INTERVIEW
with Jordan Mechner

With games like *Karateka* (1984), *Prince of Persia* (1989), and *The Last Express* (1997), Jordan Mechner has had a lasting influence on game history. Not only has his work set standards for the action-adventure genre, but it has also displayed an impressive awareness of cinematic traditions, tropes, and settings, which are discussed in the following interview.

What drew you to the choice of the Arabian Nights-setting for Prince of Persia?

The *1001 Nights* are an incredibly rich and imaginative world of stories that have been told and retold for thousands of years. The tales are exotic, fantastic, and human. It's a cultural legacy we all share, whether we're from the East or West; its roots are deep in humanity's collective unconscious. Because that world is so recognisable, and filled with action, magic, adventure, and romance, it offers great opportunities for both games and film.

Did film classics like THE THIEF OF BAGHDAD *(1940) provide inspirations for the game? And if they did in what way did they influence the design, only on the level*

Figs. 1–2 / *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*
(Ubisoft, 2003)

Figs. 3–6 / Ludwig Berger, Michael Powell, and Tim Whelan: THE THIEF OF BAGDAD (1940)

> *of scenario or also in regard to creating the game-play? Were there any situations from adventure film classics (e.g. the* stop motion-*fight scenes by Ray Harryhausen) that could be elaborated on as a template for game challenges?*

As a kid growing up in the 1970s, I got to know the world of the *1001 Nights* through cinematic, Hollywood versions as well as storybooks. The 1940 THIEF OF BAGHDAD (with Conrad Veidt as the evil Grand Vizier Jaffar lusting after the princess) was a direct inspiration for the game storyline. And, of course, Ray Harryhausen's fighting skeletons in SINBAD. My model for the sword fighting was Errol Flynn and Basil Rathbone's duel in 1938 ROBIN HOOD. Basically, I stole from everywhere.

In your journal on the making of Prince of Persia *you mention that you considered becoming a screenwriter or a director. Did your inspirations towards film influence your game design?*

One of the things that attracted me to making games in the first place was that it was essentially a way to make an interactive action-adventure movie, in which you experience the story by playing it, not just watching. I was inspired by the first ten minutes of RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK (1981) where Indiana Jones runs, jumps over a spike pit, misses the jump and has to struggle to pull himself up while a portcullis slowly closes. I wanted to get that kind of visceral feeling of jeopardy and suspense into the game animations, so that you feel that if you miss the jump, it will really hurt. Backing a guard into the slicing jaws in a sword fight is another raiders moment. And of course the whole story, the cutaways to the princess and the hourglass, is inspired by silent film.

In film history there have been very elaborate ideas about the artistic role of the director like the Auteur politics proclaimed by François Truffaut and translated into a theory by Andrew Sarris. Can there be an equivalent to the Auteur politics in game design, especially in regard to games in the 1980s being programmed by one designer like your work on Karateka?

Stop Motion
Stop motion is a cinematic technique in which single frames are put together with minimal alterations and thus the depicted object comes to life. This procedure is most prevalent in traditional animation films, its origins can already be found in the early phase of cinema.

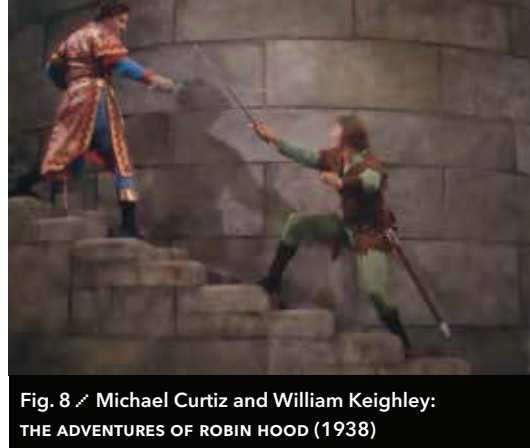Fig. 7 ⁄ Nathan Juran: THE 7TH VOYAGE OF SINBAD (1958)

Fig. 8 ⁄ Michael Curtiz and William Keighley: THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD (1938)

Academically, it's very appealing to see a game or a film as the work of a single author or director, but in most cases that doesn't reflect reality. Anyone who has worked on a larger game or film knows that they are collaborative team efforts. Even one-man projects like *Karateka* and *Prince of Persia* (or the modern equivalent, mobile games like *Canabalt*) can only happen in the context of a supportive community, a special time and place, with the author's family, friends, and colleagues often being very important, unacknowledged contributors. That was certainly the case for *Karateka* and *POP*, as you can see from my old journals of the time.

In academic Game Studies there has been an intensive debate between narratologists and ludologists in the early 2000s about the meaning of storytelling in games. Can the storytelling in a game be compared to narrative concepts in cinema? Or does it have to take the backseat (even in the danger of becoming the backseat-driver) in regard to gameplay? What do you think of cutscenes?

For me, the best cutscenes are short and flow smoothly in and out of the game action. They should support the game play, not overwhelm it. Ideally, a game would tell its story purely through the game play, with no cutscenes at all. I see cutscenes as a holdover from film, a useful but clunky device that I hope we're in the process of outgrowing. An analogy might be the use of voice-over narration in cinema: If well used it can be effective, but too often it's a crutch, a holdover from whatever novel or lit-

erary source the film is adapted from, and not the strongest or most cinematic choice to move the story forward.

Can the concept of mise-en-scène that focuses on the arrangement of space and the symbolic meaning of the set design offer an alternative meeting ground for games and cinema, that is more neutral than narrative?

It sounds like you're talking about games that focus on creating a world, rather than creating linear storylines following specific characters. I think that's a very promising direction. The most interesting stories are often the ones discovered or created by the players, not those scripted by the designers.

On the first Prince of Persia *you recorded video footage for the animation of the protagonist. What was the experience like? Can it be compared to the process of rotoscoping in animation?*

Fig. 9 ⁄ Steven Spielberg: RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK (1981)

Rotoscoping is exactly what it was. I videotaped my brother running and jumping in our high-school parking lot, then traced each frame to recreate the illusion of motion. It was a laborious process of many steps, requiring first a VHS video camera (new technology in 1985), taking still pictures on 35mm film, getting prints made, carefully tracing black-and-white silhouettes, digitising each frame into the computer, cleaning them up pixel by pixel, then programming the computer to replay them at eight frames per second. It took weeks of work just to do one sequence. I wasn't a trained animator, and had been very dissatisfied with my previous attempts at hand animation, so when I finally saw the little character come to life on the Apple II screen, running and jumping with so much of my brother's personality – it was a huge thrill.

Can the character in a game be defined by his or her actions?

Action is the thing that best defines any character, whether it's in a game or film. In a movie, characters are most strongly defined by the actions you see them take on the screen (as opposed to things that are only talked about or referred to). In a game, it's the actions done by the player that count.

What changed in regard to the game design and its challenges when working with three-dimensional spaces for Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time *(2003)? Did the virtual camera work have any influence on the puzzle design?*

For *Sands of Time*, we had to completely reconceive the original platform game play to make use of three-dimensional space. One of our biggest concerns was how to recapture the fluidity of the 2D game, where as the player you feel that you can chain actions together so that one flows smoothly into another. A key breakthrough was to take it into vertical space, adding parkour elements like wall-running and rebounding. Another was the "rewind" feature that could make time run backwards at any moment by pressing a button.

The concept of time seems to be very important to your games (the countdown situation in the first Prince of Persia, *the rewind effect in* Sands of Time). *In what way does the use and experience of time differ in games from film? And how did you come up with the brilliant idea of the dagger of time in* Sands of Time *that can be interpreted as a reflection of the game mechanics?*

I think the player's experience of time in a game is more akin to reading a novel than to watching a film. In film, the editing sets the rhythm, whereas in a game, the player often chooses where to direct his or her attention and when it's time to move on. Elements like a ticking clock, or enemies attacking, add suspense and tension in a game in a way that's different from film, because it puts pressure on the player to react in real time. Alternating these episodes with periods where the player controls the tempo and can "breathe" creates the rhythm of the game. The team came up with the rewind in *Sands of Time* first as a gameplay mechanic, the wish for a button that the player could press to make time run backwards at any moment. The story, including the "dagger of time," magic sand, and hourglass, and the sand being a plague that turns everybody

into monsters, came later; the story elements were chosen specifically to support and enhance the game play.

How did it feel when you participated in adapting Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time *for a Hollywood movie? In your journal you mentioned the fascination of Disney, what was the experience when you worked with them twenty years later? How did the process of translating the interactive situations from the game to the not so active experience of a movie develop?*

Writing a film screenplay is a different craft from writing a game. A movie is meant to be watched, a game is meant to be played. The "Sands of Time" game story was tailored specifically to support the gameplay and give the player an active experience that would be fun and challenging. In adapting it as a screenplay, I used elements from the game – the dagger, the hourglass – but took the liberty of reinventing the mythology and the characters in ways that might make a better film story. For example, in the movie, the dagger's powers are much more limited; it doesn't have the power to slow down or fast-forward time, or see into the future. And it contains only a very small amount of sand, so that the hero isn't constantly undoing events that aren't to his liking. Things that are fun to play aren't necessarily fun to watch.

There has been a lot of buzz going on about transmedia storytelling and the Prince of Persia *series would suit this concept very well. Do you*
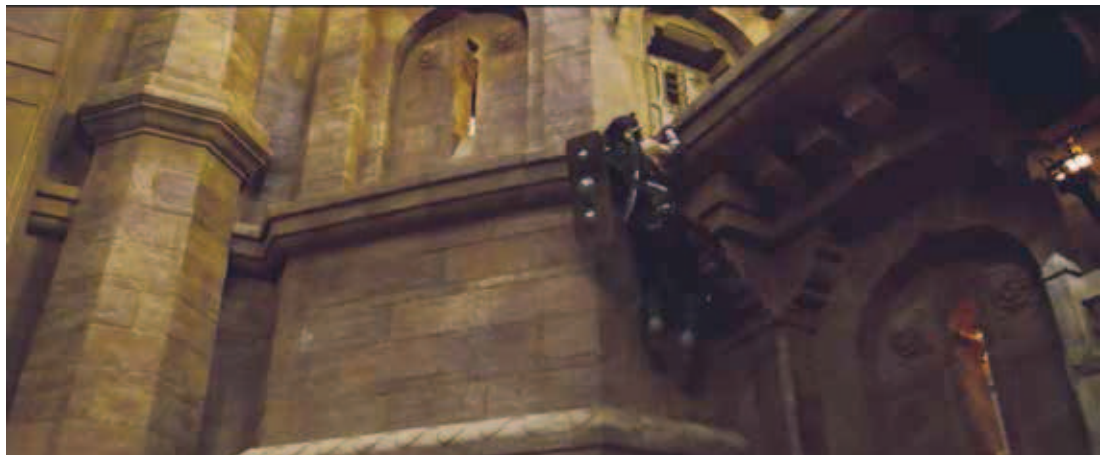

⇧ **Figs. 11-12** ⁄ *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* **(Ubisoft, 2003)**

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Fig. 13 / Drafts for
Prince of Persia:
The Sands of Time,
drawings on paper

Figs. 14–16 / Mike Newell: PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME (2010)

see creative potential in connecting game scenarios and characters with a world spread across several media?

"Transmedia" is a new buzzword, but ultimately it still comes down to creating a number of separate works in different media, each of which will succeed or fail on its own merits. Star Wars is one of the all-time most successful examples of transmedia, because so many of the video games, comics, toys, and animated TV series are excellent in their own right. That comes down to the talent of the many individuals and teams that worked on those projects. Just because a property is a huge success in one medium is no guarantee that it will work in another. Having the original creators involved, or having everyone work from a three-inch-thick "bible," doesn't actually improve the odds that the new team will create magic. There's no formula for it. We try, but every time it happens, it's a small miracle.

Recently you did a remake of Karateka *that has been produced by screenwriter John August and included artwork by Jeff Matsuda. Can the process of remaking a game be compared to the remake of a film?*

It's a fair comparison, in the sense that some of the audience will never have seen the original, while others will be very familiar with it. So you have the double challenge of capturing a new audience with a work that can stand on its own merits, while not wanting to disappoint fans of the original by changing too much or betraying the spirit. That's certainly the challenge we faced with *Karateka* and with *Sands of Time*. New technology enables higher production values, but that doesn't necessarily translate into a better game–or film. Other than the marketing advantage of a known title, I don't think it's actually easier in any sense to do a remake than to do an original.

Interview: Andreas Rauscher