Between Immersion and Aesthetics: Video Game Players Discussing Enchantment

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The concept of enchantment has been used in alternating fashions to describe historical or cultural spheres, or religious activities. Enchantment can refer to religious ritual activity as framing, enriching, and inviting momentary enchanting elements, or enabling agencies of (religious) practitioners (Utriainen 2017). In addition, enchantment refers to Christopher Partridge's (2004) argument, which explains today's culture as a (macro) state of being "re-enchanted" in terms of why types of popular culture, such as video games, are attractive technologies today. The concept of enchantment is in general interpreted and understood here through a sociological perspective with Jane Bennet's (2001) a formulation on enchantment being secular;" state of wonder", being charmed, and magical;" uncanny". Therefore, this paper asks what constitutes an enchanted experience in a video game world told by players, and how the concept of enchantment can complement understanding the player engagement and meaning-making processes.

This paper examines a section of qualitative interview data (n=14) on player narratives of a lager study. The original study asked how video games afford meaningful encounters; "potent connections in personal life" or "affinities" (Maison 2018). Even though player engagement and meaning-making can be seen as topical cross-disciplinary research areas (e.g. Marsh & Costello 2013; Mekler, Iacovides & Bopp 2018; Bosman, 2019; Isbister 2016), this paper approaches the concept of affinities and enchantment from a cultural and religion studies frame. Popular culture is and arena where values and meanings are understood (Ostwalt 2003). The emerging digital narratives have today a greater impact in facilitating elements for individual meaning-making, even extending to aspects of worldviews, and religion (Rautalahti 2018).

Through an open call for interviewees, self-written texts (n=4), in person player interviews (n=8), and internet calls (n=2) were conducted in spring 2019 among adult Finnish (Europe, Finland) video game players who self-recognized having had meaningful encounters with video games. In the open call for interviewees it was suggested that the interviewees would have personal knowledge of single-player adventure video games, steering the study question away from aspects of social play, or multi-player online games.

In the process of collecting data, the interviews were conducted utilizing an argumentative approach (method developed e.g. by Vesala & Rantanen 2007; Peltola & Vesala 2013).) The semi-structured interviews were introduced by seven sections, or statements, to the players inducing opinions, contemplations and recollections of meaningful encounters. This paper presents the data of the interview given statement:" I am enchanted by video game worlds."

Although it was recognized that 'enchantment' was a literary word given in the interview statements, the term itself was not explained further to participants. The interviewees took and used the term as they preferred. One participant told, "The term sums up pretty well what I have been talking about the whole time." Players adopted the concept in their narratives and continued to reflect their answers by means of it. Enchantment emerged as a distinct theme in those interviews that described specifically a feeling or sensation connected to one's emotional, environmental, and aesthetic surroundings in video game worlds.

Enchantment for players also meant doing, dwelling, and wandering, experiencing and exploring the spatial and aesthetic dimensions of a game world, marveling and being charmed. Enchantment was a desirable sensation. In addition, enchantment was expressed to be possible only in certain circumstances; not all games were able to provide that feeling. "Enchantment is being amazed by the game: the technical, aesthetic aspects," one player said. Descriptions of the common sensation of awe in digital games, connected to marveling at technical achievements, have also been recognized by Possler et al. (2018, 74–75) and Rautalahti (2019). Additionally, game soundtracks were at times mentioned as enchantment-enhancing elements.

Enchantment was described by one player as an emotional attitude or mind-set laid out by the (multimodal) game narrative, an approach that steered the exploratory aim, the search and the needs, and the quest in the game world. Enchantment was often aesthetically characterized by players as being connected with nature or experiencing a natural phenomenon, landmarks, a change in weather, or the sun in the game world. Similarly, Calleja (2011, 142) describes the inhabitation of game worlds as appealing and affective to players. A beautiful environment, such as being on top of a high mountain and viewing the horizon, or a sunset, was described as enchanting.

The concept of enchantment as it emerged here, implied an enchanted aesthetic attitude, an individual dynamic sensation of being in relation with the (digital) environment, having a constant emotional mind-set of reciprocity with the surroundings. The most important aspect of enchantment recognized by many interviewees was, that it seldom happened twice with the same game. Interviewees described the initial and first encounter; the surprise, being the most important and memorable aspect.

Enchantment emerged from the data as a literal tool used to describe experiences between immersion and aesthetics. Video games may offer experiences described as enchanting, as this study data section shows. David Morgan (2006) describes the art historian's thought of re-enchantment in cultural history as being specifically a tool for the "play of imagination" where video games could be described as such, namely, as artwork continuing similar cultural lineages of enchanted imaginations.

By introducing the concept of enchantment, the paper offers a contemporary viewpoint in discussing video game experiences where immersion, emotions or engagement have previously been discussed among engaging play (Calleja 2011; Calleja, Herrewijn & Poels 2016).

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