Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies / September 26, 2024 / Blog

Evgenia Amey: Narrative, gameplace and players' affective response

Recreation of author's Valheim adventure. Credit: Image generated with AI, Microsoft Image Creator.

How do you make the player feel like they 'belong to' or 'feel at home' in a game world? How do you create an in-game place so uncanny, that the prospect of returning there makes one's skin crawl?

In my recent study (Amey & Moore 2023, also upcoming), I looked at how the interconnection between narrative, worldbuilding and in-game geographies enables players to affectively engage with and make sense of the places they encounter in games. Considering the question from both production and reception perspectives, I focused on selected digital fantasy RPGs, to examine how players' own experiences connect to that of their characters, as they traverse, explore, and, sometimes, form attachments to in-game locations.

Feeling like one 'belongs' to a game world where one has spent dozens, if not hundreds, of hours, is a familiar sensation to many players. Shared sense of belonging and familiarity can be observed in online discussions, memes, fan creations and other user-generated content. As in the actual world, *space* becomes *place* once it is imbued with meaning (Tuan 1974; Relph 1976). Earlier research on in-game environments adopted the term *gameplace* to refer to locations in games that become meaningful on an individual or collective level (Ali 2016), evoking a strong emotional response and player identification (Westerside & Holopainen 2019).

The exploratory and interactive nature of video games allows the use of audiovisual and narrative elements to create locations that appear inviting, cozy, majestic, awe-inspiring or, in contrast, uncanny, disturbing and terrifying (see e.g., Martin 2011; Jansen 2019). Tapping into pre-existing experiences, memories, expectations and associations by means of environmental storytelling and non-linear narratives is often used to achieve the desired affective response from the audiences (see Jenkins 2004, particularly on *evocative* and *embedded narrative*).

Novels, films and comics, upon close inspection, rarely have a completely linear narrative (Jenkins 2004). Readers and viewers move back and forth: encountering events, being presented with new information, transported back through recollections and conversations, reconsidering the events, reconstructing the chronological order of the story, and uncovering (or failing to uncover) the truth. Trends come and go in how the non-linear narrative is used in the media (remember Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, anyone? Earlier decades were big on 'it wasn't real, in the end' or 'it was only you, all along'). Transmigration/rebirth/reincarnation plot device, popular in East Asian ACGN (Animation, Comics, Games and Novels) productions offer even more curious twists, such as travelling in time to relive the earlier events, being transported into another (or parallel) universe or to an already known fictional setting (see e.g., *isekai* genre). In this study, I was interested in looking at how non-linear narratives are utilized and entwined with other elements of game design to make in-game places meaningful.

An attempt to recreate a generic epic in-game scenery. Credit: Image generated with AI, Microsoft Image Creator.

Environmental storytelling, non-linear narrative and sense of place in Enderal

In October 2023, I had the chance to interview game developer and writer Nicolas Lietzau, who served as a project lead for *Enderal: The Shards of Order / Forgotten Stories* (SureAI 2016/2019) and is the author of the *Twelfth World* novel series (2019–). Our discussion covered worldbuilding, narrative and environmental storytelling, and, with the full interview to be published this December in *Fafnir*, I wanted to share a few insights in this post.

Enderal is a full-conversion non-commercial mod for Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) and offers a complete overhaul of *Skyrim* game world. Set in its own unique dark fantasy open world, it features original lore and narrative, with several biomes and numerous in-game locations. With the story delivered through quests, dialogue, environment and game mechanics, but also via songs, in-game books, and overheard snippets of conversations, the player can glimpse the meaning of some locations before they set foot there.

The excerpt below (edited for readability) is from the interview with Nicolas Lietzau where we discussed two in-game locations. The first is a place encountered in memories/dreams, initially an idyllic pastoral setting, which turns into a nightmare following an encounter with someone from the player character's past. Another is a seaside village, an oasis surrounded by desert, which appears tranquil and inviting at first, gradually revealing its horrifying side, in what has been described by many players as the most tragic and agonising quest in the game.

EA: I noticed, in my own and others' playthroughs, that with the place from the [Prologue quest] – as the first encounter with [someone the player character used to know] isn't really a nice experience – when you are transported there again, it evokes a sort of topophobia, and you are like "oh s***, I'm in this place again. I'm going to see [him] again."

With Silvergrove, it's more gradual. It is a nice-looking place and I feel that something is very wrong here. […] Things are going too well, everyone likes each other and they do not want to leave. I don't know if any other medium can do it – to actually be there, to walk around, to hear these utterances, NPCs talking to each other, and you're like "I'm getting a bad vibe."

NL: Silvergrove is one of my favorite regions. It came together quite nicely, I think, and there was also a great confluence between the story and the visuals […] this kind of uncanny beauty.

[…] Something I came to realize a while ago is that games are non-linear to a certain extent, especially open-world games, but I would argue that any interactive experience in any story is non-linear. What I mean is that the narrative is linear, but you don't experience it in a linear fashion, and that everything touches upon something that happened previously.

So if I set up something at an early point in the story – and I think that again translates to every single creative medium – and then I put something else, let's say 60% into the [player/reader] experience, it changes how you see that early element, you are transported back. That's why I think 'linear' is a kind of misleading because, yes, a text, and a movie, and a game, might be linear, but actually it's a construct. And you always go back, you go back and forth and you recontextualize everything you experience.

Getting back to [the sense of place], I think that's why [the player has] this sensation you described in the dreamscape, like, "oh, s***", it's because everything connects. You have the music, and the first time you get there you just sense that something is amiss. There's a juxtaposition. You have some horror elements, but then you

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have this almost Arcadian beauty, the sunset, and this beautiful
house on the cliff, and so that works. But as you live through it
again, as you have the dream again, you have so much more information
now. You know what this theme music means, you know who this
character is and everything is starting to make sense. I think that's
a very delicate and very fascinating way of creating immersion and
actually infusing places with meaning. Once you have established a
certain symbol, whether it's visual, auditory or contextual, you can
use these symbols and give meaning to your places and evoke certain
reactions.


EA: And it resonates with our own experiences and other texts.


NL: Absolutely. It's intertextual. That's why it's interesting that
in every game – especially if you work with humanoid or human-like
characters – it's almost impossible to create something that's
entirely hermetic, completely isolated, and has no connection to the
real world, because it's connected to our experiences, to what
happens in the world and the current Zeitgeist and all that.
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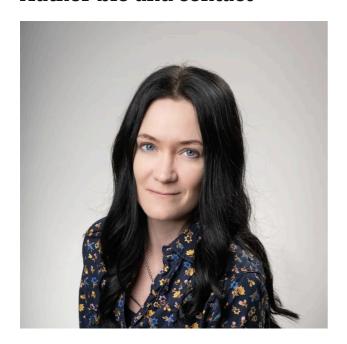
While game mechanics were not addressed in the interview, it is worth mentioning that they often play a crucial role in how players engage with the environment and what type of gameplay particular locations invite. Furthermore, adjusting game mechanics through modding to make the environment more realistic, interactive or challenging (see Jansen 2019) can lead to a change in the way players interact with the in-game setting and experience the game world.

In the examples used in this post, my focus was on how narrative and in-game environment intertwine to create an engaging and affective experience. This, however, may not necessarily be the core feature to enable immersion and the feeling of belonging. The combination of a well-crafted setting and the freedom given to the player in open-world RPGs and sandbox games allows for memorable emergent narratives, unplanned and unscripted. This author's new adventures take place in *Valheim* (Iron Gate Studio, upcoming), with few premeditated stories and an island homestead overrun with boar.

Acknowledgments

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