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Terry Borst / *Transcribed:* In full / *Talk:* "*Wing Commander*, Interactive Movies and FMV: Dead End or Doorway?" / *Panel:* "Lean Back versus Lean Forward Aesthetics" / *Event: Bell Canada and MediaLinx Present Big Game Hunters* / *Date:* Saturday, September 19, 1998, 2:45–4:30 p.m.

Terry Borst is coauthor of the interactive movies *Wing Commander III* and *IV*. *Wing Commander III* won the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences' Cybie Award for Best Writing. Borst's traditional screenwriting credits include the TV-movie sequel to the hit film *Midnight Run* (*Midnight Runaround*), the independent feature *Private War*, and episodes of the BBC series *Bugs*. Terry also coauthored "alt.screenwriters," a monthly print column on the topic of screenwriters and new media. He teaches at Santa Fe University of Art and Design.

Terry Borst: Just to start out here: I'm the enemy. I'm one of those Hollywood guys who came in and messed up the games business completely. In fact, I have a quote from J.C.[Herz]'s book, *Joystick Nation*. She goes, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. There's a half-hour movie at the beginning of *Wing Commander III*. When do we get to play the game?"[129] J.C.'s right, but the funny thing is that it was the movie guys who were saying, "We need more interactivity. We need more game play," and it was the game guys who were saying, "We need more movie."

What I'm going to suggest here is that the us-versus-them paradigm that I'm presented with if I go to game-design conferences is, at best, short-sighted. J.C. and I probably have a little disagreement—however, I share with her my uncertainty about how this world convergence is going to work out. In fact, in non-print entertainment, we are definitely headed more and more toward the continuum between interactive and game entertainment: interactive toys and theme parks, television and the movies, and animation. That train is leaving the station, and I think it's just going to continue to pick up speed. It's a lot of work that we're going to be up to in the 21st century. I think it's a little bit like the direction the music business has gone in. In the '90s, a lot of it now is about sampling and borrowing from all kinds of genres and creating these new kinds of recombinant forms. I think the same might be ahead for games, TV, movies, and so on. We're going to break down a lot of those walls. One can argue that, on a creative level, Hollywood is at a certain level of exhaustion. We see a pure recycling of TV shows from the '70s and movies that were made in the '60s.

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129 J.C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired Our Minds* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co. Inc., 1997).

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While the panel here was called "Lean Back versus Lean Forward Aesthetics," what I'm going to suggest is a lot more "Lean Forward versus Lean Forward Aesthetics." It may be that what we're talking about is a lot more "left brain versus right brain." Because, I'll tell you what, game-designer schools are interested in narrative.

In our heart of hearts, we would still like to achieve what they haven't been able to yet—which is that the emotional and intuitive power of film narrative, so far, has not been achievable in a game. Games have great powers of their own. For instance, the visceral narrative power of *Doom* is so pure and works so well. We've been talking about puzzle games. We know about problem solving, logical powers, and narrative powers that are in game play as well. But the pull of doing something, to be able to engage people on the level that movies like last year's *Titanic* and *Saving Private Ryan* have done, is something that still beats in the hearts of an awful lot of game designers. Is it possible to achieve that in some realm? If that wasn't the case, you wouldn't see those opening three- to five-minute movies that are at the front of so many games. You wouldn't see so many endgame cinematics.

The first time I met the creator of the *Wing Commander* franchise, Chris Roberts, his view of future at that particular time—and we're talking about several years ago— was a creative dichotomy of passive entertainment versus interactive entertainment.[130] Wait a second! When I watch a great movie, it is not a passive experience just because my thumb is not twitching in the middle of it. The movies that I care about the most are Jean-Luc Godard's *Week End* and Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*. That's anything but a passive experience. I'm incredibly engaged. Through the element of montage we have to fill in all those gaps. Our minds are doing all kinds of work all the time. It's just different from what games do for us.

Just a very brief list of how games are incorporating narratives. The old text games and role-playing games were the way to drive narrative. Hotspots on the screen have been a way to move narrative forward. For several years, *Wing Commander III* and *IV* were filmed, and backlash against full-motion video games set in just about as quickly there.

Let me talk about a couple of ways in which Hollywood is very nervously dipping into interactive narrative. Clearly, simply appropriating game titles and turning them into movies is not what that's all about. The interactive divisions of most of the studios got flooded with money for a while, and most of their games bombed. If you go

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130 Chris Roberts is a computer-game designer, programmer, film producer, and director. He is best known for creating the popular *Wing Commander* series while employed at Origin Systems.

to the *Homicide*'s website, the dramatic TV show, what you'll find is a whole additional set of narratives that are on the web. Also, currently, because of bandwidth, you're talking primarily text graphics, maybe extremely short videos as well. But, as that bandwidth increases, I that think the relation of both of those elements—the TV show and the website—will only continue to grow. This is where Hollywood is going to move—greater and greater interactive narrative, through a combination of websites and television.

Ultimately, *Wing Commander* is an action game, and that's where its focus was. But, what I call the "cut-up" narrative that we used within *Wing Commander*—certainly, this kind of idea's not new. William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin were doing it.[131] If you read Julio Cortázar's novel *Hopscotch*, it's presented linearly and he tells you that you can read it in this order in terms of the chapters as well.[132] It's a different experience doing that—the same with Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*.[133]

I think this suggests new directions for what used to be traditional entertainment—to broaden the scope of that narrative and make it more interesting. Especially with the potential in the future of post-DVD delivery systems: online, video-on-demand, and so on.

Wing Commander, for people who are not familiar with it, is a very common plot line borrowed from *Star Wars*—except you're fighting a race of aliens. If you don't win all the missions, the aliens are going to take over the earth and it's going to be on your head. When we organized the missions, the game play was really a series of chapters. We called them series and simply designated them by letters. We had approximately 50 or so missions, so we had approximately 17 chapters with approximately three missions per chapter or per series.

We alternated space (flight-space and combat game play) with scenes of full-motion video. In *Wing Commander IV*, we actually varied the potential sequence of the missions and you could fly Mission Three before you could fly Mission One. In terms of the narrative scenes, you could choose to play them in any order that you wanted to. You could skip ones that you didn't want to play. *Wing Commander* was binary,

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131 The cut-up technique of writer William S. Burroughs was re-introduced by Brion Gysin (inventor of the dream machine), and is an aleatory literary technique in which a text is cut up and rearranged to create a new text. Cut-ups are used to offer a nonlinear alternative to traditional reading and writing. The concept can be traced to, at least, the Dadaists of the '20s, but was popularized in the late '50s and early '60s by. Burroughs, and has since been used in a wide variety of contexts.

132 Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch* (New York: Pantheon, 1987).

133 Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975).

in that you could only respond to what was happening in a scene with a couple of directions: it was an either/or choice. That might lead you to some place where another scene might be the logical thing to do, but it would still be your choice. Now, the interesting thing about this, in terms of cut-up narrative, is that those scenes have to work regardless of which order they're played in.

At least part of the reasons that full-motion video (FMV) is so much in disfavour now is not just the problem of technology; a lot of it was simply done badly the first time around. This doesn't mean that it's invalid for the future. However, FMV or no FMV is beside the point. The concept works just as well with scenes that are completely computer-generated.

Carl Goodman: There's so much to talk about. To extend what has just been said, I think that as computer graphics and animation move more toward photorealism, equating cinematics with full-motion video will not make as much sense. As it becomes more and more real, it's not about capturing live action and the immediate depth you get from that. The problem with that is—like in music with synthesis versus sampling—when you're synthesizing you have a lot more control, I believe, over creating these elements and allowing people to manipulate and change the states. When you capture video, there's a lot less for the interactor. You basically slow it down or speed it up. The other area is navigable video—the idea that, at some point in the future, we will be able to, first of all, combine sampled or synthesized imagery into one interactive tableau. Also there are people playing around now with the idea that you could navigate through captured video if the device that captures the video captures the panorama over a certain period of time. One could envision moving through what seemed like varied cinematic—or at least televised—experiences in an interactive way. I think that will eventually happen.

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