception of both computer games and motion pictures (see Aarseth 1998; Walther 2003). Both *depict* space; they *take place* in space; and they invite *recognitions* that are spatial in nature. The kind of commitments that games and films make possible is directed towards focalisation, understanding of level structure, and identification with characters and worlds. Naturally, the technological progress has heightened the potential for working with true 3-dimensionality, in games and in cinema, and with the development of digital tools for filming, editing, and post-production there seems no longer to be any obstacles for the total congruence of games and films.

Are there? Even though games and movies freely copy from each others domains – which is natural evidence for the much celebrated media convergence – there are still dictating differences. First, the film – at least in its traditional form, i.e. as non-interactive materiality – is a realised action (or string of actions); whereas gaming means to 'frame' actions. To put it accurately: a game can be seen as *framing* of events (sometimes in random order; at other times in a fixed order), and a gameplay can be labelled *realizations* of the framed events. This difference between realisation and framing is a simple difference; however, it is a crucial one. Second, the film may *thematize* the potential of interactivity (as in *Lola Rennt*), but it can never *materialise* this potential. Films *show* and are clearly inspired by the space, structure, and dynamics of games, but films do not for that reason *become* games. In a similar vein, games may *adopt* certain filmic expressions and artistic qualities; but it happens in order to support a cultural teleology that primarily has to do with *winning* and are only secondarily founded on *observation*.

Currently a range of promising experiments with database programming, dynamic websites, random access, and other brands of interactive cinema are pushing cinematography further and further in the direction of convergent new media. Consider for instance Lev Manovich's *Soft Cinema* (2002) and the Danish art group Oncotype's interactive roadmovie *Switching* (2003). Yet, none of them are games in a strict sense. If they hold agonistic motives – the desire for winning (Greek: *agon*) – it is because they invite the observer's interference with the secreted structural organization of the films. 'Winning' becomes a measure for the success of, or failure in, unravelling the code, the structure underneath the spectacle. The question is for that reason whether cinema as an art form can truly run away from its

paradigmatic foundation in basic narrative ground principles. Besides, one should not forget that both films and games are conservative leisure. One does not endow all movie goers with remotes so that each of them can add to the fun by interacting their way to precisely *their* film. Here, the problem is not that the cinematic material bends toward the potentials of games; but rather that such approaches, which would otherwise seriously challenge the new possibilities of digital media and interactivity, presumably would go against the traditional bias of social and cultural practices. 'This is what we do when we watch movies'; and 'this is what we do when we play games'. It is hard to decide on the worst nightmare of de-socialisation. Is it a family that can not agree on what film to see and therefore resorts to quarrel; or is it a family where each member holding his or her remote control creates his or her very own movie on separate screens?

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