Cutscene (video games)

This article is a post-print version of:


A cutscene is a non-playable animated or live-action sequence in a video game, usually employed as a storytelling device, and typically following established conventions of cinema. Cutscenes are closely related to (and may blend into) other storytelling sequences that have no or very limited gameplay functionality, like text dialogues or comic book panes. The main function of cutscenes is to push the plot forward and give narrative context to the GAMEPLAY [Juul], often by evoking generic characters, settings and storylines from popular fiction. Cutscenes are important to the structure and pacing of singleplayer games, providing rewards to the player, and brief respites from the intensity of gameplay. They may also have specific gameplay functions like giving mission briefings or providing clues to what lies ahead (Hancock 2002; Klevjer 2002; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

Donkey Kong (1981), which first presented the character later to be known as Mario, was also the first game to use a series of short animated intermissions to advance the story between levels. During the 1990’s, following the introduction of CD-ROM media on home computers and game consoles, full motion video cutscenes – of either animated or live-action footage – proliferated. Since the turn of the century, however, animated cutscenes rendered in real time through the game’s graphics engine have been the favoured option, offering lower cost and stronger visual seamlessness between gameplay and cutscene imagery. The real-time rendered cutscenes in Grand Theft Auto III (2001) were particularly praised for their high quality of motion capture, voice talent and cinematic direction. The new opportunities opened up by computer game graphics engines also sparked a movement of amateur or small-scale real-time animation production, coined MACHINIMA [Nitsche].

When cutscenes are being rendered on the fly in real-time 3D environments, the "cut" from gameplay action to cinematic «scene» implies a temporary suspension of avatar-based navigable gamespace. In contrast, dramatically scripted events, as utilised to powerful effect in Half-Life 2 (2004), unfold within navigable gamespace, so that the player remains in control of the first-person avatar and needs to be restricted and directed by the game designers in various ways. At the other end, there are innovative games like Metal Gear Solid 4 (2008), in which cinematic sequences do suspend regular gamespace, but where the player is invited to choose camera angles and/or conversation lines in a way reminiscent of INTERACTIVE CINEMA [Davenport]. The more popular variant of the interactive cutscene, however, would be the so-called quick-time event, which challenge the player to quickly respond to button prompts in a Simon Says fashion in order to make the cinematic interlude unfold successfully.

The role of cutscenes has been much discussed among game designers, players and theorists alike, as a paradigmatic case in the larger debate on the function and value of pre-written narratives. Klevjer (2002), Weise (2003) and Cheng (2007) all investigate cutscenes as a way of looking into the nature
of agency and rhetoric in computer games, emphasising the ways in which cutscenes and gameplay interact to form a distinct langue of dramatic expression.

References and further reading:


