

The Influence of External Fictional Entities on Video Game Development, and Value.

Peter M. Carey

SAE Creative Media Insititue

Introduction

One of the most difficult tasks people can perform, however much others may despise it, is the invention of good games. (C.G. Jung, 1936, as cited in Murray & Maher, 2011) When considering the creation of video games, and the components inherent to this process, I wish to focus upon the change in value invoked upon the addition of an external fictional entity.

The influence of external entities upon the construction of an artwork seems an issue that must have been explored already; thoroughly and in depth. The use of folklore, mythology and third party IP in art is present in the majority of modern art works. However, it seems that while many works skirt the borders of this area of academia, leaving a distinct vacuum of knowledge needing to be filled.

Developing Existing IP

Mark Rowell Wallin comes stunningly close with his examination of the process and effects of adapting a film into a game (Wallin, 2007). Using the adaptation of The Lord of The Ring's movie franchise into games, Wallin explores the difference between adaptation from a novel compared to adaptation from a film, and how a game might seek to identify, and gain legitimacy from its origin. Wallin attributes the success, or 'power' of the adaptation to its link with its predecessor, where the origins values and context are passed on to be included in the audiences interpretation of the adaptation.

Wallin highlights the difficulties of converting a narrative driven, single-path experience into a game, where the very introduction of choice forces the creation of emergent storytelling. He suggests that a game adaptation would lead toward immersive level design, using ambient (or 'spatial') storytelling to embed the player within the world that they know. (Wallin, 2007)

The Player As An External Entity

'Rules of Play' (Salem & Zimmerman, 2011) also glances on my topic. The paper devotes a single paragraph to 'external contexts', however in this paragraph, the author focuses primarily upon the state of the player themselves, e.g. how the players physical, mental and social skills are both challenged and fortified by multi-user gameplay. The paper focuses on the effect of the *player*, and not upon any external references.

Fantasy in Games

'The Role of Fantasy in Video Games: A Reappraisal' (Murray & Maher, 2011) is a paper that is as good as its title, supplying an in-depth account of the role of Fantasy, not only in video games, but in literature and film also. However, I find the authors focus to be narrow, highly focused upon the disdain levelled towards Fantasy as a genre, and thus neglecting to address the actual influence that the use of Fantasy has upon a game.

Defining Value in a Game

"Games carry values and beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics" (Flanagan, Belman, Nissenbaum & Diamond, 2007). In order to objectively assess the value, or change in value, of a video game, a set of metrics must be devised, based on the values/beliefs inherent within said game.

These would be assessed in two different forms. The first can be seen in 'A Method to Discover Values in Games' (Flanagan, Belman, Nissenbaum & Diamond, 2007), and focuses on the *representation* of the value. Values given as examples in this text include; Diversity, Justice, Equality and Gender. By making the assumption that a games represented values reflect its effect on the audience, these metrics may be used to assess objective value. We may look at the language used in the work, and how symbolism is used to influence the players attitude toward each.

The second form of metric is *demonstrated* values. These are values that are assessed more subjectively. 'Rules of Play' (Salem & Zimmerman, 2011) puts forward such values such as; Creativity, Simplicity, Elegance and Sociality. The assessment of these criteria will vary according to the audience, however should a large enough sample of viewer opinion be gathered, we should be able to form an accurate result.

Singular vs Holistic Design

The above topics are complex, however, and difficult to define absolutely. This may be further complicated by the differences between a single element of externality, and an entire work being based on an external concept. The difference is exemplified by the use of "Solid Snake" (*Metal Gear Solid*, 1987) in Super Smash Bros Ultimate (*Super Smash Bros: Ultimate*, 2018), and the use of Pokemon in Pokemon GO (*Pokemon Go*, 2016). The first uses Solid Snake as a source of appeal, and mechanic design for a single character, whilst the second derives its full aesthetic, mechanics and character roster from Pokemon.

The "Derived" Game

The second category may also be known as the 'derived' game, "a new work derived from an existing copyright work" (Greenspan, Boyd & Purewhal, 2014). Wallin's example of this is the aforementioned 'Lord of The Rings' games. First came the books, which then became derivatory films, finally to be ported to the genre of video games. Through each of these conversions, core thematic features were kept, yet how these were expressed was altered to best fit the medium. A key example of this presented in Wallin's paper is the 'Story Map' in Lord of the Rings: Return of the King (*Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, 2003). It draws aesthetically from the movie renditions, however key aspects of its purpose are taken from the original literary work, and have influenced the construction of this map. Thus, the content did shape the game, and in return the game has shaped the overall perception of the content.

Porting to Video Game – Spatial Stories

To further expand upon this, in Henry Jenkins 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture' (Jenkins, 2003), Jenkins examines how the structures of narratives present in other forms of media can be applied to game development. Whilst not directly addressing the *effect* of external content on a game, Jenkins does write about the restrictions applied to converting content from one medium to another. "Stories are not empty content that can be ported from one media-pipeline to another" (Jenkins, 2003). In fact, Jenkin's posits that a common thread in the work of these conversions is in the development of "spatial stories". Where a designer cannot directly port a story, which relies on use of narrative conventions not present in video games, the developer can instead seek to distil the space in which the story took place into an area explorable by the player.

Procedural External Content Generation

All of this addresses content that was sourced intentionally from either global lore, or from other content creators, such as IP holders. I wish to briefly address the addition of procedural content.

The far majority of procedural content is used for “replayability and tailoring content for an individual player” (Smith, 2014). However, this changes when taking the method of generation into account. What I believe Smith refers to, is a traditional method of generation, involving level spaces (generating caves, or rooms), and the minutiae of procedural generation that is involved in AI movement, or even inventory spaces (procedural items often follow literary conventions of pre-main-post. For example, Paladin’s Flaming BattleAxe of Glory).

Since the time in which Smith wrote her article, there have been significant advances in this field in regards to AI mimicking and regenerating life examples. NVidia showcased an AI at GTC 2019 able to turn a child's drawing of a landscape into a photorealistic waterfall (*GauGAN*, 2019). With AI capable of drawing inspiration from life, and from images fed to it, I strongly believe that we are on the verge of AI procedurally generating entire enemy aesthetics and behaviours from scratch. Given that the source material will be fed from examples, consider the effect of feeding said AI a dictionary of nordic lore? We may not see Loki, or Thor, specifically, but an amalgamation of aspects that can invoke responses normally associated with their owners.

Conclusion

To conclude, my research has shown many areas that draw a tangent to my true topic of “how an external entity affects the value of a game”, however none thus far address this topic directly. However, this initial research has assisted in the division of this whole topic into a succession of addressable points. Wallin and Jenkins put forward the question of ‘How does a content’s source affect its implementation and influence?’. Salem and Zimmerman help to answer ‘How do we assess a games value initially, and after influence?’, and Smith prompts the question of ‘Must the implementation of external content be conscious and deliberate?’, and ‘What effect does the appearance of serendipitous external content have on a game?’. Alone, these questions will not address my topic, however in amalgamation I believe that they will at least begin to address a terrifically grand area of academia.

References

- Electronic Arts, Aspyr. (2003). *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* [PlayStation 2].
- Flanagan, M., Belman, J., Nissenbaum, H., & Diamond, J. (2007). A Method For Discovering Values In Video Games. *Digra '07 - Proceedings Of The 2007 Digra International Conference: Situated Play*, 4. Retrieved from <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/a-method-for-discovering-values-in-digital-games/>
- Greenspan, D., Boyd, S., & Purewhal, J. (2014). Video Games and IP: A Global Perspective. *WIPO*, (02). Retrieved from https://www.wipo.int/wipo_magazine/en/2014/02/article_0002.html
- Jenkins, H. (2003). *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*. MIT Press.
- Konami. (1987). *Metal Gear Solid* [MSX Home Computers]. Tokyo.
- Murray, L., & Maher, J. (2011). The Role of Fantasy in Videogames: A Reappraisal. *Eludamos: Video Game Journal*, 5(1), 45-57. Retrieved from <http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/vol5no1-4/html4>
- Nintendo. (2018). *Super Smash Bros: Ultimate* [Nintendo Switch].
- Nvidia. (2019). *GauGan* [Windows].
- Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2011). *Rules of play*. Johanneshov: TPB.
- Smith, G. (2014). CHI '14 Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems. *CHI '14 Proceedings Of The SIGCHI Conference On Human Factors In Computing Systems*. doi: 10.1145/2556288.2557341
- The Pokemon Company / Niantic. (2016). *Pokemon Go* [Mobile].
- Wallin, M. (2007). Myths, Monsters and Markets: Ethos, Identification, and the Video Game Adaptations of The Lord of the Rings. *Game Studies*, 7(1). Retrieved from <http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/wallin>