THE WAY OF THE GUN

The aesthetic of the single-player First Person Shooter

Published in Italian as:
Klevjer, Rune (2006) "La via della pistola. L'estetica dei first person shooter in single player" In Matteo Bittanti & Sue Morris (Eds.) Doom. Giocare in prima persona, Costa & Nolan, Milano.

In this introduction to the aesthetic of the single-player First Person Shooter I want to present a narrative that can give some structure to the history of the genre so far, and suggest some key concepts to highlight central characteristics and distinctions.

I want to argue that a structure of generic coherence and diversity crystallised during the formative years of 1993 – 2003, unified by the distinctive traits of the subjective camera-gun. The aesthetic history of the genre follows two main trends. The first-person action-adventure as it was initially defined by *Wolfenstein 3-D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993) has developed towards a story-based, realistic, linear and cinematic adventure. This new dominant form has in part incorporated the arcade-action excesses of the early pioneers of the genre. On the other hand, the emergence of the tactical and squad-based FPS represents a radical departure from the genre's action-adventure roots. The FPS-adventure and the tactical FPS can be described and analysed through a number of general binary oppositions.

The re-invention of action-adventure

Id Software's *Wolfenstein 3-D* created a new niche within the broader genre of action-adventure, and brought violent arcade action to the PC. Unlike previous first-person action-shooters like *Battlezone* (1980), *Star Wars* (1983) or *Wing Commander* (1990), *Wolfenstein 3-D* takes the action into a textured, fluid and fast 3-dimensional game world. Because the hand with the gun is fixed in relation to the framing of the first-person perspective (as if mounted to a subjective camera, immovable), the gunpoint is always at the centre of the player's vision. Looking and targeting comes together in the same movement, and the player is invited to, as it were, follow his gun.

However, it was *Doom* (1993) that kick-started the genre of the First Person Shooter, successfully mixing horror-fantasy adventure with the hypnotising thrills of the arcade shooter[1]. Although technically speaking *Doom* was still confined within a space of 2-dimensional pseudo-3D, the game revolutionised the simulation of space, movement and visceral action in computer games[2].

The game was structured as a linear adventure of exploration and conquest, placing various resources along the way (health, ammo, weapons, power-ups), and puzzles as obstacles to entering new areas. Navigation and gathering of resources were inseparable activities, unified in the adventurous logic of kleptomanic exploration. However, unlike previous first-person 'dungeon crawlers', and unlike *Super Mario Brothers* (1985) – still the dominant formula for action-adventure at the time – *Doom* offered mindless, fast and hyper-violent action. The slaughtering of monsters in computer games had taken a quantum leap.

Role-playing

The PC's new capabilities for first-person 3D were also explored outside id Software. In 1992, Blue Sky Productions released an action-RPG that was more sophisticated but ultimately less successful. *Ultima Underworld* (1992) continued the tradition of first-person role-playing games from games like *Wizardry* (1981) and *Dungeon Master* (1987), but with a much more fluid and believable 3-dimensional world[3]. Although the game was not a shooter (fighting was real-time but semi-automated), the quality of the graphics far surpassed John Carmack's *Wolfenstein 3-D.* The graphics engine even surpassed *Doom* in some respects, expanding the space by allowing the player to look up and down.

In 1994, the same developer (by then Looking Glass Technologies) released *System Shock*, a hybrid of a *Doom*-clone and a first-person RPG. The game impressed gamers and critics alike with a seamless blend of action and role-playing - of shooting and narrative involvement. Unlike traditional role-playing, its elaborate and complex narrative was inspired by William Gibson and techno-dystopian 'cyberpunk'. Along the route of the adventure, the story is gradually revealed through audio logs, e-mails, journals and datacards. This kind of integrated and

‘embedded’ narration, together with the elaborate role-playing mechanics of character development, was miles away from the run-and-gun simplicity of *Doom*. “Dermal patches’ and cybernetic implants (with various upgrades) were used as a fictional ground of character-development and customisation.

Tunnel Vision

In spite of the accomplishment and critical acclaim of *Ultima Underworld* and *System Shock*, it was the simplicity of *Doom* and *Quake* (1996) that provided the leading model for commercial success in the following years, and which established the FPS-genre as a major factor in the game industry as well as the PC-industry. Their speed and simplicity continued a tradition of first-person arcade games, racers, space shooters and flight simulators.

In a 3-dimensional space that enables movement in all directions, the tunnel-vision of the first-person camera is a serious restriction. Narrow perspective enhances the sense of speed, but also the sense of disorientation and suspense. Enemies can potentially attack from any direction (- this is why there will always be corridors in the FPS no matter how capable the technology: the tension of having free space in all directions must be carefully regulated). First-person perspective is also perfect when fast and precise aiming is necessary[4].

The perspective of the FPS is essentially about speed and movement, the sheer sensual and vertiginous attraction of the responsive illusion[5]. It is also about the suspense of combat, about what is at any time *outside* the restless scope of the tunnel-vision. This basic perceptual grounding of the genre means that the design of the sound-space is important. The player-avatar has tunnel-vision but not tunnel-*hearing*, and it is this discrepancy that creates the tension of navigation and combat (- as well as giving tactical information). When the camera is in third-person perspective, a lot more of the aural field is included by the control of vision.

The first-person camera of the FPS is not really just a camera, but a camera-and-gun joined in the same virtual apparatus, a camera-gun. This basic set-up does not allow the gun to be moved independently of the camera, which is mounted in a similarly fixed way on the largely invisible body of the player-avatar. When the gun moves, the frame of the camera and the body of the avatar moves with it, and vice versa[6]. The subjective camera-gun gives unified control of vision and destruction, based on the mathematical simulation of a 3-dimensional space. The visual and auditory response from the weapon that occupies the central position of the game-space is hyper-reactive, loud and graphically in-your-face, forcing an awareness of sheer power and destruction.

The genre of the First Person Shooter can be delineated by this consistent and gun-centred perceptual set-up. *Super Mario 64* (1996) and *Tomb Raider* (1996) showed that a restrictive first-person perspective was not the only way (or indeed the most ‘natural’ way) of conceptualising a 3-dimensional action-adventure. The fetishist accentuation of the first-person-gun excludes a range of other possible interactions with environments and characters – especially acrobatics, tactical overview and stealth[7]. Even in the cases when a third-person perspective also retains the restrictedness of a fixed ‘mounting’ in relation to the player-avatar, as with the behind-the-character cameras in games like *Hitman* (2000) or *Max Payne* (2001), the overview will still be dramatically better, the sense of speed diminished, the player-avatar more free to perform, and most importantly: the presence of the gun itself less dominating.

The arcade-FPS

Doom had done away with the score-points and player lives from *Wolfenstein 3-D*, and thereby erased two of the most distinctive characteristics of the arcade. Still, the arcade aesthetic dominated in terms of movement, characters and combat. Over-sized guns and hordes of spectacular enemies went hand-in-hand with a fast-paced, frantic and almost balletic style of play.

In terms of level design and navigation, *Wolfenstein 3-D*, *Doom* and *Quake* stand out in the history of the FPS for their maze-like structure - in classical dungeon-crawling and labyrinth-shooting tradition of games like *Rogue* (1983), Castle Wolfenstein (1981) and *Berzerk* (1982). In this mythical, first-person vertigo of corridors, doors and hidden entrances the player needs to be constantly and restlessly on the move. In combat the pattern of movement is typically determined by the rather direct and kamikaze-style routines of the AI-controlled enemies (- a tactic generally favoured by monsters), in combination with another distinctive mark the arcade-FPS: the slow-moving projectile. Enemies tend to attack with fireballs, rockets, grenades, arrows or other forms of weapons or ammunition types that give the player some opportunity to dodge by sidestepping.

In combination, the AI routines of enemies and the slow-moving projectiles encourage the player to move in a fluid dance of dodging and shooting, with emphasis on backward movement (while firing at the approaching enemy) and sideways strafing. Also, in *Doom* and *Quake* the generous amount of health, ammo and power-ups means that the placement of these items serves as a strategic challenge to find the optimal pattern of movement. As a residue of pure arcade-action, time-limited power-ups drive the player into regular bursts of hyper-frenetic activity. Finally, a reliance on regular boss-fights is also a typical feature that the high-powered FPS has imported from a long tradition of action games – space shooters as well as Platformers. This type of challenge is a bit more tactical and puzzle-like than what is the case with the average grunt-slayering, in which stronger enemies are routinely defeated with bigger weapons and more shots. A boss-fight requires the player to look for patterns in how the enemy attacks and how he takes damage. Once the pattern is figured out, the player can (sometimes quite easily) defeat the boss by means of a systematically choreographed approach (like a rehearsed dance).

This heavily arcade-inspired style of play became established as the dominant strand of the genre through *Quake* and also through another early classic – the aptly titled *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996) from 3D Realms[8]. However the arcade-FPS was not going to become the dominant strand of the new genre. The more story-based approach of its generic 'half-brother' *System Shock* won out the end, although in a more streamlined and less role-playing version. In the following I will give a brief outline of the developments that reduced the single-player arcade-FPS to a somewhat nostalgic sub-genre, and instead established a model with more emphasis on adventure, realism and cinematic theme-rides.

The FPS-adventure

Story, mission and cut-scene

Aside from the FPS/RPG-hybrid of *System Shock*, *Doom* quickly got another competitor that was more than just a clone: LucasArt's *Star Wars: Dark Forces* (1994.) The basic mechanisms of perspective, navigation, resources management and combat followed the formula of *Doom*. However, unlike Doom, the progression through the game was framed by a continuous unfolding of a traditional and linear Hollywood-type story. The links between story and game-progress were based around two devices that were not new, but which were soon to become standard in the genre: mission-objectives and animated cut-scenes[9]. Mission-objectives provide not only game-objectives and navigational waypoints, but also give each task a specific narrative rationale. In *Dark Forces*, the mission-based structure is also accentuated by the fact that the player can only save between missions. The cut-scenes used hand-drawn animations and had high production values for the time, with generous amounts of voice-acted conversation.

Into the mainstream

The Star Wars shooter was the first game to signal a development towards more mainstream and less sub-cultural fictional worlds. *GoldenEye 007* for the Nintendo 64, the game that successfully re-invented the FPS for console platforms, was another early landmark in this development. The major strand of First Person Shooters was not going to be dominated by castles and temples but by secret agents and war heroes. The mission-based structure of play fits quite nicely into these generic worlds.

The war setting – in particular WWII – has at the time of writing arguably become the most popular fictional fantasy of the FPS, introduced by the hugely successful *Medal of Honor* (released for Playstation in 1999) and its followers. The world of the secret agent has been most successfully exploited in successes like *Perfect Dark* (2000), *No One Lives Forever* (2000) and a series of James Bond games from Electronic Arts. The 'Bond-subgenre' can be said to partly include the *MoH*-games, owing their success to a well-designed blend of secret operative and wartime action-heroism a la *Saving Private Ryan*. Science-fiction is still a leading fictional genre, only less as mythological fantasy and more as straightforward Hollywood-type Sci-Fi, as in *Red Faction* (2001), *Halo* (2001) or – more popular on the PC – as urban-dystopian scenarios inspired by *Neuromancer* (for example *Deus Ex* (2000) or *Chaser* (2003)).

The cinematic FPS

The general 'sanitation' that has taken place through the marginalizing of demons and dark mythologies is a sign of a broadening of the genre, as its major franchises are becoming more and more a part of mainstream entertainment. This change of fictional emphasis is interconnected with a development towards more cinematic

types of narrative exposition and integration. *GoldenEye 007* is again an obvious example. The game re-creates the action-scenarios from the film almost scene-by-scene, and uses the authentic Bond-score to tie the two universes together.

Unreal (1998) was a seminal game in the development of cinematic music. Unlike previous games, *Unreal* successfully implemented music as a dynamic element in gameplay, where different themes and variations in the music were triggered by the player's interaction with the game. In making this crucial transition from *track* to *score*, *Unreal* created a new kind of cinematic space in the First Person Shooter. In a later game like *Halo*, the music plays like a grand-style orchestral Hollywood score, using a combination of invisibility and pompousness to heighten the emotional impact of the various types of action set-pieces. Another landmark in the development towards cinematic forms is *Medal of Honor.* In everything from interface and mission briefings to environments, weapons, scenarios and cut-scenes, *Medal of Honor* leans heavily on the narrative conventions and visual style of war-documentaries and realistic war films. Dynamic musical score replicates the atmosphere of an epic Hollywood war film. The rich environmental soundscapes set a new standard for sound in the FPS.

Explorative linearity

The development of the cinematic shooter was also a development towards more linearity in game design. The various 'mission objectives' and cinematic cut-scenes in *Dark Forces* did not imply any significant variety in how the player was meant to progress through the game. In spite of the more ambitious Hollywood-narrative, the navigational structure was maze-like in a traditional fashion, with plenty of secret passages, rooms and areas. Navigation was a central challenge in itself, and the mission tasks were little more than 'narrativised switches' or navigational puzzles, interspersed with some slightly more enigmatic pattern-based puzzles. In contrast, the post-*Quake* successors of *Dark Forces* abandoned the maze as a self-evident structure of moving and shooting.

With more consistent narrative and cinematic ambitions, the maze gave way to what we may call 'explorative linearity'. *GoldenEye* and *Half-life* combine an overall linearity with a modest degree of branching, secret passages and non-crucial areas of extra 'goodies'. A typical feature is the 'closed branching', where two alternative routes briefly allow for a choice of challenges (- typically between a stealthy and a run-and-gun approach) before they join together in the main track again. As a somewhat curious staple of the post-*Quake* FPS, explorative linearity generally implies generous use of ventilation shafts or similar structures that encourage subversive crawling. In the best-selling *Medal of Honor*- and *James Bond 007*-series published by EA, the explorative structures are notably played down in favour of strict on-rails linearity and pedagogic hand-holding. In the forward-moving spectacle of the cinematic FPS, navigation is not supposed to be part of the challenge.

Narrative integration

In *Dark Forces*, although the fictional world provides a significant imaginary framing, one could say that the narrative sequence of events unfolds *alongside* the game-progress rather than within it. The story is in constant dialogue with the actions of the player, but is only loosely integrated with the specific mechanisms of navigation, resource management and combat.[10] Still, *System Shock* had proved that other, more ambitious and more integrated strategies of storytelling were possible – also within the world of the subjective camera-gun.

Without adopting the role-playing mechanisms and the complexity of narrative from *System Shock*, *Unreal* and in particular *Half-Life* used some of the same strategies to create a FPS-adventure with a stronger narrative resonance. *Unreal* lacks cut-scenes and mission-based levels, but offers instead a more seamless and atmospheric adventure, based on dynamic music and embedded narrative voices (given as text messages accessed via a 'universal translator'). Like in other games with embedded narrative voices (typically RPG's and puzzle-based adventures), the task of the player-protagonist is to gradually unveil (through fighting and exploring) events that have already happened. Another distinctive characteristic of *Unreal* for the time is the use of large, open spaces and the visual splendour of the alien landscapes (both due to the unique capabilities of the game engine). In this way the game is a pioneer of the genre with respect to what Henry Jenkins and others refers to as 'spatial narrative (or 'narrative architecture') – the way narrative meanings are evoked by the design of the space that the player navigates through[11]. A quite similar poetics of the alien landscape can be found in later games, most notably in *Halo* and *Red Faction* (2001).

The story in *Half-Life* does more than just provide the playing with a familiar and evocative fictional setting. As in *Unreal*, there are no cut-scenes or mission briefings. There are episodes but no levels - just one, continuous journey through a space that is regularly interrupted by brief loading screens. Throughout the adventure (particularly in the opening scenario), the back-story, the mission tasks and the narrative significance of events are mainly conveyed through pre-scripted actions and dialogues that are triggered within the real-time game-

world. The combination of a seamless and relatively non-interrupted space (the player is never given any written instructions about what to do) and in-game scripted events proved to be a persuasive strategy of narrative integration and immersion.

Crucially, the narrative in *Half-Life* is faithfully generic (experiments gone horribly wrong, conspiracies etc), something that allows the narration to be strikingly minimalist in the exposition of a sequence of events. This minimalism and generic familiarity is what allows cleverly scripted events to tell the story without assistance from cut-scenes or mission briefings. The technique of scripted events (as well as, in part, the narrative ambition) became a typical feature of the genre after *Half-Life*, and helped to define the FPS-adventure more firmly as an alternative to the arcade-FPS of *Quake* or *Serious Sam* (2001). However, one could argue that the minimalist strategy of in-game storytelling has never really been copied, and this seems like something of a missed opportunity[12].

The industrial adventure

Half-life follows a rather elaborate logic of scientific-industrial instrumentalism, one that was only implied by the general structure of *Doom*. The name of the developer, *Valve*, is quite illustrative, suggesting that this is a game for the engineer as well as for the soldier. Progressing through the game is like an exercise of rational, problem-solving, painstakingly systematic, and ultimately very civilized, *work*. The teleported monsters as well as the 'government marines' are placed in an environment of switches, hatches, conveyor belts, docking bays, science labs, valves (!), toxic pools, pipes, elevators, control rooms and other industrial-scientific machinery. Like in *Dark Forces*, there is an awful lot of operating and 'activating' to do for the adventurous player. The hero of the FPS-adventure is definitely not just a gladiator but also a worker. The mechanical stone-brick puzzles of *Doom* and *Quake* (which bring associations to tomb raiders like Indiana Jones and Lara Croft) have developed into something that is more sophisticated and less exotic. The puzzles and the ‘mission objectives’ of the scientific-industrial adventure resemble routine operations in a factory – a modern assembly-line adventure.

Semi-realistic combat

The more civilized and sanitised flavour of the FPS-adventure is also evident in the mechanisms of combat. The frenetic and balletic dance of the arcade-FPS is largely discarded for a more modern and semi-realistic approach. In *GoldenEye 007*, the fictional world largely determined the style of play. Maybe for the last time in the history of popular culture, James Bond proved to be a fresh source of innovation. In part due to the technological limitations of the hardware and also the lack of speed and precision of the controller-interface, the pace was dramatically slower than in the PC-based *Quake* a year before. The game stood out as comparatively moderate and realistic in its simulation of weapons and enemies.

GoldenEye features almost exclusively fast-moving and non-visible projectiles (and obviously no demons or monsters – except from the human ones). Consequently, the fluid dance of back-stepping and strafing is substituted for a kind of oscillation between passivity and aggression, where the player typically moves in and out of cover, and frequently retreats and waits in safe positions (at least this tactic is strongly encouraged on the higher difficulty levels). A development in this direction was (again) indicated already by *Dark Forces*, which for the first time enabled the player-avatar to *crouch*. As a result of this technique, most environments in the FPS-adventure are today generously provided with crates or similar structures that invite the player to crouch behind cover. Crucially, the fact that *Dark Forces* and *GoldenEye* had no mid-level saving also strongly encouraged a more careful style of play.

The new sophistication of enemy artificial intelligence in *Half-Life* was equally important to the development of a more militaristic and semi-realistic mode of combat. The enemy marines communicate and work together as a well-trained commando team. They move strategically, employ retreat tactics, and are particularly clever at throwing grenades from behind cover positions. After *Half-Life*, the quality of enemy AI has become one of the most central criteria for a successful FPS-adventure, and in many cases the one element that can make or break a game[13].

Stealth

GoldenEye007 was the first FPS to integrate stealth as a major strategy of combat (obviously without abandoning a fair share of excessive violence), although sneaky tactics could sometimes also pay off in *Quake*. The generic figure of the lonely operative proved to be a natural match for the First Person Shooter. There are in particular three features in *GoldenEye* that encourages stealth. Firstly, there is the system of location-based damage in enemy soldiers. In order to save limited ammunition, the player is wiser to aim for head and take out an enemy with a single shot. After *GoldenEye*, the ‘headshot’ has become a standard concept in First Person

Shooters. Secondly, there are security cameras that ought to be avoided or shot out from a safe position in order to avoid swarms of difficult enemies to appear. Finally, the *sniper rifle* allowed the player to patiently pick off enemies from a distance. This weapon has now become a standard feature of the genre (as common as crates, ventilation shafts and exploding barrels), representing a characteristically slow, controlled and surgical way of disposing with enemies. The sniper rifle is also an illustration of the role of *aiming* in today's games compared to the frantic pointing in the early arcade-FPS. Careful aiming is a key element of controlled, stealthy combat. Indeed the ability to take aim is a very immediate advantage of the subjective camera-gun, and one could argue that this advantage was not fully realised until the introduction of the sniper-rifle[14].

After *GoldenEye*, stealth has become one of the marks of a FPS-adventure. Another significant influence on the genre in this respect was the 'first person sneaker' of *Thief: The Dark Project* (1998), which offered a type of play that focuses exclusively on staying hidden from enemies instead of gunning them down. Other notable stealth-action games that stimulated the development of a stealthy FPS are the third-person adventures *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) and *Tenchu: Stealth Assassins* (1998). More recently the success of *Splinter Cell* (2002) once again illustrates how the range of sneaky tactics (and acrobatics) is dramatically bigger in third-person perspective. The popularity and influence of this game also suggests that First Person Shooters may not necessarily become the dominant form of action-adventure in the future.

The military simulator

Although the cinematic, linear and semi-realistic model has become dominant in today's First Person Shooters, no single game follows this model in a clear-cut and unambiguous way. The model nevertheless allows us to identify a dominant and relatively coherent trend in the development of the genre, a trend that has to do with narrative form as well as structures of navigation and combat. In 'pure form', the arcade-FPS no longer exists outside occasional 'throwback'-games like *Serious Sam* (which is sort of a *Doom*-parody). Instead we might say that some of its dominant elements have been taken up by the adventure-based games, while others – notably the maze-like structure and the kamikaze-simplicity of the AI – have mainly been discarded. Some games (- like the *Medal of Honor*-series) have a considerably stronger flavour of arcade-action than others, while still retaining the characteristic shape of cinematic adventure[15].

However, the short history of the FPS also includes a different strand, which unlike *Doom* and *Medal of Honor* does not grow out of a broad tradition of action-adventure. The so-called *tactical FPS* (sometimes also referred to as the 'squad-based' FPS) draws instead on the traditions of strategic war games and the military simulator. In spite of many similarities (which follow from the common perceptual grounding of the first-person-gun) and in spite of the inevitable ambiguities and hybridisations, the binary of action-adventure versus military simulator has become a significant aesthetic distinction within the genre of the single-player First Person Shooter.

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six (1998) was a very different FPS. It has a series of anti-terrorist missions in true Tom Clancy-style, but no real story other than character-detached geopolitical scenarios. Weapons are realistically simulated, and inflict realistic damage. One well-placed shot from an enemy is all it takes, and the player will typically not see where the shot is coming from before it is too late. The player leads a squad of fellow anti-terrorists, laying out waypoints and routes on maps and floor plan layouts. The members of the squad are assigned to different teams, which can be coordinated in detail with go-codes (as well as given specific rules of interaction). During the action the player can switch between teams as needed (- such as, rather importantly, when the player's current avatar dies). Before each mission, the player must survey the intelligence, choose members of the team, select weapons and equipment, and devise a plan. The planning stage is not just a briefing; it is a configurable database and a strategy game. Although there is an option to skip this stage and go straight into action using ready-made plans and pre-set kits of equipment, this alternative will drastically reduce the scope of the game[16].

The subsequent *Rainbow Six*- and *Ghost Recon*- games, as well as a variety of similar type of games, have followed the same formula of squad-based, tactical and realistic military simulation[17]. Many of them, like *Rainbow Six*, give the player a choice of alternating between a first-person and a third-person perspective, which makes sense given their reduced emphasis on the shooting action. The individual games vary in their degree and complexity of simulation, but they all share a common ethos of non-fantasy, and strive for a sense of realism within a strictly military or special forces/anti-terrorist fictional setting[18]. This limited and relatively unimaginative fictional environment is one of the distinctive marks of the sub-genre. The dedication to realism is not about graphics and animations, but about simulating the patterns and strategies of action that are presumed to

be a central part of being a soldier in a modern war or a special forces operation. This also means that the weapons' behaviour in terms of range, recoil, precision, firing rate etc is very important.

As a rather abstract but useful model, we can set up a list of general characteristics that separate the world of the tactical FPS from the world of the adventure-based FPS.

The soldier versus the lone gladiator

Being a real soldier means to be one among others, operating as part of a team. As in a strategy game, the tactical FPS has AI-controlled units that respond to a set of basic commands available to the player. The FPS-adventure may also have the player-avatar fighting alongside AI-controlled characters (like in *Halo*), but these typically cannot be given commands. They are there simply to simulate an action-packed battlefield. They are utterly expendable, and ultimately the hero is alone on the journey.

The adventurer-hero is a lone gladiator, a warrior that follows the rule of visibility and visceral violence. In contrast, the modern soldier is not sent out to entertain or to create a spectacle, and the action is therefore not supposed to be in-your-face and visually sensational. One of the central challenges in a tactical FPS is precisely to establish the required minimum of visual contact (before it is too late).

The soldier versus the operative

A professional solder may be well equipped, but is not meant to be a one-man stealth-killing unit with remote cameras and retinal satellite uplink. The gadget-heavy solitary operative has become an archetypical modern adventurer, but is still largely absent from the tactical FPS.

The soldier versus the explorer

Professional soldiers are not supposed to go treasure-hunting or grab whatever they find along the way. In contrast, the FPS-explorer is rather obsessive in both respects, Mario-style. A soldier is not self-driven and self-employed but is sent out to do a job, to solve the situation. The explorer does also have 'missions', but they are more like checkpoints along the journey, or vehicles of adventurous diversity. Sometimes mission-tasks involve strange and ingenious puzzles, a phenomenon that would be oddly out of place in Operation Desert Storm (who would have put them there?).

In line with the tradition from *Pitfall* (*1982*), *Super Mario Brothers* and *Prince of Persia* (1989), the FPS-explorer faces not only the challenge of enemies, but also the aggressive challenges of the environment. In *Quake* (with all its traps) or *Half-Life* (which plays much like a 'First Person Platformer'), hostile environments are absolutely central to the overall game mechanics. The environment in a tactical FPS does indeed present challenges of strategy and combat, however it is not in itself animated – it does not come to life to conspire against the player. The soldier is sent out to *use* the environment, not to fight it.

The journey versus the situation

The structure of navigation in the tactical FPS is very different from the FPS-adventure. The scenario is always the same: We have a situation. There is no heroic quest upon which to embark, no journey through strange lands with unknown dangers and resources. After each situation (each 'operation') the player is thrown back to base for de-briefing, re-equipping and a new brief. There is no adventure, just a sequence of new configurations. In this respect the tactical FPS is similar to the competitive multiplayer FPS, which follows the metaphor of the tournament and the arena rather than the journey[19]. By implication, the 'arenas' of the tactical FPS do not follow the principle of explorative linearity. In accordance with the emphasis on map-based strategic planning and tactical action, the layout of each situation is non-linear and open-structured.

Simulation versus videogame

The tactical FPS, just like the flight simulator, is a videogame that tries not to be a videogame. This means that even though realism always includes abstraction and compromise, it is still important to avoid any clues that might bring associations to a traditional arcade-based videogame. The world of Tom Clancy does not encourage translation into a videogame world. - Hence no collectable health and ammo, no bosses, no power-ups, no puzzles, no jumping, no animated environment, no dodge-strafing, no exploding barrels. This is also why the look and behaviour of enemies is so crucial to the believability of the game world. They must not look like videogame characters, must not be animated in a way that is reminiscent of videogame characters, and must not behave like videogame characters. In contrast, the FPS-adventure, because it tries to establish a game-world that is unknown and un-real (and un-conquered), is quite content with the typical features and associations of a

videogame-space. As in *Tron* and *Neuromancer*, the concept of computer-space conveniently blends with fantasies of outer space and strange civilizations.

Simulation versus movie

In the tactical FPS, the simulation takes precedence over cinematic structure. Even though the fictional setting in a game like *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* follows a generic model from books, film and television news (- and in this particular case is also a cross-media franchise), neither the game structure nor the mode of narrative integration bears much resemblance to literary and cinematic forms. While the explorer is a dramatic and literary figure (like for example Odysseus or captain Jean-Luc Picard), the progress of Tom Clancy's anti-terrorist hero does not really follow the path of a story. There is a plot of some sort that unfolds in between the 'situations' (in briefings and cut-scenes), but this plot does not involve any of the lead characters or any personal relationships. Extracted from the typical Tom Clancy-novel are the mission tasks, the detailed descriptions of weapons and equipment, and an unfolding geopolitical scenario.

Planning versus the unexpected

While the military simulation approaches each situation with careful planning, the whole point of a true adventure is the *lack* of planning, of entering into the unknown and exploring the dangers and resources along the way. In the tactical shooter, weapons and equipment are selected and configured (in various degrees of detail) before each operation. The map is an absolutely indispensable resource, both before and during the execution stage. In contrast, post-*Quake* FPS-adventures do not have maps and no database for gearing up. The adventurer prefers not to know. Even if he has a strong premonition of what kind of weapons and items lie ahead (as is normally the case in a videogame-world), they should always be part of the quest, as prizes along the way, and as confirmations that stronger opposition (and bigger prizes) is to be expected next.

Realism

The bi-polarity of the FPS can be described as two different modes of realism, two different principles for constructing a play-world as a believable interpretation of the real world. All FPS games focus on realism – indeed we could say that the genre is all *about* realism, shamelessly exploiting old cultural fascinations with first-person virtual reality. Still, the realism of the FPS-adventure is primarily a *cinematic* realism, mainly concerned with story-based immersion and the realistic simulation of film-like environments and characters. The ultimate goal of this rhetoric of realism is to create an illusion of being in a Hollywood movie, of being inside an alternative and fantastic reality. In contrast, the realism of the military simulator is not a fantasy about a world (a possible world), but a fantasy about a situation. This is what we might call 'radical realism': the play-world must be *this* world.

Variations of gun-play

The single-player First Person Shooter is unified through the perceptual characteristics of the subjective camera-gun. The first-person perspective is not about 'immersion' in the literary sense, and neither is it some clever device that would stimulate self-forgetting identification with a virtual reality[20] Above all, 'first person' means first-person *gun*, a unique and rather extreme perceptual articulation within a broader cultural category of violent gun-play. The genre holds up and celebrates the gun as the ultimate technology, a focus point for a wide range of modern technologies. Captured by the First Person Shooter, technology is interpreted in the image of the gun.

The gun-play of the FPS accommodates two different cultural forms - two forms of playful practice. The adventure-based FPS engages with modern technology through exaggeration and parody. The super-augmented warrior of *Half-Life* or *Halo* is a grotesque modern figure, a monstrous cyborg, a walking and killing machine that seems to absorb all the powers of modern technology within one, sovereign and bizarrely bloated individuality. In such a delirious technological imagination, technology is magic. This is never allowed in the tactical FPS (even though technological augmentations may be highly advanced), which is more similar to professional training simulators, requires more intellectual work and has more educational value. With its database-structured configurations and desktop-like interface, the tactical FPS is also more akin to non-gaming software[21].

The binary categories of military simulation versus adventurous exploration are mutually exclusive. As tools in aesthetic analysis, however, they must be understood as opposing poles rather than as boxed-in categories. There are no pure military simulators[22], and hardly any FPS-adventures that have no tactical planning or any kind of distinct 'situations'. Still, at the time of writing, few games can properly be defined as hybrids that explore the area between the two poles[23].

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[1] In comparison, the 3-dimensional space of *Wolfenstein 3-D* was crude and repetitive - basically just a maze of walls with doors.
[2] *Doom* did not, technically speaking, have a 3-dimensional space – not only because the player could not look up and down, but also because there were no 3-dimensional objects or characters in the game. *Quake*, three years later, was the first game to present a consistent and fully 3-dimensional space (in which, for example, grenades will bounce around based on the simulated physical properties of the space).
[3] *Wizardry* was the first role-playing game to use a first-person perspective, although with no bitmapped textures and colours. *Dungeon Master* had a textured space, but not with fluid movement.
[4] For this reason a variety of other action-adventure games implement the first-person perspective as a (optional) combat-resource for the player.
[5] The term 'vertiginous' is here taken from Roger Caillois, who in his classical study *Man, Play and Games* (2001 [1961]) lists 'vertigo' (physical disorientation) as one of the four model-types of play.
[6] Exceptions that come to mind here are *GoldenEye 007* and *Timesplitters* (2000) both console games that offer a special 'aiming mode' in which the crosshair – to a certain extent – can be moved also within the frame. A similar kind of 'detachment' takes place when a console-based FPS uses auto-aiming to compensate for the lack of speed and precision of the analogue stick. However, this 'magnetic' manipulation of the aiming, I would argue, only testifies to the importance of keeping the solidity of the camera-gun intact.
[7] Admittedly, many FPS games include a fair share of platform-jumping mechanics – a rather helpless form of interaction that is strangely at odds with the visual restriction of the genre.
[8] Here the narrative setting is more overtly parodic than in *Doom*. The player-avatar ("Duke") is a primitive parody of the rock-hard masculine hero, and the selections of monsters and weapons are more varied, more colourful and even more excessive than in *Doom* and *Quake*.
[9] Cut-scenes were first used as a major storytelling device by Lucasfilm Games in *Maniac Mansion* (1987) and quickly became a staple of the company's successful line of point-and-click adventures. A cut-scene typically provides central information about plot and characters, and may also include useful gameplay information and clues.
[10] See Lindley (2002) for a further discussion on how narrative and game work together in a typically cut-scene- and mission- based linear action-adventure.
[11] For more on the concept of spatial storytelling, see Fuller and Jenkins (1995).
[12] The game that most successfully uses the same type of minimalist narrative strategy (although with short, enigmatic cut-scenes) is not a FPS, namely *ICO*.
[13] This is particularly evident in *Halo*, a game that otherwise would be almost depressingly repetitive.
[14] In this respect, *Quake* was a crucial step forward, featuring a solid, fully polygonal 3D-environment that lets the player take full advantage of the precision and freedom of mouse-aiming. The fact that *GoldenEye* put such weight on careful aiming can be seen as a bit of a contradiction. In a console game, the player has to use an analogue stick for aiming instead of the faster and more precise PC-mouse. It may well be that the challenge of aiming actually becomes more interesting as a result of the cumbersome, slow and in a sense more 'realistic' mechanics of the analogue stick.
[15] A typical strategy is to alternate between run-and-gun action, stealth and exploration – often with dedicated sections of mounted on-rails arcade shooting.
[16] Actually, at least on the easy setting, it is possible to play *Rainbow Six* successfully as a pure strategy game, without taking part in the real-time events of the first-person action.
[17] The game *Delta Force*, also released in 1998, was the first in a series that that strives for realistic military simulation, but which is not squad-based and hence does not have the same element of strategy-gaming as the *Rainbow Six*-series. This is why the generic term 'tactical shooter' is more precise than 'squad-based'. Squad-based or not – both game types follow in the tradition of (military) realistic simulation.
[18] The *Rainbow Six*- and *Ghost Recon*-games are developed by Red Storm Entertainment, a company co-founded and creatively supervised by Tom Clancy.
[19] 'Competitive multiplayer' would exclude co-operative single-player, where two players play co-operatively through the single-player adventure of the game. As far as I know the first game to implement this feature was *Perfect Dark* on the N64.
[20] Many games allow the player to switch between first-person and third-person modes. I see no reason why this should confuse or significantly alter the conditions of identification with the game world through the player-avatar.

[21] For a further discussion of the FPS in a wider cultural context, see “Danzando con il Grottesco Moderno. Guerra, lavoro, gioco e rituale nei *First Person Shooter* run-and-gun” (Klevjer 2006). The relationship between game genres and non-gaming software is discussed in “The cultural value of games” (Klevjer 2008).
[22] The closest candidate would be *America’s Army* (2002), developed by the US army as a PR-tool.
[23] Two notable candidates in this respect would be *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* (2003) – which is a strange mix of wild arcade-action and tactical realism – and *Rainbow Six 3* (2003) for the Xbox, which is a planning-free, strictly linear and action-filled ‘subversion’ of the series (it has even got exploding barrels). One would think the most obvious area of innovative hybridisation should be in combining squad-based strategy with action-adventure, but this has not yet been successfully implemented in a FPS.