Dwelling in Digital Game Worlds

Daniel Vella
University of Malta
Msida, MSD2080
Malta
daniel.m.vella@um.edu.mt

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With the aim of adding to game studies' understanding of the spatial practices that define the player's being-in-the-gameworld, this presentation will draw upon the philosopher Edward S. Casey's argument that human being-in-place is structured around the interplay between two ways of dwelling, which he terms hestial and hermetic dwelling (1993, 133). The figure of hestial dwelling is the hearth and the home – it is centralizing, inward-gathering, and emphasises lingering and remaining. Conversely, the locus of hermetic dwelling is the path – it pulls outwards and onwards, encapsulating the spatial functions of movement and traversal.

On this basis, I shall make the claim that most existing approaches to the spatiality of game worlds have assumed that the player's mode of being-in-place in game worlds has a character that closely matches Casey's notion of hermetic dwelling. Espen Aarseth's founding of a theory of ergodicity upon the image of ὁδός - *hodos,* 'path' (1997, 1) – already hints at such a transitive, restless understanding of the player's engagement with digital game spaces. Likewise, building upon Aarseth's usage of the image of the labyrinth, Alison Gazzard arrives at an understanding of game spaces as mazes that, in their emphasizing teleological, forward movement, effectively reduce themselves into paths: "the game-maze is a *pathway to,* a device for *completing* the multiple objectives of the game" (2011, 40). We find the same assumption at work in Gordon Calleja's argument that exploration is the impulse that structures the player's spatial involvement with digital games (2011, 73), in Mark J.P. Wolf's theorization game space as "navigable space," which he defines as "a space in which way-finding is necessary" (2009, 21) – a procedure he links specifically to movement (ibid., 23), and in Stephan Günzel's comment that "the ego has to wander through game space in order to apprehend the spatial setting" (2007, 174). All of these assume a rootless, peripatetic existence for the player in the gameworld. Some notable exceptions do exist – notably, Bernadette Flynn's notion of the console as the "digital hearth" in the living room (2004), Georgia Leigh McGregor's observation that games make use of our familiarity with architectural forms to structure "nodal space" (2007, 5), and Bjarke Liboriussen's examination of building practices in *Second Life* (2012). By and large, however, existing literature has characterized the player's spatial practice in the gameworld as being one of progression and traversal – the term 'walkthrough' is particularly indicative – and, hence, as inherently hermetic.

In addition to Casey's development of the two ways of dwelling, this presentation shall draw on other philosophical sources as a foundation for its understanding of

dwelling: namely, Heidegger's intertwining of the notions of building and dwelling in relation to human being-in-the world (2002[1951]) and Christian Norberg-Schulz's development, on the basis of Heidegger's ideas, of a phenomenology of dwelling and built places (1983). This presentation shall consider a number of games – focusing in detail on *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo 2013) and *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) as case studies, but also making reference to other games, including *Dark Souls* (From Software 2010), *This War of Mine* (11-bit Studios 2014) and *Dragon Quest Builders* (Square Enix 2016) – that, I shall argue, structure a hestial way of dwelling in the game world for the player.

The investigation shall focus on identifying spatial structures that the chosen games establish – and, resultingly, spatial practices afforded to the player – that align with Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology of dwelling-places, and with Casey's notion of hestial dwelling. The first spatial structure considered in the presentation shall be the *establishment of a centre* around which the space of the gameworld is experientially organized as a series of concentric circles of decreasing intimacy (as is the case in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf,* where the player's house represents the innermost circle, and her village the circle containing that), and in relation to which 'near' and 'far' become significant terms (as, in *Dark Souls,* the player might feel more or less at ease depending on her proximity to, or distance from, a known bonfire). Related to this is the *demarcation of inside and outside*, generally through the structuring of a more-or-less porous boundary delimiting the dwelling-place from the outside world – thereby establishing a binary opposition around which are clustered a multitude of significances, including 'safety' versus 'danger,' 'civilization' versus 'nature,' 'us' versus 'them,' and so on (as Oliver (2002) and Huber (2005) describe regarding the distinction between 'city' and 'wild' places in MMORPGs).

These games' establishment of these spatial structures make possible the spatial practices that pertain to hestial dwelling – namely, the practices of *lingering* in place, through the games' invitations for the player to pause in their wandering and to turn their attention towards the awareness of a place rather than towards forward progress (as in the case of the benches in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*); the practice of *building*, in which the player is allowed (or required) to engage in the shaping of a dwelling-place (as in the necessity to build shelter in *Minecraft*); and the interrelated practices of *departure* and *return* to the dwelling, through which the dwelling-place comes to anchor and shape the player's spatial relation to the gameworld as a whole.

In these ways, the presentation shall build towards the conclusion that, in the chosen case studies as well as in other games, we encounter a mode of being-in-the-gameworld that adheres to Casey's notion of hestial dwelling. As such, this mode of being-in-the-gameworld requires an expansion of our understanding of the spatial dimension of the player's existence in the gameworld, moving beyond the boundaries of the dominant, hermetic understanding of the player's spatial practice that continues to hold sway in game studies.

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