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Novigrad in the evening sun. *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Project Red 2015)

Special Issue

Gamevironments of the Past.

by

Derek Fewster and Ylva Grufstedt

Issue 05 (2016)

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The Adventures of Ms. Meta: Developing a Historical Superhero Video Game

Sarah Zaidan

Abstract

The Adventures of Ms. Meta (forthc.) uses a combination of brawler and puzzle game mechanics along with the narrative device of time travel to provide players with the means to become active participants in the cultural narrative of the American superhero. Although these larger than life characters are irrefutably fixtures in contemporary popular culture, they exist in constant change; reinvented time after time in accordance with each era's definition of heroism, adapted as media forms evolve. As a game designer with a background in comic book illustration and superhero art history, this article explores my process of developing an experience that engages with the ever-changing relationship between superheroes and American culture. Players assume the role of Ms. Meta, a modern female superhero, in an adventure where every level represents a different age of superhero comics, and the world that produced them. Grounded in academic research, and featuring game mechanics including puzzle-solving and collaboration, I hope to empower players to create their own definition of heroism.

Keywords: superheroes, alternate history, representation, independent games, authenticity, intertextuality, video game history, game development, developer insights, agency

To cite this article: Zaidan, S., 2016. The Adventures of Ms. Meta: Developing a Historical Superhero Video Game. *gamevironments* 5, 205-236. Available at <http://www.gameenvironments.uni-bremen.de>.

Introduction

A mainstay of contemporary popular culture, the figure of the superhero has been inextricably linked to history and the cultural climate ever since the creation of *Superman* in 1939. For over seven decades, these larger-than-life characters have existed as part of the American cultural record; engaged in a dialogue with the world beyond the pages of a comic book, inspired by their creators' perceptions of heroism, informed by the weight of their own history and cultural importance. As a game

designer, artist, and superhero scholar, I am developing a video game that engages directly with this complex relationship. *The Adventures of Ms. Meta* uses a combination of brawler and puzzle game mechanics along with the narrative device of time travel to provide players with the means to become active participants in the cultural narrative of the American superhero. The following is an account of my intentions for *Ms. Meta*, from its narrative, game mechanics, and context. My process is guided by ongoing scholarly research, and takes inspiration from existing works in the fields of video games and comic books.

The Superhero as a Cultural Record of History

Superheroes are no strangers to scholarship. As these costumed crime-fighters have become increasingly ubiquitous in popular culture, their legitimacy as subjects of academic analysis has also grown over the past two decades. The history of the genre is a prevalent topic of study; as is the analysis of how the genre originated. The approach that superheroes are only the most recent iteration of the ancient mythic hero archetype, as Campbell (1988) and Reynolds (1992) have stated, stands in apparent contrast with the arguments of Fingerroth (2004) and Chambliss and Svitavsky (2013) that the genre represents the uniquely American narrative of immigration mixed with inspiration from serial stories of the era including pulp novels and radio plays.

In addition to where superheroes may have originated from, there is a wealth of material that explores where they have been and where they are headed. The essays collected by Wandtke (2007) and Ndalians (2009) illuminate how these characters inhabit a cycle of reinvention and adaptation, instigated by the relationship between media and society, and the place superheroes occupy at the intersection of both spheres. The body of work written about superheroes is a significant and valuable resource for contributing to and enhancing the understanding of these figures'

cultural significance and impact across time in the popular consciousness.

When I look past the varying, sometimes conflicting, theoretical frameworks for studying the superhero, I see the emergence of common ground. The story of the superhero is one that speaks to American society, politics, and media; of aspirations and anxieties, with the theme of change a beating heart at its center. To paraphrase Foucault (2002), history is neither straightforward nor tidy, and the superhero genre, when viewed as a cultural record of a given time period, certainly reveals several pasts, several forms of connexion, several hierarchies of importance. As one era passes into another, superheroes change, the overarching meta-narrative that informs the structure of their stories changes, and in turn the ways in which superheroes act as agents of change in their world.

Proehl (2016) discusses the complicated space that superheroes occupy, and how their meaning transcends their individual narratives:

“There is a Captain America that exists outside of or above the stories written about him. He’s a moral guidepost. He stands apart from the political fray: a version of an America that could be. He’s better than all that. He’s super... The superhero can serve as a symbolic protector or an avatar for personal strength. Some victims of violent crimes find solace and vicarious revenge in the stories of Batman. Characters like the Hulk or the X-Men can be touchstones for people struggling with mental health issues or discrimination.”

The subject of superheroes has also been explored through the medium of comics themselves. Notable examples are Busiek and Ross’s *Marvels* (2004), that presents pivotal events in the Marvel Universe from the 1940s to the 1970s from the perspective of an ordinary citizen. Its photorealistic art style imparts a sense of reality to the proceedings, and to the text. Gaiman and Kubert (2009) deconstruct and give equal validity to Batman’s many reinventions by inviting readers to imagine the character existing in an endless cycle of death and rebirth.

The Adventures of Ms. Meta

On the surface, the game tells the story of Ms. Meta, an undergraduate engineering student who is the current protégé of MetaMan. Drawing inspiration from Marvel Comics’ use of an alternate version of New York City in many of its comics, the game’s levels take place in New York and its environs, albeit in a world where superheroes have been a fact of life since the late 1930s. Although by the time the game begins superheroes are an international phenomenon in this world, few have reached the iconic status of MetaMan, who is widely known as the first American superhero. Ms. Meta, however, is representative of a different generation of heroes: legacy characters. While superheroes have fought alongside youthful sidekicks since the Golden Age of the 1940s, the past decade has seen long-established characters pass their titles on or even share them with a diverse assortment of young people who want to follow in their footsteps without becoming their carbon copies. These characters bring different backgrounds, worldviews and experiences to their in-universe actions, but also give readers a fresh perspective on the superhero genre.ⁱ To translate the visual aspect of this individuality into the game world, future builds will implement a modular avatar creation system. This will include a variety of heights, body types, facial features and hairstyles for Ms. Meta; so that players can experience the game in the role of the superhero they have designed. The demo features a pre-designed avatar, who I designed to intentionally speak to the variety the modular system will offer.

shocked to find that Ms. Meta is capable of shrugging off the onerous "Meta" obligations, and players will be given the option to assert their identity and restore their original character design from that point forward, or to accept their situation. As part of the player's opportunity for choice and decision-making, one of the options during NPC conversations will always be what a superhero of the time might have responded with, and players can choose to proceed through the level in this manner. Ms. Meta, by virtue of the recent comic book debuts of the legacy characters she represents, and by virtue of her being a video game character whose actions are decided by the player, has the agency to choose the form her heroism takes. MetaMan, however, is unable to do the same, after more than seven decades of reinvention and with the weight of his status as a cultural icon confining him to his role as the embodiment of the All-American Hero.



Figure 3. An image of the 1940s hub featuring a patriotic MetaMan during WWII.

game, players will become active participants in the past while shaping the future. To demonstrate proof of this concept, the demo will contain one complete storyline with three possible endings, beginning with a tutorial level that is set in the present day and familiarizes players with the game's inputs. The player is then transported to 1942, where a full level will take place, after which the player returns to the present for a short epilogue which is determined by their actions in the past. I chose these two particular time periods in order to showcase the unmistakable stylistic differences between a medium in its nascence and that same medium after seven decades of evolution and innovation. In addition to proof of concept for the game's mechanics and art direction, I intend for the demo to introduce players to Ms. Meta's city, and the friends, foes, and ordinary citizens who populate it.

As this project combines video games and superhero comic books, I am taking a dualistic approach to my research and development. My decisions are informed by the unique qualities of each medium, their histories, and the parallels and overlaps that emerge between them. As players learn the actions needed to progress within the game system, gameplay creates narrative independent of any pre-designed story (Salen and Zimmerman, Anthropy and Clark). Visuals, meanwhile, have connections to both gameplay and story, facilitating level navigation, existing alongside the mechanics, and communicating pertinent information to the player about the game world.

On Creating Meaning through Superheroes and Intertextuality

In the words of Huizinga (1971), "all play means something." I am deliberately designing the game to maximize player agency through meaningful play, working from the definition Salen and Zimmerman provide in their seminal *Rules of Play* (2004). Meaningful play is described as "the goal of successful game design," (2004, 33) where meaning emerges from the relationship between players' actions and their

outcomes within the game. If the system does not respond to players' in-game decisions with discernible feedback, the relationship between the action and its result is stripped of meaning. However, if the game system fails to integrate the outcome with the larger context of the game, players are left anticipating a meaningful response that is never fully realized (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 35).

The nature of video games has the potential to add a dimension to this existing body of work that text alone cannot provide, as Gee (2007) explains:

"Plato in the *Phaedrus* famously complained that books were passive in the sense that you cannot get them to talk back to you in a real dialogue the way a person can in a face-to-face encounter. Games do talk back. In fact, nothing happens until a player acts and makes decisions."

Superheroes are informed by the era/creative team they date back to, but I am giving the player the agency to have a hand in that process also. For example, before its closure in late 2012,^{iv} the MMO *City of Heroes* (2004) featured a robust character creation system where players could customize their characters' costumes, powers and even write a unique backstory. The game's setting corresponded to a contemporary city, but its storyline took its cues from well-established superhero comic conventions to create a sense of timelessness. The ability to develop a character's personality through dialogue options is effectively demonstrated in the context of the superhero genre in *Batman – The Telltale Series* (2016). Each episode is fueled by choice, from the timed conversations that determine Bruce Wayne's behavior in a series of events that increasingly place him at the source of controversy and scandal, to the crime scene investigations and their subsequent reconstructions that are dependent on connections left up to the player to form, to the precision-based combat mechanics, and strategic pre-planning of the first episode's climactic battle. Although the player's choices conclude each episode with a single ending, the journey to reach it is filled with a variety of ways for players to make their individual

experiences as Batman unique. As the series continues, I will certainly count *Batman – The Telltale Series* among my inspirations for giving weight to *Ms. Meta's* conversation mechanics, as well as the social obstacles players will face.

The *InFAMOUS* (2009-2015) series engages with the issue of a superhero's impact on their community, albeit in a world where super powers are hated and feared. This aspect of the universe adds a heightened sense of stakes to the game's morality system. Sucker Punch Productions' creation of a Native American main character, as well as setting the game in contemporary Seattle, remain innovative design choices as well. A particularly inspirational game for *Ms. Meta's* development is *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (2014). Its successful integration of history with engaging and meaningful gameplay presents the human cost of World War I, in addition to its use of comic book style visuals. *Valiant Hearts* is an example of optional intertextuality in that it requires no prior familiarity with World War I on the part of the player. In addition, its playable characters represent a diverse collection of experiences and nationalities in a manner that is organic and supported by its moving storyline.

On Genre: Contextualizing the Side-scrolling Brawler

I have deliberately designed the movement and combat mechanics of *Ms. Meta* to resemble those of side-scrolling brawlers, a genre that dominated the arcade scene of the late 1980s thanks to games like *Double Dragon* (1987) and *Final Fight* (1989). This section explores the rationale behind my decision, my analysis of the brawler genre through the lens of its connection to superhero-themed video games, and how this analysis has influenced the development of *Ms. Meta* in ways that extend far beyond the game's core mechanics and into elements including story, art, and level design.

Early Game Design

Thematically and mechanically, brawlers owe a great deal to Hong Kong action cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. The primary goal of these films was to showcase the martial arts prowess of their lead performers, such as Bruce Lee, whose film *Enter the Dragon* served as a primary inspiration for *Double Dragon* (Leone 2012), and Jackie Chan by pitting them against a large groups of enemy characters, who they dispatched through a combination of quick thinking and consummate skill. Often cast in the role of a rescuer or an avenger, these action heroes fought their battles against the landscape of Hong Kong, using the environment itself as a weapon, even as they favored hand to hand combat (Miller 2015).

All of these elements are present in classic brawlers, from the deluge of enemies to the urban settings and plotlines rooted in revenge. With enemies bearing down on players from both sides of the screen, or even leaping down from above or bursting out of walls in the background, brawlers achieve a palpable sense of tension and suspense. The ability to move freely along the X, Y, and Z axes, intuitive controls translating on-screen into a wide array of flashy martial arts moves, and the option for cooperative play (usually 2 to 4 players) proved to be a winning combination that coincided with the resurgence of the superhero genre in popular culture. The critical success of *Superman* (1978) left a lasting imprint on the landscape of mass media (Tye 2012, 191) by reestablishing superhero figures as mass media juggernauts, and introducing the character to a new generation--one whose definition of mass media now included video games.^v

Unsurprisingly, the 1980s saw a variety of tie-in video games starring the Man of Steel, but Taito Corporation's 1988 arcade game *Superman* was the first to apply brawler mechanics to the superhero genre. In Taito's *Superman* movement along the Z-axis combines with the character's power of flight, giving levels more verticality

uncertainty is perfectly in keeping with my intentions for *Ms. Meta*; the player may be in the role of a superhero, but that alone will not guarantee their success.

An urban setting is also fitting when applied to the theme of superheroes. However, the treatment of the urban setting and the evil forces that have beset it can appear at odds with a superhero theme. In the average brawler destroying public property is treated as advantageous, even desirable, for the player, as these objects yield useful healing items or weapons. In the player's hands, trash cans and oil drums are capable of knocking over groups of enemies in one throw. By the end of the game, the player will have mowed down hundreds of enemy characters, who vanish from the screen once their health is depleted, emphasizing their inconsequentiality to the overall narrative. This rampant destruction of public property, while clearly a nod to the Hong Kong action film roots of the brawler genre, as are the piles of enemies left in the hero's wake, creates a different sort of meaning when players take on the role of superheroes. In Marco Arnaudo's analysis of the ethical code that governs superheroes' behavior, he observes that in the present day, these characters "may never kill, for any reason or under any circumstances, not even for legitimate defense, by failure to rescue, or 'for the greater good'" (Arnaudo 2010, 78). Arnaudo traces the origins of this rule to reveal that superheroes of the late 1930s and early 1940s had no compunctions over the deaths of villains, a sign of the influence hard-boiled pulp novel heroes like *The Shadow* and *Doc Savage*, the *Man of Bronze* had on the genre before its narrative voice was fully formed (Fingerroth 2004, 40).

The Application of Non-violence as a Mechanic

It was after the 1954 establishment of the Comics Code Authority that violence in comic books was all but eliminated,^{viii} but by the Silver Age of the 1960s, "the no-kill policy...[went] from a restriction to an openly represented and debated topic, as it is today for the vast majority of Marvel and DC heroes" (Arnaudo 2013, 79). This led me

to question how and if the no-kill policy was represented in superhero-themed brawlers, when traditional brawlers require the player to fall into a rhythm of consistently and casually killing enemies in order to progress. As is often the case with video games whose release predated the Internet, and whose success did not reach the heights of iconic titles of the day, insights on the technology used are easy to uncover; insights from the developers less so, including what guidelines they were given by Marvel or DC Comics on how to represent their characters. In the following examples, I am treating the games as sources of inspiration for how I might approach the design of *Ms. Meta*'s adversaries, levels, and the player's interactions with the game world, concluding with an exploration of how these insights will inform the development of *Ms. Meta*.

In *Superman*, defeated enemy sprites transform into glowing outlines that immediately move off-screen at high speed, leaving their fate ambiguous. This iteration of *Superman* also had no aversion to kicking his way through trash cans, fire hydrants, fences, and the occasional telephone booth.^{ix} *Spider-Man* (1991) translates the title character's wall-crawling abilities into innovative platforming mechanics within what is otherwise a conventional brawler (albeit with a marked lack of property damage on the part of *Spider-Man*). Enemies are universally human, and flicker and vanish in the classic brawler death animation. *Spider-Man*'s levels conclude by tallying up of all the enemy types that have been killed so far. The amount of kills adds proportionate bonus points to the player's overall score and is accompanied by a declaration of "awesome!" from Spidey himself. This feedback is certainly meaningful for the player from a gameplay standpoint, but the scoring system stands out as a game design choice in direct conflict with *Spider-Man*'s personality.

Captain American and the Avengers directly addresses the potential disconnect between brawler game mechanics and superheroes' moral code with exclusively

robot enemies, the exception being the licensed supervillains who appear as bosses. After each boss battle, these characters are shown in a defeated pose as the screen fades to black, followed by cutscenes that clearly state with both text and image that the boss has survived. However, when The Avengers give chase to the forces of villain Red Skull in the third level, they leave their city devastated by the giant robot boss of the second level without a second thought. *X-Men* also features a largely robotic cadre of enemies, and avoids the issue of property damage as collateral by beginning the first level with the city having already been destroyed prior to the X-Men's arrival. Given the time period, the fate of these cities is commonplace; the collateral damage caused by the conflicts of larger than life heroes and villains is an aspect of the genre that was largely taken for granted during the 1990s. Superhero media of the 21st century, however, has been addressing this topic directly, resulting in a new meta-narrative. The central conflict of recent films including *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) is initiated by how inadvertently destructive superheroes can be, and how the enormous power they wield can disconnect them from the very communities they serve, causing them to be viewed with distrust and animosity.

I have translated this meta-narrative and sense of accountability into the gameplay in a deliberate subversion of classic brawler mechanics: Ms. Meta will be able to manipulate the environment and make tactical use of her surroundings, but cannot personally destroy them. This is not to say her attitude is a universal one. Property damage will certainly occur at the hands of other characters—not all of them enemies, and not always intentionally, but Ms. Meta's role will be one of intentionally preventing and mitigating destruction rather than personally contributing to it. I have contextualized these gameplay elements through the demo's plot; one of the game's main characters, Steel Dart, is a robotics expert who has dispatched their army of robots to the past in order to preemptively prevent a terrorist attack that occurred

that very day in 1942. The identity of the attacker remains unknown, and Steel Dart, used to remotely controlling their metal minions via wireless contact, has no distance command over the hostile metal behemoths flooding the attack site and its surrounding environs. The character believes fully that in this case, the ends justify the means and any collateral damage the robots may cause is negligible by comparison to the evil act they are trying to stop. This aspect of the plot ensures that enemy robots of assorted sizes, speeds and attack patterns will be in plentiful supply.

The next step in the design process was determining what would happen when the player is defeated. In traditional brawlers, players who choose to continue the game resume instantaneously from the screen where their character ran out of health. This approach is a valid one for *Ms. Meta* as long as level progression is determined by combat alone. This does not apply to the game in its entirety. Brawlers excel at providing an action-packed experience of continuous movement through the game world towards a single goal, but *Ms. Meta's* levels are designed to provide other methods of interacting with the game world apart from violence. Brawler mechanics were not initially intended to accommodate the sorts of challenges the player will encounter in the game, such as navigating social interactions, and uncovering the identity of a would-be terrorist before they can strike. The non-combative elements of the game will impact how the level is experienced moment to moment, as well as provide opportunities for the player to shape the personality of the *Ms. Meta* character. To maintain visual cohesion throughout the game, and reduce the feeling that conversations are a separate mode of play, they will occur in the form of classic comic book speech bubbles that will not alter the existing game view. When presented with a choice, the player will have up to four dialogue options, which will appear above *Ms. Meta's* head as comic book convention of cloud-edged bubbles denoting thoughts. When the player selects their response, its outline will be replaced with a conventional speech bubble to indicate *Ms. Meta* has spoken the line

aloud.

These social interactions exist in part so that the player may uncover alternate paths for navigating a level – such as finding a way over a police blockade set up on account of the aforementioned giant robots by taking to the rooftops, but they also afforded me an avenue to integrate conversation and combat. One of the greatest strengths of brawler gameplay is the allowance for multiple players cooperating toward a unified goal.^x While *Ms. Meta* does not support cooperative play at this stage, the player’s decisions throughout the game will determine whether or not a selection of NPCs, including fellow superheroes and ordinary citizens, will assist the player during boss battles. Involvement will range from distracting the boss so that the player gains a momentary advantage, to super powered team-ups. It will also be possible for two of the NPCs native to 1942, a society journalist and a munitions factory worker; to help the player gain access to particular characters and locations that would otherwise be unavailable. Proactive NPC participation is intended to provide players with a feedback metric for the conversation mechanic, and add to the player’s experience that their decisions are impactful in ways both large and small, with the goal of maximizing meaningful player engagement with the NPCs as well as the game itself. The game will also feature visual feedback whenever the player’s actions alter the timeline, but the nature of these changes will not be revealed after the level is complete.

Level design and Visual Narrative

Historical Research and Plotlines

The plotlines of each level are based on stories that are common to the time period in question. In the present day tutorial level, Dr. Entropy’s time machine is stolen by teenage robotics prodigy Steel Dart, who longs to change the past to give their

Aesthetics and Visual Cues

NPC interaction may be optional in many cases, but the player will be constantly interacting with the game’s visual aspects. Each level’s art is designed to form a connection in the player’s mind with superhero comics of the corresponding era. I began this process in an intertextual manner by exploring the visual elements of superhero comics from the past and present. In the present day, superhero comics have begun to move away from the fixed parameters of a “house style”, with many recent titles demonstrating a wide range of unique artistic approaches. There are some defined areas of commonality across an assortment of recent superhero comics: saturated color palettes (Stewart, Fletcher, and Tarr 2015, Leth, Williams, and Allegri 2016), applications of color reminiscent of watercolor painting techniques, often lushly shaded and textured (Stewart, Fletcher, and Tarr 2015, Wilson and Alphonso 2014), inked outlines that are frequently loose and sketch-like (Stewart, Fletcher, and Tarr 2015, Fraction et al. 2013), and significant attention paid to environment and clothing details. With this assessment in mind, I am designing a bright, colorful, and plausible game space, reflective of a visual medium that is entering a new stage of its evolution; one that celebrates individual self-expression.

Superhero comics of the 1940s had a more uniformly identifiable style. They employed clear, often thick outlines, and cross-hatching techniques alongside areas of solid black to convey shadow. The color palette placed heavy emphasis on red, green, yellow and orange, often resulting in an excess of non-local color.^{xi} When designing the look of 1942, I have turned to some the Golden Age’s most famous characters for guidance. Joe Shuster’s drawings of Superman, square-jawed and barrel-chested, established the visual conventions of what was soon to become a wildly popular genre (Siegel and Shuster 1938). Jack Kirby’s cover illustration of Captain America punching Hitler in the jaw remains one of the era’s most iconic images (Simon and Kirby 1940). Wonder Woman made her debut in 1941 drawn by

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