

THE EVOLUTION OF THE INTRODUCTORY SECTION

An Analysis Based on Three Long-Standing Video Game Series

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1 INTRODUCTION

From personal communication to media reception, from love-at-first-sight to Tinder, the idea that the introduction, those first impressions, hold particular relevance appears to be a widely shared belief. In many ways, introductions are such a ubiquitous structural element that it is their absence rather than their presence which tends to cause notice. In consideration of this it is not surprising that introductions are also a common feature of video games. Many titles include sections serving such a function despite them often not being explicitly labeled as introductions. This, however, begs the question of what exactly the function of an introduction is? In some way, the answer to this question appears self-explanatory and tautological; introductions introduce something. In order to obtain a more useful description it might be necessary to look at the specific object which is supposed to be introduced.

In his monograph *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul argues that video games are both “rules *and* fiction” (2011, 12). If we accept this, it follows that both these elements, the rule-based systems and the fiction, would have to be introduced to a game’s audience. However, while this might sound like a simple task, it appears considerably more formidable when considering the complexity of the various involved elements. First, a game’s audience is a group of individuals generally unknown to its designers. While designers might be inclined to create introductions catering to their audience’s needs, they are only able to second-guess these needs. Therefore, a

game's introduction does less reflect its audience but rather its designers' assumptions about this audience. Second, rules and fiction inside a video game "interact, compete and complement each other" (Juul 2011, 163) and the nature of this relationship strongly depends on the specific game. Video games' introductions are therefore as diverse as the games themselves. Together, this makes video games' introductory sections a promising object of study for heightening our understanding of video games in general, their intrinsic relationships between rules and fiction, and their designers' assumptions about their audiences.

In this essay I will analyze a number of introductions from entries in three long-standing video game series. The analysis will be restricted to the games' progression-based single player campaigns and will focus on how they convey rule-related and narrative information to the player. Furthermore, looking at each series in chronological order, the analysis will show how each series' introductions have generally evolved. This evolution will be further contextualized by looking at the circumstances surrounding the individual title's release. The three series I will look at are the SUPER MARIO (1985-) and THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1986-) series by Japanese company Nintendo, and the DOOM (1993-) series by US-developer id Software.

2 THE SUPER MARIO SERIES

Starting out as the unnamed protagonist of Nintendo's 1981 arcade game DONKEY KONG, Super Mario has turned into an iconic character almost synonymous with Nintendo itself. Having appeared in an enormous number of games stretching many genres, at the core of the character's popularity lies a series of jump'n'runs beginning with SUPER MARIO BROS. (Nintendo 1985). First released for Nintendo's Famicom home console and later in arcades, SUPER MARIO BROS. introduced the series' core mechanic (Salen/Zimmerman 2004, 316) in a form that is still recognizable even today. Aside from prerecorded sequences showing the core mechanic when the title screen is left idle, the game features no designated introduction.

Instead, it appears designed to facilitate players learning by trial-and-error. First, by presenting a direct and clear feedback loop between player actions and their consequences. The player never has to worry about his actions potentially having a negative effect later on. Second, because the game starts out comparably easy before its difficulty gradually increases. The lack of a designated introduction with explicit explanations of the mechanics proves advantageous in combination with the game's inability to record the player's progress. After turning off the console the game always begins anew in the first level. The game therefore appears designed in consideration of the fact that it has to be repeatedly played from its beginning. This is further supported by the complete outsourcing of a narrative introduction to its manual. In general, these design choices reflect Nintendo's then-status as a developer of popular arcade titles. However, considering many arcade games start out comparably difficult, an element like the game's gradually increasing difficulty level, already hints at a more careful consideration of the specific needs of home audiences.

As part of the starting line-up of Nintendo's next home console, the SNES, *SUPER MARIO WORLD* (Nintendo 1991) served as a showcase for the new system's capabilities. In terms of the game's structure, the perhaps most important development was the inclusion of a save feature. Removing players' need to always replay the game's initial levels went hand-in-hand with the series' first designated introduction. Starting a new game, a brief written narrative introduction appears before the player's avatar is placed on a map structure titled *Yoshi's Island*. Similar to the game's direct predecessor, *SUPER MARIO BROS. 3* (Nintendo 1988), this map allows access to different levels. However, while the previous game barred player's access to already completed elements, *SUPER MARIO WORLD* does not just allow repeating them but actively encourages this via the inclusion of secret level exits which open up new map paths. Here, the arcade-like design of pushing the player towards a designated end point as in *SUPER MARIO BROS. 3* has been replaced with a model encouraging players to explore the game's content in a more free-floating manner. Unlike later sections, *Yoshi's Island* does not feature secret exits. It does, however, already introduce another new element, boxes placed inside the levels which, when

activated by the avatar, present written explanations. On *Yoshi's Island*, these explanations generally center on the avatar's new abilities in comparison to the previous games. This juxtaposition of elements allows to identify *Yoshi's Island* as the game's designated introduction, teaching the game's rule-based mechanics while not yet revealing its full complexity. The structured introduction of SUPER MARIO WORLD, which players are free to skip when continuing an earlier session, appears as an emancipation from the earlier entries' arcade-style design where each session started from the game's beginning. In the same vein, the brief narrative introduction suggests a rising importance of narration even in genres not typically associated with it.

In 1996, the launch of the Nintendo 64, Nintendo's new console, was again accompanied by a SUPER MARIO title. SUPER MARIO 64 (Nintendo 1996) had not just to prove the series' ability to adapt to a three-dimensional presentation but also validate the design of Nintendo's new hardware. While the Nintendo 64 lacked its competitors' CD-ROM drives (Kent 2001, 510f) it was also the first console with a standard controller featuring analog input (Kent 2001, 523). Already, SUPER MARIO 64's interactive title screen introduces players to this new feature by allowing them to playfully manipulate a three-dimensional Mario head. Starting a new game, a brief written and voiced narrative introduction is followed by an in-game engine cutscene. Here, the camera's movement highlights the diegetic space's three-dimensional nature while the visual presentation and lack of loading times showcase the Nintendo 64's technological capabilities. Following written explanations of the avatar's abilities, the player first gains control of Mario. The game's starting point, the castle garden, allows engagement with the game's rule-based systems in the absence of any threats. Approaching the castle, another cutscene introduces cameraman Lakitu as an intradiegetic embodiment of the game's virtual camera. He explains how the player's viewpoint is manipulated separately from the avatar's actions, nowadays a standard, then still a novelty. Upon entering the castle, more cutscenes introduce the presence of villain Bowser and explain the game's non-linear progression structure. In comparison to its

predecessors, the introduction of *SUPER MARIO 64* is more rigidly structured and closely controls the flow of information towards the player. The intent hereby appears to ensure that audiences are able to follow the series' transition into the third dimension. This transition was not merely aesthetic but represented a major reimagining of the series' established core mechanic. Interestingly, this rigid structure makes the introduction stand in stark contrast to the game's general structure which grants players more freedom than previous titles not just in terms of movement through the diegetic space but also in its structure of progression.

The structure of *SUPER MARIO 64*'s introduction was retained for the two following three-dimensional *SUPER MARIO* titles, *SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE* (Nintendo 2002) and *SUPER MARIO GALAXY* (Nintendo 2007). However, the developers apparently assumed audiences to be familiar with *SUPER MARIO 64* and explanations concentrated on each game's new features. A change is both games' inclusion of more distinctive narrative set-ups presented through longer cutscenes and featuring of diegetic locations unique to their introductions. Taken together, these introductions reflect the general rising expectations of video game audiences in terms of games' presentation as well as their greater knowledge of established core mechanics. Furthermore, they also reveal a continuing development towards more sophisticated narrations. However, beginning with *NEW SUPER MARIO BROS.* (Nintendo 2006), Nintendo also began releasing new two-dimensional series' entries. These titles feature less rigidly structured introductions more closely mirroring their NES and SNES predecessors than the more recent three-dimensional games. Doing this, they appear to suggest a continuing relevance of this earlier template despite the series having partly moved away from it.

At the core of the *SUPER MARIO* series' introductions appears to be the developers' intent to supply audiences with a basic understanding of the respective titles' core mechanic. Therefore, as the games grew more complex, their introductions turned into more rigid structures steering the flow of information towards the player. Here, the series' focus on its ludic rule-based systems becomes evident. At the same time, the series also reflects a continuous trend towards a greater emphasis on narration. Despite all

the analyzed titles, without exception, sharing the diegetic situation of Princess Peach being captured by villain Bowser, its execution in *SUPER MARIO GALAXY* is a far cry from the mostly paratextual presentation in *SUPER MARIO BROS.*

3 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA SERIES

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (Nintendo 1986) marks the beginning of another enduring Nintendo series. Already the game's title, by inclusion of the word "legend"¹ suggests a greater emphasis on narration. In a thereby fitting contrast to *SUPER MARIO BROS.*, the game's title screen, when left idle, presents a written narrative introduction rather than prerecorded gameplay. However, aside from this, the narrative introduction is outsourced to the game's manual. Starting a new game, the avatar is placed in an empty location and presented with a number of potential exits. However, only one choice allows the unarmed avatar to avoid being confronted by enemies. This set-up is not merely giving players a space to accustom themselves to the game's control scheme but also introduces them to the game's exploration and trial-and-error-based core mechanic. Despite its brief nature, this introduction effectively conveys the game's appeal of allowing the exploration of a large diegetic world.

Following an offbeat sequel on the NES, the series returned on the SNES with *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST* (Nintendo 1991). The games' more sophisticated narration is already evident when the title screen is left idle. Here, a narrative introduction combining written text, still images and in-game engine sequences depicts the diegetic events preceding the game itself. Starting a game, the player's avatar is lying in bed while being telepathically called upon by the imprisoned Princess Zelda. The following moment, the avatar's uncle instructs him to stay in bed before he himself leaves the house. At this point, the player gains control of the avatar. In contrast to the series' first game, where the avatar's initial placement appears like that of a board game's playing piece, this

1 Respectively 'densetsu' in the original Japanese title.

beginning appears more akin to established linear narratives.² The distinctive diegetic situation also immediately grants narrative relevance to the player's actions as moving the avatar is also a diegetic act of defiance against the uncle's authority. Leaving the house, the avatar's movement is directed towards a specific path by guards blocking all other options. This route then leads him into the castle dungeon where he rescues the imprisoned princess. The princess then serves as an intradiegetic explanatory device during the introduction's second half as she and the avatar escape together. Only after she has been escorted to safety does the avatar gain access to the diegetic world in a fashion comparable to the first game's initial set-up.³ *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST* presents a rigidly structured introduction in which ludic elements and diegetic events are carefully intertwined. Doing this, the earlier game's trial-and-error-based introduction is abolished while the narrative appears now cohesive in a manner similar to established linear narrative media.

Released two years after *SUPER MARIO 64*, *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCA-RINA OF TIME* (Nintendo 1998) was less burdened with proving the Nintendo 64's capabilities but had to prove the series' adaptability to a three-dimensional presentation. This difference can already be identified on the title screen. While *SUPER MARIO 64* offered a playful way to engage with the new control device, *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME* presents an atmospheric sequence of the avatar riding at night interspersed with game-play sequences. When starting a new game, an extensive cutscene employs cinematic storytelling techniques to set up the narration. The sequence ends with a fairy awakening the avatar and ordering him to meet the mythical Deku Tree. As the path towards the tree is blocked, the avatar first has to collect several pieces of equipment scattered throughout the village. The village, similar to the castle garden in *SUPER MARIO 64*, allows players to engage with the game's core mechanic away from imminent

2 Considering its later diegetic events, the narrative of *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST* very much fits Joseph Campbell's hero's journey.

3 Fittingly, this moment is accompanied by the game's first use of the series' main theme.

threats. Furthermore, it establishes the diegetic world as the avatar can explore the location and engage with various characters. Having collected the equipment, the avatar can meet the Deku Tree which tells him about diegetic events and presents him another task. For this task's completion, the avatar has to defeat various enemies and solve several smaller cognitive challenges. Having done this, more narrative exposition is followed by the avatar gaining access to the game's diegetic world beyond the village. This introduction incorporates elements from both *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST* and *SUPER MARIO 64*. Retaining the first titles' use of diegetic reasoning to steer the player it takes advantage of the three-dimensional presentation to adapt film's audiovisual language in its narration. In its spatial design it resembles *SUPER MARIO 64* but the more intertwined nature of the narrative elements highlights a key difference between both series.

The introduction of *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME* served as the template for later three-dimensional Zelda games. This only changed with the series' latest entry *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD* (Nintendo 2017) where the game begins with a brief cutscene in which a voice calls upon the avatar to wake up. Doing this, the player gains control of the avatar inside a small cave located on a larger plateau. Free to roam the area, the player only receives instructions from an old man⁴ who offers a way to leave the plateau in exchange for some spirit orbs. These are located in shrines of which each also presents the avatar with a new skill when accessed. Completing this objective, there is a longer narrative cutscene before the avatar is then free to roam the whole diegetic world. While this introduction still ties progress through the game to the avatar completing specific tasks, it offers vastly more freedom than its predecessors. Instead of a rigid sequence of tasks it presents a set of tasks which can be completed in any order to finish the larger segment. Here, the introduction serves as a brief encapsulation of the whole game, as it introduces the game's level of freedom on a smaller scale. At the same time, this diminishes the introduction's character as a sequence of events akin

4 This also appears as a reference to the series' first game where the player's avatar early on meets an old man who presents him a weapon to defend himself.

to linear narrative media. Instead, it is reduced to an almost archetypical state resembling the series' first game.

As a series, the introductions of the ZELDA games highlight several elements. First, how explanations of the games' core mechanics and its narration can be intertwined with another. Where the SUPER MARIO series appears to prioritize giving players space to understand the core mechanics, the ZELDA series appears designed to achieve this while creating a narrative akin to linear narrative media. Second, that the series' narration is distinctively tied to the avatar's spatial movements. Here, the series' designers present what Henry Jenkins termed *enacted narratives* (Egenfeldt-Nielsen/Smith/Tosca 2016, 227) by arranging narrative events alongside the avatar's ability to move through the world. Finally, both the series' first and latest entry show the appeal of engaging with a game's core mechanics through trial-and-error. Taking away control from the designers, this grants players freedom to explore at the cost of a higher risk of being unprepared for specific ludic situations. In the case of THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD, this can furthermore be seen as an acknowledgment of how video games' audiences have generally evolved. Audiences appear to have become more inclined to explore the nuances of the interplay between emergent systems while many video game conventions have turned into common knowledge no longer requiring explanations.

4 DOOM

In 1993, US-developer id Software released DOOM for MS-DOS-compatible home computer. The game represented a major milestone for the first-person-shooter genre and supported the developer's reputation for being at the forefront of technological developments. Like other releases for non-standardized home computer hardware, DOOM features extensive documentation on various aspects as part of a file accessible from outside the game itself. In contrast to this, inside the game there is only an overview of the game's control scheme in the options menu and several pre-recorded gameplay sequences playing in the main menu's background. Besides the first element, which can be seen as a reflection of the large

number of potential input selections offered by a keyboard, this appears reminiscent of *SUPER MARIO BROS.* in its demonstration of the core mechanic. After a player chooses a difficulty level and one of several different episodes, the player's avatar is simply placed at the respective episode's starting point. The lack of any instructions works because *DOOM*, again similar to *SUPER MARIO BROS.*, has a direct feedback loop between player's actions and their consequences alongside a gradually rising difficulty level. Compared to other home computer releases, the introduction of *DOOM* appears to employ strategies more commonly associated with arcade and console games. Not necessarily just a personal preference of the designers⁵ this could be seen as a result of the game's wide distribution as shareware and online, without the physical paratextual material then typical for home computer releases.

The *DOOM* series returned, after a barely distinguishable sequel in 1994 and a long hiatus thereafter, with the release of *DOOM III* (id Software/Activision 2004). At that point, audiences' expectations regarding the single player modes of first-person-shooter had vastly changed. An important reason for this was the success of *HALF-LIFE* (Valve/Sierra Studios 1998) which effectively used scripted in-game engine events to present its genre film-like narrative. Doing this, the designers were able to retain the player's control of the avatar during embedded narrative events while also reducing the presence of non-diegetic elements during gameplay. *DOOM III* was id Software's first game including a single player mode released after *HALF-LIFE*. It therefore had not only to prove the capabilities of the company's new graphic engine but also its ability to remain relevant in light of the changed expectations. Starting a new game, a cinematic cutscene presents the player's avatar, a soldier, arriving at a Mars colony. Initially, the avatar, now controlled by the player, is ordered around the colony fulfilling various mundane tasks. Almost without any explanations of the game's core mechanic, this section mostly introduces various characters and the diegetic world's general atmosphere. Furthermore, it also

5 The studio's first success was the *COMMANDER KEEN* series which appears far closer to then-popular console releases than to other games for MS-DOS home computer.

serves as a technological showcase for the game's then high-end visual presentation as players could explore the diegetic world without the risk of being attacked. Throughout this initial sequence, the use of scripted events and the avoidance of intruding non-diegetic elements appear distinctively modeled after *HALF-LIFE*. The segment concludes with the appearance of demons inside the colony. In contrast to its predecessors, *DOOM III* shows how genre expectations have changed with its general progression now being tied to narrative developments instead of the earlier games' arcade-style progression. Furthermore, its lack of explanations of ludic elements shows that the first-person-shooter genre has formed an audience well versed in its conventions but also highlights the game's lack of elements moving beyond them.

In 2016, id Software released a new entry to the series simply titled *DOOM* (id Software/Bethesda Softworks 2016). Already the title constitutes a statement of intent as it directly references the series' first game. Indeed, if *DOOM III* marked the series following the expectations set by other titles, this new *DOOM* appeared intent to refurbish some of the series' roots for modern audiences. First, there is a clear deemphasization of narration compared to *DOOM III* and other contemporary first-person-shooter. As a statement of intent, this is perhaps best encapsulated in the game's beginning almost directly letting the player control the avatar and fight enemies. However, even beyond this, the introduction's scripted events and cutscenes are often brief and opaque moments. Furthermore, while *DOOM III* avoided intruding non-diegetic elements, the new title employs such elements to explain its core mechanics. These sometimes forcefully interrupt gameplay but also tend to take up less time than the explanatory elements embedded in the diegetic world in *DOOM III* and other games. Furthermore, they can be easily removed as evident in *DOOM* where they are omitted on higher difficulties. In its general tendency, the introduction of the new *DOOM*, similar to *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD*, appears willing to break with consistent evolutionary tendencies recognizable in the series' previous entries.

5 CONCLUSION

The introductions of the analyzed games reveal distinctive similarities between them. In all analyzed titles, the introduction appears as a statement of intent regarding each game's later focus in terms of its ludic and narrative elements. While this might not be surprising from the perspective of video games as commercial products, it marks a distinctive change from, for example, film and literature, where introductions often appear to intentionally misguide recipients' expectations towards the later presentation. In regards to various properties of video games it is easy to see why developers would be reluctant to pursue such strategies. Considering arcade's pay per session-structure or the extensive length of more recent titles, willfully misguiding players could alienate audiences. Indeed, the backlash against METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY, which mislead audiences regarding the game's inclusion of the series' mainstay protagonist (Holmes 2012, 144), would support developers' reluctance.

Furthermore, introductions reveal the zeitgeist of the video game industry. Many larger trends regarding video games can be identified by merely analyzing the introductions of individual titles. The important role of arcades for video game development in the 1980s, the growing importance of narration and the apprehension of film's audiovisual language are just a few trends discernible in this small-scale analysis. Intuitively, this leads to the question if the two most recent games included here, THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD and the 2016 DOOM, indicate a distinctive trend. In both cases, there is an intentional break with their series' previous developments coupled with a harking back to each series' initial entry. However, in both cases it would be hyperbolic to consider these newest entries' being closer to their series' initial entries rather than to later sequels. Instead, both games combine a reevaluation of previous developments with an assessment of what made the initial entries appealing to audiences. As a design tactic, such a pattern is only available to a select number of series sporting comparable longevity. Nonetheless, this might be read as part of a larger trend of reevaluating previous developments in game design. Perhaps slightly hyperbolic, I would argue that this trend is a

sign of video game design detaching itself from technological developments. For a long time, game design appeared driven by the need to take full advantage of new technological possibilities as they took hold of the market. Nowadays, this effect appears weakened as development costs have soared and many titles' popularity partly depends on their availability outside of high-end hardware. This trend in introductions, similar to the rise of independent game development or Nintendo's abandonment of pushing for high-end hardware, represents technological development becoming a less decisive factor for video game design.

In summary, introductions are not just a structural part of video games but also an object of analysis not merely supporting the understanding of individual games but also of larger developments in the video game industry and game design. Therefore, expanding their analysis beyond the small scope of this essay might prove a fruitful scholarly endeavor.

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