

***Wing Commander* and the Enduring Impact of Live-Action Video**

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ABSTRACT

This research project is an investigation of the historical poetics of live-action video (FMV) via a case study of the *Wing Commander* franchise. In popular memory, FMV-based games such as *Wing Commander* are regarded as a technological dead end, the result of ‘film envy’. However, close examination of the *Wing Commander* series shows such a characterization of live-action games is fundamentally inaccurate. FMV was a necessary phase in the development of game storytelling. Furthermore, with the advent of motion and facial performance capture, live-action storytelling is today far more dominant than it had been at the time of *Wing Commander*’s peak.

Keywords

FMV, cut-scenes, live-action, storytelling techniques, motion capture, *Wing Commander*.

INTRODUCTION

This research project is an investigation of the historical poetics of live-action video via a case study of the *Wing Commander* (*WC*) (1990 – 1998) franchise. It proposes a reconceptualization of the accepted understanding of the association of full motion video with this particular franchise and its influence on game history.

Wing Commander is a sci-fi space combat series created by Chris Roberts at Origin Systems, a pioneering company also responsible for the *Ultima* series (1981-2013). The *WC* series can be likened to a video game version of *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-1979), with space fighter pilots defending humanity from a feline alien race known as the Kilrathi, while dealing with personal dramas aboard their own carrier. The series is best remembered today for its expensive spectacle and especially for the live-action full motion video (FMV) cut-scenes (Howells, 2002; Klevjer, 2008), in *Wing Commander III: Heart of the Tiger* (1994) and *Wing Commander IV: The Price of Freedom* (1996), where the player was represented on-screen by Mark Hamill and squared off against opponents played by the likes of John Rhys-Davies and Malcolm McDowell. Yet, perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that because of these games, so focussed on FMV storytelling, *Wing Commander* is now forgotten. While at the time of original

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia Queensland Symposium 2016: Wayfinding

release in the 1990s FMV lent a veneer of respectability to video games (Russell, 2012), subsequent decades have hardened attitudes towards this intrusion of the film medium into video games, often regarded as being brought about by ‘film envy’ (Brookey, 2010).

While *WC* did not invent FMV, the series’ history was inextricably tied to this technique, mirroring its rise and fall – embracing FMV early on, and then virtually disappearing together along with live-action FMV. A closer examination of the series, however, shows that it is inaccurate to characterize live-action games as an irrelevant evolutionary dead end of games development. Live-action was a necessary phase in the development of game storytelling techniques at a time when telling the same story using only computer graphics was essentially impossible (Perron, 2008). The history of *Wing Commander* shows not only how crucial FMV was at its peak, but also how it continues to shape game storytelling long after its supposed disappearance.

The first *WC* game, released in 1990, told its story through dynamically rendered cut-scenes using hand-drawn, hand-animated 2D characters. However, advances in graphics technology made this approach obsolete, while simultaneously, 3D animation was still too expensive to be practical. Recording live-action video was cheaper, and the advent of the CD-ROM eliminated data storage as a practical concern in development. Beyond *WC*, in the mid-1990s FMV found employ in the *Command & Conquer* (1995-2013) and *Phantasmagoria* (1995-1996) series, as well as numerous other games.

By the time of *Wing Commander: Prophecy* (1997), however, the quality of dynamically rendered 3D graphics had improved significantly, and FMV was rapidly disappearing from the scene (Russell, 2012). A year later, the first-person shooter *Half-Life* (1998) was released, with neither live-action nor pre-rendered 3D video. Scenes could now be depicted in the game engine and rendered in real-time – still a drop in visual quality, certainly, but no longer so significant as to make the game unpalatable.

The story of live-action storytelling in video games has an ironic postscript. In recent years, the visual quality of games has continued to increase and photorealism reigned as a visual style. As character models approached photorealism, animation also needed to become more natural to avoid falling into what Japanese robotics theoretician Masahiro Mori has termed the ‘uncanny valley’ (Mori, 2012) – when a character is so realistic in appearance, that every unnatural movement becomes off-putting. To avoid the ‘uncanny valley’, game developers have essentially returned to FMV in disguise: motion capture and facial performance capture transpose real actors into games in an interpolated form.

Unsurprisingly, one game developer who has employed these techniques for storytelling (Klevjer, 2002) is the creator of *Wing Commander*, now working on a new space opera, *Star Citizen* (2016). In his quest to continue to create ‘cinematic’ games, Chris Roberts had first adopted FMV, then abandoned it in favour of digital animation, and now combines the two techniques by animating digital models with captured performances.

A continuity in techniques exists from *Wing Commander* in 1990 to *Star Citizen* today. These techniques, furthermore, are commonly used in other high-profile productions such as David Cage’s *Heavy Rain*

(2010) and Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013)¹. Far from being forgotten, *Wing Commander*'s FMV techniques have laid the foundation for the animated motion capture mimicry of today.

BIOS

Jakub Majewski is currently pursuing PhD research at Bond University, focusing on the intersection between RPGs and cultural heritage. As an adjunct Teaching Fellow at Bond, he has taught interactive experience design, game culture, and the game industry. Jakub also has a decade of experience in games development in various capacities from level designer to producer and creative director. His professional portfolio includes forty games in multiple genres, and for multiple platforms.

Scott Knight is Assistant Professor of film, television and videogames at Bond University where he teaches courses in film and videogame aesthetics, history, and culture. He has held the role of programmer of the Brisbane International Film Festival from 1993 to 2012. Scott has authored papers on fan cultures, censorship issues, and videogame history. He is currently engaged in research on the formal characteristics of film-to-game adaptation.

ENDNOTES

1. For more on motion capture in *The Last of Us*, see the feature-length behind-the-scenes documentary *Grounded: The Making of The Last of Us* (2014) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R017LzC_h8I

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