

Turning History into a Story Arch to Enable a Computer Game Emotive Narrative Immersion in Archaeology: Palmyra from Queen Zenobia to William Wright

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ABSTRACT

There are several steps in the creation of an historically bound computer game which can be used for academic purposes: the programming, the design, the architectural and environmental research, the testing etc.

But the factor that makes a game (any game) a success or a failure, is the ability to turn the already known facts into a compelling narrative, which the user will get immersed in and want to continue playing until the end.

For that reason, this article delves into the relation between historical accuracy, compelling character arches and the creation of fictional narratives which follow the historical account closely enough to be both accurate and compelling at the same time.

The article will follow as a case study the historical narrative of a recently designed Palmyra computer game, following characters who were in Palmyra for different reasons and had strong historical ties to the ancient town: Queen Zenobia, William Wright and a general historically extrapolated slave.

Keywords: *narrative, computer game design, historical accuracy, Palmyra, Queen Zenobia, William Wright, classics, digital archaeology, emotive*

INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF PALMYRA, QUEEN ZENOBIA AND THE EXPLORER WILLIAM WRIGHT

In order to discuss the more complicated reasoning's behind the creation of a narrative story arch, one has to familiarise himself with the historical background of the area to be reconstructed.

For this reason, the first section of this paper will focus on the history that will then be followed through the game narrative, starting from the most recent one, the destruction of Palmyra by Isis, going through to the next step backwards, which is the travels of William Wright; all the way back to the history surrounding the accomplishments of Queen Zenobia of Palmyra.

If one was to open any news article in 2015/16, they would probably be directed to a link to the destruction of Palmyra by the so called "Islamic State", there is a plethora of articles describing in detail what is to be described as an act against humanity, resulting in the destruction of several

archaeological and historical monuments in Palmyra, culminating with the destruction of a large part of the historical knowledge through the killing of the director of the site Khaled al-Asaad¹.

The destruction occurred in several stages which saw: the temple of Bel, the temple of Baalshamin, the statue of Al'Lat, part of the Great colonnade, the Tetrapylon, the Great Arch, the Tower Tombs and finally the Amphitheatre being destroyed along many other historical objects all over the site of Palmyra, sparing only the actual ruins because of them not being religious icons²³⁴⁵⁶.

¹Davies et al... 2015, Pp. 1-3

²Agence France-Presse in Damascus 2015, Pp. 1-2

³Shaheen 2015, Pp. 1-2

⁴Shaheen 2015, Pp. 1-4

⁵Shaheen 2015, Pp. 1-2

⁶BBC News 2015, Pp. 1-3

The overzealous newspapers labelled this as a unique action, never occurred before the advent of terrorism, but history tells us that this is just one of the many instances when this level of destruction has occurred (take as an example the principle of destruction of temples of ignorance in India, which saw many towns in India having their temples and idols destroyed by Islamic invaders)⁷, therefore one has to approach this event with care, and for the purpose of reconstruction and ethical balance the game's initial part did not delve too far into the latest destruction but mentioned only the reported facts and made it a point to carry on with the narrative part which ignores and avoids political comments (as the purpose of the game was to use technology to aid scientific study and to preserve or recover lost history not to have a political argument).

The next step backwards was to delve into the narrative of the travels of William Wright.

This character was an early explorer of Palmyra, his main reason for travelling through Syria was to spread the word of God as a Presbyterian priest; the most accurate description of such a type of missionary was a man with a bible in one hand and a gun in the other.

William Wright travelled to Palmyra several times, but only one of his travels was accurately recorded, giving us many details, which are still relevant nowadays in the historical reconstruction of the town⁸.

The travels of William Wright resulted in many detailed depictions of areas and monuments in Palmyra, for example he accurately measured the Tower Tombs, took several sketches of the internal decorations, which through digital reconstruction would allow archaeologists to have an approximately accurate ancient depiction of the monuments. He did several observations on the columns and the Great Arch⁹, which were crucial for the accurate recollection of what was present back then that isn't any more nowadays; this was as the previous monument, sketched in a particularly detailed manner which again helped with reconstructions in the game this paper talks about.

7Elliot 1872, Pp. 22

8Wright 1895

9Wright 1895, Pp. 71-73

The list of sketches and measurements goes on to the temple of Bel and Baalshamin, showing the detailed decorations of the roofs and a very detailed description of all the collapsed or still standing columns in every area and the discovery of the water source supplying all of the town, making it possible to map most roads and perimeters due to the columns and stone pipeline positions for the water system¹⁰; therefore, from the archaeological and architectonic point of view, William Wright's exploratory missions were priceless.

But the reason to chose this particular character was actually the narrative potential of his adventures, during his travels, he had various colourful interactions with the Bedawins, he got trapped in an underground tomb for an entire night, he was chased by bandits and dealt with the "King of ladders", a particularly stubborn donkey that was used to carry ladders and kept on creating chaos whenever camp was set up¹¹.

These misadventures and his various connections with the Ottoman world during a period preceding L.T. Lawrence, when the Arab tribes were still divided and scattered round the Eastern world in the form of Bedawin groups and the Ottomans still ruled over them in absolute¹², made his time period an exciting area of study which had the potential of creating a compelling narrative, primary requirement for a successfully long-lasting computer game.

Queen Zenobia on the other hand was chosen due to a mix of historical and narrative reasons. Her history started having a front place when her husband Odaenathus died of mysterious circumstances (hence the rumours of being murdered by his wife), officially killed by his cousin, but there were several versions from the interested parties¹³.

Odaenathus was the regional governor of the area of Palmyra and a hero in the people's eyes, he was the only thing standing between the Parshan Empire and the Roman Empire during a period when hostilities had costed Rome an emperor and were not showing any sign of calming down¹⁴.

10Wright 1895, Pp. 95-98

11Wright 1895, Pp. 89-94

12Thomas 1924, Pp. 21

13Seller 1696, Pp. 42-75

14Seller 1696, Pp. 15-19

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When Odaenathus died, Zenobia took political and military control of the region, serving as the Queen-mother to their son Walballathus, he was present on some of the coinage in Palmyra, but the queen was predominant in the years to come putting his historical importance in a quiet profile lost in history¹⁵.

Subsequently, Queen Zenobia had a successful military campaign substantially challenging the Roman Empire and succeeding in taking over most of the Middle East and Northern Africa including Egypt. This was a very fast campaign that saw her gathering support and conquering areas without much resistance due to general grief against the Roman Empire; but was not going to last for long as a new emperor was placed at the head of the empire.

Aurelian was a military leader, not charismatic or politically schooled like the predecessors, but a brilliant strategist, once he took control of the Empire, he made quick work of the resistance amassed by Zenobia and chased her back to Palmyra, where after a passionately defended siege, she tried to flee to the Parshan Empire but was captured by the Romans before she could successfully escape¹⁶.

Her fate is uncertain in historical recollections, some say she was brought to Rome in chains and executed as it was expected, other say she was married off to a Roman noble after a short incarceration and that she had other children who went on to join the ruling class in Rome¹⁷, but whatever happened, she was a powerful female character able to rival or even surpass the famous Cleopatra.

The fact that made this character one of the best ones to use as guides for the game user, is the powerful presence and the historical circumstances, which placed her right in the middle of the peak of Palmerian development; allowing the user to explore Palmyra at its full with most of the temples and monuments present towards the late 200s A.D.

During this period, all the monuments present during William Wright's time were already fully built and in use, giving a priceless opportunity of narrative and historical interaction.

The next step to the building of a compelling classical history narrative is finding a balance between the historical accuracy and the fictional narrative needed to keep the attention of the user and the next section will explain how this was done.

HISTORICAL ACCURACY VS. COMPELLING NARRATIVE FICTION?

When a historian approaches the writing of a book, article or a general historical description in classics, the first thing he does is insure that whatever he is writing is properly backed up by facts which can be easily checked by following the references and research material¹⁸. This is academically what distinguishes fact from fiction; the recollection of facts needs to be absolutely true and accurate.

The completely different approach is the one of fictional writers, such style requires a certain level of attention and focus from the reader; the book needs to be compelling, exciting, have an emotional reaction which will keep on drawing the reader more and more into the story; until one is completely immersed and forgets about the world around him¹⁹. This method will inevitably require deviating from the actions taken by the characters in the real history (talking about historical fiction) and delve into the realm of fiction.

So, how does one manage to mix such a polar opposite approach?

There is no clear answer to this problem, there are many issues which vary from ethical responsibility to historical inaccuracy and in particular the inability of the audience to distinguish what is real and what is fiction²⁰; especially if we are talking about creating a game which will look realistic and give the impression that everything you see is as it really was.

From the ethical point of view, there is a danger when creating historical narrative that one might insult, offend audience or misrepresent a particular historical fact²¹; in the case of Palmyra, there is a large variety of problems of this nature present: one may take the side of one

15Stoneman 1994, Pp. 117-122

16Stoneman 1995, Pp. 119-125

17Southern 2008, Pp. 156

18Kathari 2004, Pp. 1

19Witmer et al... 1994, Report 1014.

20Aarseth 2007, Pp. 37-42

21Kempshall 2015, Pp. 9-11

character or the other and believe in their story regardless of the fictional nature, for example the character of William Wright, tends to be compelling for the adventurous way of behaviour that he shows in the book written by himself (which its self might be partially fiction)²². On the other hand, the character of Queen Zenobia, tends to be more historically accurate but presents various theoretical changes in her history, like for example the possibility of her not dying by the hands of the Romans and managing to live a long prosperous life as opposed to the other theory which sees her killed in a public display of Power once brought back to Rome²³.

The historical inaccuracies like the actions by William Wright or the more romantic possibility of Zenobia's long life would be compelling and more naturally taken as fact due to the emotional attachment to the characters; but nevertheless, this might be just fiction and ethically not the right way of recollecting historical accounts.

Another factor that might be of crucial importance to the narrative dangers is the insult or offence to the audience as mentioned above, for example, William Wright was a missionary, but from a different time period and although his written work is a testament to dedicated accuracy in regards to the work done on the town of Palmyra, he often has very direct comments and to a certain extent insults to the population living in the area at the time.

The Bedawins which were inhabiting Palmyra and the surrounding areas, were depicted by William Wright as gullible, barbaric and underdeveloped; people he could easily kill but chose not to because of pity most of the time; and we must not forget that his mission was to spread the word of God to the pagans regardless the religious associations they might already have²⁴.

This places William Wright in the category of typical conqueror from the British Empire regardless of his missionary status and as a result the novelization of his actions as a "hero" fending off the barbarians when attacking him in

the ruins with his revolver²⁵, would not be well received by some audience.

On the other hand, the challenge to the Roman Empire by Queen Zenobia, seeing her battling Emperor Aurelian²⁶, who could be depicted as an unforgiving ruler and western tyrant, would on one side upset people from the Italian peninsula and on the other hand enforce misconceptions of western autocratic enforcement on the Middle East.

Although, this is actually more historically accurate, it would have many fictional instances created to show an important part of a compelling narrative, just like the Bedawins with William Wright; there is the need for an antagonist in order to draw in the audience into continuing the story till the end; the need to conclude the story arch and overcome difficulties placed by the "bad guy" as part of the presence of anticipation of meaningful experiences which make users of a game immersed in the environment²⁷.

What would therefore be a solution to this convoluted conundrum? A historian would say, be historically accurate so that no doubt can be there, and a fictional writer would push towards the compelling story arch with bad guys, gun fights and explosions.

Unfortunately, neither of them can be followed, the problem with the historian is that the classical history, unless supported by hard archaeological evidence (and at times that is not enough either), can be possibly wrong and contested and therefore there is no complete and accurate historical undebatable recollection of facts.

This would result in the game narrative arch having to rely only on the pure archaeologically recorded facts which would create a very stale narrative depending on the amount of information; in the case of Palmyra, due to the deterioration of the ruins and the fragmented information on historical accounts this would definitely be the case.

On the other hand, one cannot follow the purely fictional narrative suggested by the opposite side of the spectrum, this would result into distorted history, like in the case of Assassin's

22Wright, 1895

23Southern 2008, Pp. 156

24Wright, 1895, Pp. 194-204

25Wright, 1895, Pp. 171-176

26Southern 2008, Pp. 121

27Witmer et al... 1998, Pp. 225-240.

creed²⁸. This game has a very compelling narrative arch, but debatably distorts history and despite the level of detail, it cannot pass as a possible tool for historical teaching or academic research as it is although the creators disagree with this statement and claim that they use historical advisors, with creative writing in mind.

The solution that was chosen to partially solve this situation, was the integration of historically accurate information in the game's inventory system; which allowed the viewing of artefacts and people and a detailed, referenced explanation of their real history (as accurate as the author could be) and the option to swap display view from the "fictional" reconstructed one to the factually known one during game play.

Meanwhile the narrative story arch was created with the fictional author in mind, combined with a tendency towards trying to follow the historically accurate account of facts but many narrative deviations were taken in order to keep the story compelling enough for the audience to want to continue playing till the end.

This solution would enable the audience to have an entertaining experience and look at both the factual reconstructions for the actual archaeologically accurate plan of the area and use the inventory system as a way to distinguish fictional narrative from an historically accurate account.

CREATING THE NARRATIVE STORY ARCH

Once a line of action was created by combining the two schools of thought, it was time to identify areas in the stories of both characters that one could extract from the general history and make into a compelling narrative arch.

The first thing that was needed was a connection between the two characters; the reason for choosing such distant time-periods was to have a gamified view of the town both at its peak and at its lowest (without going to the 21st century due to the lack main of buildings resulted from the ISIS attacks)²⁹.

Therefore, how would one create a connection between centuries without going in the realm of science fiction with time travelling? The tone of

the game needed to be realistic and academically sound enough not to be dismissed as a pure work of fiction and therefore it was decided not to go as far as time travelling. The solution was simple, the connection would have been through storytelling itself; William Wright would have to go through explorative trials and get certain objects, in order to be told stories by the Bedawins about the history of Palmyra. Once the Bedawins would start recollecting the splendour of ancient Palmyra, the user would be transported to the reconstruction of the town at guided by Queen Zenobia.

Once queen Zenobia finished going through her explorative trials, the game would switch back to William Wright who would have to do the same in a new area and vice versa; this would create a narrative story arch which would be logical for the user and keep the immersion and interest in both stories and times.

The next major narrative tool designed to both test the emphatic attitude of users and the option of following alternate narrative situations out of independent choice, was the morality option in the conversation with other characters. The main characters whenever interacting with certain non-player characters (NPC), would have different dialogue options, in general this would not change the story outcome, but it would give a very personalised experience to the user and an option to have different moral standards³⁰.

For example, when playing William Wright, the user would have the option of Shooting a hostile Bedawin as part of the conversation, or try to negotiate his way through the situation; a very realistic choice due to the recollections of his travels, which described these types of situations happening often³¹.

On the other side, a theoretical situation would happen when Queen Zenobia would encounter a slave, during this time period, slaves were common and their rights almost non-existent³², especially in the eyes of a Queen, then the user would have the option of either helping or being kind to the slave or the extreme opposite, verbally and physically abuse him.

Lastly, the most crucial part of the compelling narrative was the exploration puzzle creation,

28Kapellet al... 2013, Pp. 5-9.

29Agence France-Presse in Damascus 2015, Pp. 1-2

30Kadokia 2005, Pp. 29-30

31Wright, 1895, Pp. 215-217

32 Cato the Elder, Agriculture Pp. 56-59

games are created to give a challenge to the user and create a sense of accomplishment whenever one of these challenges is completed successfully, an opposite way buy-in concept, when the skills in real life “intelligence” can help solve problems in virtual life³³.

To this end, a series of medium level difficulty puzzles were created, I consider them middle level due to the fact that only 2 factors are ever present: 1 exploration and 2 interaction (normally examine or pick up); this was the agreeable level of difficulty due to the length of the game and the variety of audience considered to go through the narration arch.

The inclusion of complications to the puzzles, like for example the inclusion of a series of levers and/or analysis dependent interactions with an artefact were initially considered, but after further research in the area of point and click adventure games³⁴, due to the extensive time spent by users trying to solve such difficult puzzles and the loss of immersion due to the recent loss of attention span of user interaction³⁵, it was decided to keep a limited difficulty level with the future option of enhancement depending on the results of future focus groups surveys.

FOCUSSING ON THE CHARACTERS EMOTIONS AND ATTITUDES

The characters were the core mean of immersion in a point and click game, if they had not been relatable and did not have an aim or a story arch which appealed and was consistent with the overall story and environment; the most likely event would have been that the user would have ended being bored and would have left or there would have been no immersive connection which ultimately would have defeated the point of creating such a game³⁶.

Goals and emotions played a strong part in the character arch, and it was what made the user push the boundaries and try to find a solution to help the character finish their story arch³⁷.

To this aim the first playable character: William Wright was given a backstory, the user was be

able to read about him in the inventory, then as the character progressed in the game, there were instances where he was able to interact with other people and objects and each one of these interactions showed a little bit more of his smart and direct character; giving a sense of emotional attachment to him; aiming at creating the bond described above.

The same thing can be said about Queen Zenobia, she was a more desperate and urgent character, due to the fact that in this instance she was preparing to leave her city to run away from Emperor Aurelius to avoid capture and execution.

Lastly, the slave (last minute addition for emotive research), was the most oppressed and limited character, forcing the user to make very tough choices, hiding in the shadows, avoiding most human contact with higher classes, limiting the movement and living space to a claustrophobic oppressive level which should have caused an oppressive feeling to the user; this in theory should have given very strong moral choices to make to the user and create an even stronger bond.

The characters were created using the principles of “physiology, sociology and psychology”³⁸, this meant that sex, age, class, moral standards, temperament, and many other character factors were considered in the creation.

CONCLUSION

Although the effect of each decision taken throughout the narrative path needs to still be ascertained, the overall reasoning behind the choices made was based on the following criteria:

- A balance between historical accuracy based on facts and interpreted history of specific characters; intending that both Queen Zenobia and William Wright followed a tightly controlled narrative path based on what we know about their history and their adventures in Palmyra, using some creative writing skills to give a shorter narrative arch and connect those stories in a short period of time; hopefully resulting in a full immersion by the game user. As for the briefly mentioned slave, the story was completely fictional due to the fact that the slave was not based on a strict historical

33Alexander et al... 2005, Pp. 8

34Moss 2011

35Connolly et al... 2006 Pp. 467

36Lankoski 2004, Pp. 1

37Oatley et al... 1996, Pp. 106

38Lankoski et al... 2003, Pp. 32-43

character but encompassed all the limitations that would have fallen upon a character in such a social class during this time-period; the use and effect of the slave character was to give a strong emotive reaction and record the audience reaction to such a shocking immersive story. The main focus of this part was to understand what level of balance was needed to satisfy the needs of different kinds of knowledge-based audience (what would a historian need as compared to a casual user?).

- Secondly, the creation of a logically connected and fluent narrative which enabled the audience to immerse themselves in the story without losing interest or immersion due to too many scientific details, grave historical inaccuracies, or illogical connections. This was approached by ensuring that the narrative did not lose track of the historically ascertained details and did not delve into the fictional realm excessively, then the balance was struck between the need to include many historical details and creating a virtual immersion in the story (making appealing inventory structures, giving one-liners to the characters to entertain the audience, while at the same time giving important historical information). Then a storytelling system was adopted in order to connect the two time periods without disrupting the narrative or delving into the fictional time travelling conundrum.
- Lastly, a series of choice-based reactions were integrated with special focus on fatal or shocking consequences; in order to engage the emotive reactions of the audience, regardless the background of the user of the game; this series of choices should have caused a reaction which theoretically should be recordable through a series of surveys or open-ended questions for qualitative analysis.

The next step of the research will be the collection of data through focus groups, after using the game, and the results from this should in theory give an understanding of the effect of these new technologies on several factors in historical narrative.

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