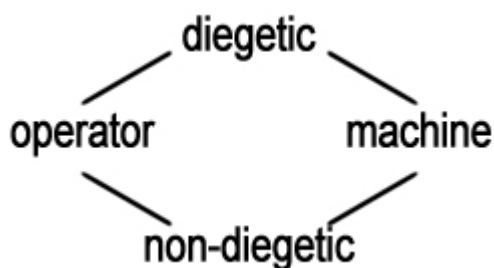


Close reading of the game Kingdom Hearts using Galloway's notions of diegetic and non-diegetic, and machine and operator actions

Galloway's concepts involve the ideas of operator/machine and diegetic/non-diegetic. The operator is simply the player of the game, whereas machine refers to the electronic device which houses the necessary hardware and software to run the game as well as provides devices for input and output of data or stimuli. The diegetic/non-diegetic concerns the diegesis of a game, which refers to the narrative world of the game as a whole and includes both the onscreen (diegetic; internal) and off-screen (non-diegetic; external to the game's narrative) components. These intersecting axes bring about what Galloway terms as 'four moments of gamic action', under which some examples of acts within video games have been classified. The four categories are as follows: *diegetic machine acts*, *non-diegetic operator acts*, *diegetic operator acts*, and *non-diegetic machine acts*.



Using Galloway's concepts, a close reading of the Playstation 2 action role-playing game Kingdom Hearts (2002) will be given, and the concepts will also be elaborated upon.

The game starts, like numerous others, with an opening animation sequence – an introduction; a glimpse of its narrative aspect. The animation sequence is an action which is brought about solely by the machine, and occurs within the game's diegesis. Thus, it would fit the classification as a *diegetic machine act*, one of the four moments in Galloway's theory of gamic action. Galloway states that in such segments of a game, the operator is "momentarily missed", merely "forgotten" (11). Noting that Galloway defines the operator (player) as "an individual agent who communicates with... the machine" (2), the statement is appropriate to his approach. For the duration of the cut-scene, the operator is transformed into a passive audience member, excluded from participation in gamic actions simply by not being engaged with the machine in a discernible way. This exclusion is

effective in emphasizing the idea that diegetic operator acts have to be carried out by both machine and operator.

[[opening video](#)]

The next segment of Kingdom Hearts is another brief cut-scene, which maintains continuity from the opening animation but with a visible difference – a drop in the quality in the graphics. The discrepancy is noticeable, but I hesitate to classify this as a *disabling act*. A *disabling act* is a form of *non-diegetic machine act*, and in this context would be defined as being a necessary deficiency which sets the limits of in-game aesthetics, and could possibly have a negative impact on the player. However, I believe that Galloway's concepts fall short here as they do not take the subjectivity of the operator into consideration. While certain players might express a certain degree of disappointment, there are others who do consider it inhibiting to their gameplay. If the player does not experience a disruption in immersion, the drop in quality cannot be considered non-diegetic.

As the game continues, a sword, a shield, and a staff are presented to the operator/player character, along with accompanying text which has the purpose of informing him of the significance of each of the objects. Through the selection of one particular object and the giving up of another, two choices have to be made - one to determine the primary strength of the player character, and the other to determine his weakness. The operator is prompted to "Choose well", reminiscent of what Galloway says about social realities being rendered into playable form (17) and questioning the operator's personal priorities. Here, the selections are undoubtedly operator acts, but upon attempting classification according to the theory of the four moments, the line between what is diegetic and non-diegetic is again blurred by subjectivity.

[["Choose well"](#)]

On one hand, the choosing of an item is considered a 'get', and is what Galloway terms an *expressive act*, a *diegetic operator act* which involves the expressive action of a player character towards an actionable object. However, in this case, the choice is also an important step in the setup/customization of the player character, an act of configuration. Galloway states that configuration is a type of *non-diegetic operator act*, as his observations have led him to assume that

there is a tendency towards setup actions occurring on the exterior of the game's diegesis. Kingdom Hearts demonstrates otherwise.

Another example of diegetic customization set in the beginning of the game is when the player character is asked three seemingly random questions by three non-player characters (NPCs). This is really a method of determining the overall speed of the player character's ability to gain levels, but this fact is not made known to the operator (within the game). Through the expressive act of interacting with NPCs, the operator is unknowingly engaging with the machine in an act of configuration. This raises a question: if the operator were to deliberately look up [information](#) in order to enable a more conscious set of selections, does this place the set of selections outside of the game's diegesis? This may not be considered a cheat in the conventional sense as there is no evidence of an act being executed from the outside of the game world, although the operator himself may consider it a non-diegetic act if he believes that his awareness places the act of configuration outside of the game's diegesis. Galloway's concept of the four moments is therefore limited in the sense that it does not clearly provide room for operator subjectivity and classification where there has been a successful fusion of two actions which would, in his model, neatly fall under two different categories.

Some examples of customization which persist throughout the majority of the game are the ability to [determine the way Donald and Goofy \(machine-controlled NPCs\) assist the player character in battle](#), and the ability to [change the characters' weapons](#) as new ones are obtained. These acts all occur in menus and interfaces "once removed" from the world of the game (14) and therefore can be said to involve *non-diegetic operator acts*. Another feature of Kingdom hearts is the Gummi Ship, the primary mode of transport used by the player character to move between different locations in the game. The ship itself can be customized by the operator, or a completely unique one can be built from a variety of 'gummi pieces' which are provided or obtained throughout the game. Like the other customization menus, the Gummi Ship customization interface is stylistically separated from the world of the game, yet a premise is given for its existence; NPCs make references to it, and you learn that ships are built in the 'Gummi Ship Workshop'. To the player character and his world, the ships are built and maintained by the mechanics Chip 'n Dale, two NPCs who also function as a 'disguise' for the operator to receive instructions on how to build a Gummi Ship. With such an attempt to link the interface to the diegesis of the game, it is once again difficult to determine if these acts of customization are purely diegetic or non-diegetic.



default Gummi Ship design

[[Really souped up Gummi Ship](#)]

Somewhat early on in the game, the player character gains the ability to use magic as a method of attack and occasionally to interact with certain actionable objects. The process of obtaining this particular ability is part of the player character's conversation with two NPCs and is as follows:

NPC: Hold on.

NPC: Sora (name of player character), this is for you.

Text in text box: Attained the power of fire.

Text in text box: Learned magic spell Fire.

Text in text box: (instructions for the operator on how to use spells and where to assign them to shortcut buttons)

[[Sora learns magic](#)]

That no simple animation or verbal explanation takes place in the exchange is quite jarring and disruptive to the narrative. Obtaining abilities is clearly a *non-diegetic machine act* in the case of this game; the means by which they are obtained go unmentioned and are not even alluded to, leaving a hole in the diegesis of the game which the operator will presumably ponder about, if not attempt to fill. Of *non-diegetic machine acts*, Galloway divides them into two kinds: the earlier-mentioned *disabling acts*, and *enabling acts*. Here, declaring the obtaining of abilities as either one

or the other is not an easy thing to do. It is enabling due to its nature; it provides an enhancement to the operator's arsenal of executable actions. At the same time, it is disabling as it causes a rupture in continuity and therefore has a negative impact on the experience of gameplay. Once again, such a view is considered rather subjective as it cannot be assumed that every player of the game shares the same opinion.

A heads-up display (HUD) is ever-present on the main interface of Kingdom Hearts. The HUD never disappears, save for moments in which there are conversations with NPCs or during cut-scenes. It provides the operator with necessary information - the health of the player character and his machine-controlled companions, and includes a small menu which turns from blue to red upon entry into an area which contains enemies. The HUD's supply of information is a *non-diegetic machine act*. Furthermore, each health display contains a small image of its corresponding character, evidence that no attempt has been made to even partially integrate it into the narrative of the game. The event of the HUD's menu changing colors upon entering battle and the entirety of the HUD itself can both be described as *enabling acts* (under *non-diegetic machine acts*), as they inform and alert the operator to changes that occur within the game's diegesis. Another example of an *enabling act* is the change in music tracks, which changes along with the color of the menu. It enhances the urgency for the player character to either engage in battle or to escape from impending danger.



HUD

Participation in the battle scenario itself provides potential for a perfect display of harmony between operator acts both diegetic and non-diegetic. Occurring within the game's diegesis are the physical attacks carried out by the player character in a series of *move acts* and *expressive acts*, whereby he is maneuvered across the space or hitting enemies with his weapon as per the

operator's manipulation of the controller's joysticks and buttons. Interspersed with these actions are the non-diegetic acts, for example, activation of magic spells or the usage of curative items via selections made from the menu of the HUD. If the operator chooses to equally employ both methods in battle, the result is a volley between the diegetic and non-diegetic, which makes for a complex (and, if the player enjoys the complexity - exciting) experience of gameplay. As the battle scenario is a key feature of the game, it would be difficult to place if one were faced with the choice of categorizing it (and similar combat mechanics in other games) as emblematic of one of the four moments of gamic action.

The battle sequences contain many other examples of *non-diegetic machine acts*. Upon attack and subsequent defeat of enemy units/characters, a variety of displays occur. Depending on the type of attack (physical, magical) and whether the attack connects with the target, nebulous bursts of color or plain yellow stars surround the point with which the weapon connects. Additionally, this also affects the accompanying sound effects. As the display depends on the success or failure of the characters' attacks, they are certainly considered informative to the operator and are therefore *enabling acts*. Upon defeating an enemy, the enemy model disappears, or rather bursts into a shower of what appears to be tiny green spheres and nuggets of gold. Like the previous examples, both types of items are integrated into the world of the game. They are representative of health and currency respectively, and are what Galloway calls 'disguises', "whereby diegetic objects are used as a mask" (32) to obscure aspects of the game which are non-diegetic. For this reason, *non-diegetic machine acts* are also described as tension-causing towards the "illusion" of the game's diegesis. Stating that one end of an axis may be used to cover for another makes the entire concept seem unreliable. Galloway calls his model a "four-part system", and yet repeatedly reminds us that it is not fixed. This deals a blow to its effectiveness as a model for analysis as there are opportunities for unconventional gamic actions to defy his classifications, especially as technology and innovation may eventually develop means to further obscure the separation of operator and machine.

While still on the subject of battle sequences – there is another example of an *enabling act* which occurs upon defeat of an enemy. This is information about the number of experience points the player character receives for defeating a particular enemy, and it comes in the form of blue text which hovers briefly over the area of the enemy model's disappearance. This feature is just as non-diegetic as the HUD, and falls comfortably within the category of *non-diegetic machine acts*, without any attempts to resist classification as such by way of a 'disguise'.

Lastly, I will address the moment of gamic death. Galloway states that gamic death, defined as “the moment when the controller stops accepting the user’s gameplay”, is “emblematic” (28) of *non-diegetic machine acts*. Specifically, it is a *disabling act*. To say that gamic death is emblematic of this particular act is to neatly classify it as non-diegetic, which is acceptable as the defeat of the player character falls without question into that category. However, some confusion may arise as the moment immediately after gamic death may be considered a *diegetic machine act*. In the case of Kingdom Hearts, transition to a menu act (*non-diegetic operator act*) is delayed, and what comes in between gamic death and menu act is a brief animation sequence which extends the moment of defeat. The brief animation may be considered a *diegetic machine act*, as control has not yet been relinquished to the player, but the sequence still occurs within the context of the game world. By bringing this up, I wish to point out that Galloway’s concepts are effective in pinpointing certain events right down to specific moments.

In conclusion, Galloway’s system of classification appears to be comprehensive and all-encompassing. However, when used in relation to the subject of my close reading, it proves to be somewhat restrictive due to successful blending of diegetic and non-diegetic elements within the game. Based on this observation, it would seem that the model is not likely to hold up when applied in analyses of games even more innovative than Kingdom Hearts. Galloway states that the four moments are merely “tendencies seen to arise” through his examination of a limited selection of games. He adds that the four moments are “not ideal types”, but “observations” (38). Furthermore, what is completely left out of the model are important aspects of play such as player motivation and subjectivity. The model is only of use when analyzing a game in a highly technical fashion, due to little attention being paid to the player’s experience and individuality. However, the usage of the operator/machine and diegetic/non-diegetic concepts proves to be a valuable starting point, should another model be developed to take the ambiguous features of a game into account.

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Gaining abilities! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySSkY6poUyc&feature=related>