Psychogeographical Games in "Ludotopia": The exploration of virtual worlds in games as a medium for artistic practice

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT (PHD CONSORTIUM)

Games have become cultural objects[1] and are popularly regarded as one of the most important aspects of youth culture worldwide[2]. Millions frequent virtual worlds in computer games, where they navigate through what media theorists Espen Aarseth and Stephan Gunzel describe as Ludotopia, a term that they coined to describe "the dialectical entanglement of games and space"[3]. This thesis draws its starting point from Aarseth's assertion that computer game spaces are allegories of space - "figurative comments on the ultimate impossibility of representing real space"[4]; and Gunzel's suggestion that computer games can become exemplifications of ideas about space.

One significant body of theories about space can be traced back to the Situationists, who introduced the term "psychogeography" to describe the conscious or unconscious impact of the geographical environment on the emotions and behaviours of individuals within a city[5]. Psychogeography has a history of influence and expression through artistic practice, and games have also become a new space for artistic practices. My motivation for looking to psychogeography is that my artistic practice has long been associated with psychogeography, and the past works and maps I made derived their identity through their relationship with the act of walking through the city. Over the years I drifted to making works which were 1:1 models from the real world, after which I transitioned to making playable virtual reality artworks using game engines, such as "Lost Horizons" (2022), "VOID" (2021), and "The Legend of Debbie" (2020).

I expand this thesis from the observation that the psychogeographical game shares conceptual affinities with the exploration of virtual worlds in games. By doing a comparative analysis of psychogeographical ideas and contemporary theories about space in computer games, I want to frame the exploration of virtual worlds in games as an evolved form of the psychogeographical game, and establish a methodology for analysing and interpreting spaces in virtual worlds that draws from both situationist ideas and contemporary theories about cyberspace and computer game spaces. The research will ask: How does one play a psychogeographical game in a computer game? What makes these computer game spaces unique and different from physical spaces?

What artistic methods can be used to investigate game spaces? And how can we design virtual worlds which create new pathways for artists and audiences to experience space and express themselves spatially?

Since the game is a complex synthesis of experience, it would stand to reason that the tools being used to investigate the game must also be able to reflect this kind of creative synthesis. It follows then that this artistic research project proposes to investigate game spaces through practice-led methods such as in-game photography, critical drawing, artistic map-making, and game-making to analyse and spatially study a diverse selection of games. Engaging in the act of playing would constitute a form of virtual fieldwork in which I will collect and record personal experiences in the virtual worlds. By deconstructing and translating game spaces into different artistic mediums, this produces an opportunity to reflect on the technical and aesthetic peculiarities of the artistic mediums and create critical distance from the game for the purpose of understanding the underlying principles and logics of game spaces.

This study of spatiality will be presented through game prototypes and the work "Ludotopia", creating a self-reflexive loop between theory and practice to explore how game spaces differ from other real spaces for psychogeographical exploration and to answer the question of what a psychogeographical practice could look as a computer game.

By situating the research at the intersection between artistic research and game studies, this research will bridge different realms of discourse, creating shared vocabulary and new understanding. Following the artistic project, I conclude that the exploration of virtual worlds in games serves a new medium for artistic practices and the medium of the computer game constitutes new ways of exemplifying spatial ideas and theories. This practice-led and practice-based research occupies a unique position on the subject of games within art practice and aims to pave the way for future collaborations between game studies and contemporary art practice.

Keywords

virtual world, artistic practice, game studies

Biography

Debbie Ding is an artist who builds virtual worlds in physical and digital media. Selected exhibitions include "Worldbuilding" (Julia Stoschek Foundation, 2023), Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2022, "Radical Gaming" (HeK Basel, 2021), "Wikicliki" (Singapore Art Museum, 2021), "President's Young Talents" (Singapore Art Museum, 2018); "After the Fall" (National Museum of Singapore, 2017); Singapore Biennale (2016); Radio Malaya (NUS Museum, 2016). Her work was shortlisted for the President's Young Talents 2018 and Impart Art Awards 2020. Debbie received a BA in English Literature from National University of Singapore and MA in Design Interactions from Royal College of Art, London (as recipient of National Arts Council Singapore's Arts Scholarship). Her PhD research at Nanyang Technological University is supported by the Nanyang Technological University Research Scholarship.

ENDNOTES

[1] Christopher A. Paul, *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games : Analyzing Words, Design, and Play*, 1 online resource (223 pages). vols., Routledge Studies in New Media and Cyberculture (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis Hoboken, 2012), http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=957077.

[2] Sean Monahan, "Video Games Have Replaced Music as the Most Important Aspect of Youth Culture," *The Guardian*, January 11, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/11/video-games-music-youth-culture.

[3] Espen Aarseth and Stephan Günzel, eds., *Ludotopia: Spaces, Places and Territories in Computer Games* (transcript Verlag, 2019).

[4] Espen Aarseth, "Allegories of Space: The Question of Spatiality in Computer Games," in *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*, ed. Eskelinen Markuu and Raine Koskimaa (University of Jyväskylä. Department of Arts and Culture Studies, 2001), 152–71.

[5] Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography" (Praxis (e) press, 2008).