The innate multiplicity of Game Worlds: Emersive effects in Dark Souls 2 and Nier: Automata

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Emersion, Defamiliarization, Literary Theory, Russian Formalism, Viktor Shklovsky

INTRODUCTION

Designing for immersion has been one of the main goals of the game industry in recent years; the concept being utilized in marketing as much as in discourse revolving around digital games, as can be shown by the extensive research of authors such as Calleja [1] or Douglas and Hargadon [2]. Not as frequent is the decision of purposefully designing games with the aim of distancing the player from digital worlds. Emersive design techniques serve the role of shifting player focus from the game being played to other aspects of that same experience, often nuanced and focused on the liminal space between players and games. To put it in different terms, the aim of creating a sort of distancing effect is that of letting the audience contemplate the artifact more so than the content of it and ponder on their relationship with it, therefore granting the insight for a more critical look at the artifact itself. This theory originated with Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who wrote about these concepts in "Art as technique" [6]. Shklovsky's ideas have already been used in game studies to gain insight in the purview of emersion, for example, by Alex Mitchell [4] to develop the concept of poetic gameplay.

One of the formal aspects of digital games that can be brought to the forefront through the use of emersive mechanics is the innate multiplicity of game worlds. Digital games, as a media, are subjected to a potentially illimited reproduction of the artifact, especially since digital copies of games have become the industry standard. Curiously enough, such copies of games (both digital and physical versions) are not considered as such, not to the same extent, at least, as a print of a painting would be considered as far removed from the original. In the same way the original manuscript of a novel would not be considered the one and only real version of that book, the gold master of a certain game would not be regarded as the real iteration of that digital game.

The innate tendency towards being reproduced of digital games, is a trait shared with other forms of media, such as cinema, or as previously stated, print media. The unique capacity that digital games hold in this regard, however, is to comment dynamically and directly on the topic of the reproducibility of art, since it is possible to allow direct interaction between two separate artifacts, in this case, two copies of the same game. This way, during the process of the player experiencing the game, they can be faced, through online functionalities, with the existence of another identical gameworld, which is being experienced by a different individual. The way I have seen this done in digital games has been through the application of emersive mechanics, particularly in two titles that, I posit, showcase a similar occurrence, the first as an emergent emersive mechanic and the second one as a purposefully designed one. The two games I will be talking about are Dark Souls 2 [3], with a

specific focus on the boss battle against the Looking Glass Knight; and Nier: Automata [5], particularly the shoot-em-up credit section of the game.

In Dark Souls 2, after traversing Drangleic Castle and obtaining the key to the King's Passage, players are almost immediately met with an open arena; standing in it is a knight clad in polished metal armor. The fight against the Looking Glass Knight is not unlike others in the Dark Souls series, the one peculiarity that this boss has over the others is its ability to summon other players to aid him in battle.

The distancing quality of this mechanic, that might emerge during gameplay resides in the fact that if it ever becomes clear to the player that they are fighting against other human opponents, the illusion of inhabiting a unique game world becomes fractured. This can happen through observation of the behavior of these player characters, which can more or less diverge from what is expected of NPC behavior, other than the name they chose for their character, which might be more or less fitting with the context of the game.

The acknowledgment of the existence of other players going on the same journey in their own identical world puts in front of the player the definitive proof of the multiplicity of the game world they are inhabiting, without the same narrative framing that an invasion might have; these invasions are brief and sudden PVP encounters that are narratively justified by the game. This consideration might inadvertently distance the player from the game experience, especially when other similar interactions are taken into account by the game.

In Nier: Automata a similar technique is used intentionally to create a sense of comradery and connection between players. The final section of the game takes place during the credits, when the player is given control of a spaceship capable of shooting said credits, creating a top-down shoot-em-up sequence. During this challenging portion of the game, the player will be aided by other spaceships, who are presented as other players, who after completing the game have decided to help others in need. At the end of the section, the player will be asked to make that same decision, however it is now revealed that helping a stranger comes at the cost of deleting one's own save file.

This decision is central to the meaning of the game, which has seen its protagonists and most of its supporting cast, realize their own humanity through the connections they formed with others. The game, in its final stage, asks the same of the player, and by doing so reveals the facade of the uniqueness of its game world.

Figure 1: The Looking Glass Knight summoning players during the boss fight in Dark Souls 2

One key difference between these two games and to what end they use a similar immersive mechanic can be seen in how they present the players from "other game worlds". In Dark Souls 2 they appear as enemies, opposing the player, and with just a health bar and nickname floating above the character model. No additional information is shown, almost as if the intention was that of concealing them, of letting them pass as NPCs. Also, to underline a more broad design decision, communication between players is sparse, being limited to engravings that can be left behind by other users; these messages being interpreted and molded by the game's community as a chance for mischief and misdirection rather than help or mere communication.

Figure 2: The messages left by others in aid of the player in Nier: Automata

In Nier: Automata, not only the other players are shown as allies, but the game lets them leave a brief message for the player that they are going to unknowingly help, next to their name; the game almost suggesting that this is not a simple gimmick, but a real connection between players.

In conclusion, these examples were meant to show the many possibilities of purposefully utilizing emersion in game design, to better convey and further reinforce the concepts laying at the base of games, and how, on the other end, the presence of these same mechanics, if involuntary and unaccounted for, could lead to mere inconsistencies in game narrative and experience.

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