POLYGON DESTINIES:

The Production of Place in the Digital Role-Playing Game

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the 'corporeal intentionality' and sensitive zonings of the body subject are pre-requisites for the production of (a sense of) place. Digital Role-Playing Games however, in a simulation of this inter-animation, have been highly successful in acheiving this effect through a body avatar with representative sensitivities. First, this paper illustrates how the production of place is integral to navigation and progression through a Digital Role-Playing Game. Secondly, it reads the work of phenomenologists, Bergson, Casey, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Serres into a discussion of how a dematerialised sense of place is produced and operated. Third, and overall, this paper considers the Digital Role-Playing Game as foundation for a critique of failings in digital simulation practice, positing it as working example of the 'worldly transformation' of mathematical 'space'.

Keywords

Game, Gamescape, Phenomenology, Place, Spatium, Inter-animation, Quasi-Object, RPG, MMORPG, Local, Morphology, Avatar, Geometric, Simulation, Cosmology

1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike the simulation, which attempts an acutely representative relationship with the real world, the RPG [1], while borrowing from those technologies of representation, is not as preoccupied with facsimile.

Though advances in simulation technologies allow for a rich emulation of the real; gravity, inertia, flesh etc, the RPG chooses to bend the rules in the ends of gameplay, somehow managing to include all the ingredients necessary to create environments capable of richly immersive experiences.

RPG's have a massive popularity as complete worlds, and as such are actively inhabited. But how can such a deep sense of place (a function of such presumably material conditions) possibly be produced within patterns of interactive pixels that loosely emulate realworld conditions, and why is the production of this effect so important to gameplay? Short of attempting tedius speculation as to why so many millions of people would rather be somewhere else, we can look to the RPG for clues as to what is the rubric or code of this thing we know as a place, being that it is so effectively reconstructed in these games.

As much as cultural investigation might provide sufficient reason for recent popularity in this genre, technical developments in both hardware and game design are as much responsible; todays gameworlds are not only richer in visual detail, but offer the sense of a full and expansive universe. On first appearances new gamescapes like those of N64's Zelda, and PS2's Final Fantasies appear more preoccupied with producing this world effect than providing an arena purely for combat, dextrous operation and problem solving. Players have responded to this design perspective; RPGs are widely talked about as complete worlds, as actual places. This is an impression many traditions within the representative arts have sought after for centuries.

2. POLYGON DESTINIES

Reduced to it's graphic constituents, the RPG, like all 3D games are comprised of millions of polygons, little coloured shapes each with three or more sides all collaborating to provide a rich illusion of space. The polygon comes from a long legacy of geometric science whose first appearance was in a model of the universe found in Plato's Timaeus, First comes the point, then the line, third the triangle, four the simplest non spherical solid - a triangular pyramid.

In the geometric universe, forms are described as a composition of points falling within the three primary vectors of x,y,z. The subject is itself a point [2], whose visual subjectivity is represented as an equation of scientific perspective or 'vanishing point'. This field of algebraic-analytical relations allows for the purely mathematical construction of any plane within three dimensions, and has come to be synonymous with the largely universal idea of 'space' as it is scientifically understood. The digital visualization of this spatial model coupled with the visual configuration of the interacting subject can supposedly provide

emulation of any object or environment - even environments we know very much as places. Simulations can be found for the Vatican, the Empire State Building, Niagara falls, the White Cliffs of Dover, our entire continents are in the process of being digitally reconstituted as we stand on them.

Heidegger however, in his Building Dwelling Thinking says that the understanding of space as comprised of points (spatium) produces not objects or places but multiple positions. When the dimensions of height, breadth and depth are abstracted from space as intervals, space itself and everything in it becomes a complex of these analytic-algebraic relations within the manifold of the three dimensions. He says,

"The space provided for in this mathematical manner may be called "space," the "one" space as such. But in this sense "the" space contains no spaces and no places....only allowing for the computing of these magnitudes."

A universe of coordinates he says is a universe of positions. What lies between these positions, the interiorities (places) and their simultaneous subjectivities, is of no significance in this model. This of course sounds disastrous for the legacy of a virtual reality, how can that sense of really being there possibly be produced when the very medium of this high representation is innately dissolving of the experience of place itself.

Henri Bergson however astutely points out that geometric space is not so much an arbitrary construction laid over the world as a filter or gauze so much as being inextricably written into both speculative and deductive reasoning through the very composition of the body. He says logical thought itself has a basis within the geometrics of the body in action; as the most efficient course of action for the body. Therefore it is geometric thinking which persists, in that speculative thought is the process of defining outcomes for any course of action. Funnily enough the RPG is full of both speculative and deductive reasoning, the solving of riddles, life threatening choices made through the strategic navigation of options. So what are we left with now; when the very substrate of the gamescape knitted with a place-less and denuded geometric logic, whose very vehicle of progression is the work of dry and logical thought? The RPG sounds hardly the site for a rich sense of place, capable of wonder and investment!

Yet the RPG is already the most popular game in Japan, so popular that when Final Fantasy VIII was released so many children took the day off school and so many adults the day off work that the Government released a public statement that videogames would not be released on weekdays. The RPG is one of the best selling genres of game in the world. More computer games were sold in America last year than books, and already one in five households in Britain owns a PlayStation - a huge proportion of these statistics include RPGs. And if as these statistics suggest, that more and more people will continue to invest in these ephemera as places, then we have a new kind of landscape to contend with, one that asks us in turn to innovate both popular and historical conceptions of landscape, place and social space.

But the RPG is a paradoxical landscape, in that being dematerialized it appears incapable of occupation. This attitude persists up until an RPG is first played. For it is through the very action of gameplay that gamers build into what is otherwise a mere plane of interactive pixels.

We can see a capacity for spatial imagination at work in all games, which are themselves always a spatialisation of some sort, if only of action itself. While chess is an obvious example of this it is useful in understanding how the basic interplay of boundary and territory may become an engaging platform for action. The seminal abstract game Tetris, while being without the third dimension provided a gruelling arena for time to compete with the management of area in an unnegotiable rain of bricks. Gameplay holds this territorial logic together in the tensions of it's internal competitions. Competition within this innate territorial logic relies on a perfection of ability within the computer game, which always gets more difficult as the game goes on. But too much of either challenge and reward always results in a bad game. This elusive margin for the constant and persistently engaging improvement of performance is the quest of all game designers, and what is strange is that when this margin is found it is so often found for millions of people. - though some were better than others, everyone found Donkey Kong perfectly difficult.

The polygon has allowed for this spatialisation and perfection of action to be oriented in a very particular way, namely by the representation of spatial illusion which simultaneously produces the effect of an environment. With the 3D game the manifolds of territory are immediately complexified. The addition of this extra dimension, brings a capacity for movement that inevitably activates a curiosity for exploration.

3. FATEWORK

Fuller and Jenkins, in their Nintendo and the New Travel Writing configure these representative universes of the RPG as an interactive story, or, in line with it's explorative nature, as a spatial story of the like found in renaissance travel logs or epic novels. However on closer inspection, in other words playing these games, it becomes apparent that the story comprises mostly a context for events and the culture of gameplay. Though the story may be actively played into existence in a classic RPG like Final Fantasies, it better understood as an annex and addition of a more basic procedural logic within game design itself. My interviews of gamers (and personal experience) reveal that for the most part gamers play RPG's to firstly explore and secondly try and make it through to the end. The emphasis on story in modern RPG design with games like Final Fantasies or Baldur's Gate grounds the gameworld in a cosmology that gives the occurrence of events real meaning. More so the RPG need not include any sole agenda of epic travel. While still being explorative Sega's immensely popular Shenmue is an urban RPG set in the 1980's

This story, if you could really call it that is told to you in the inevitability of game play, the story itself isn't interactive, the game is. An interactive story implies that there are many different stories or outcomes to be had, this is not the case in RPG's today. In this way the RPG shares very little with the

hypertext novel it is often likened to. A major limitation in developments in this area is that even if there were to be an unlimited amount of labour and funding to make an RPG with an extensive branching plot, the whole thing needs to be squeezed onto a CD or cartridge. In this way it is ironically the economy of information storage that ensures we cannot build infinite universes - which is exactly why it is so important they feel infinite. This economy of disposable disk space alongside the expenses of time and labour inevitably influence a particular approach to game design, where progression in the game operates as amostly linear stream of events. This event stream however (while prevalent in game design generally) surfaces in the RPG in a way that works the gamer into the worldspace, into it's places.

Because there is really only room for a continuum that diverts occasionally, each scene is constructed as the means to progress to the next, and as such become constructed within a model where progression into another scene can not occur until certain tasks have been fulfilled - the golden key effect. Sometimes this is enforced with an object as iconically literal as the stone door of TombRaider, other times, as in PlaneScape or Baldurs Gate, passage is barred because the character has not fulfilled certain designated events at an earlier stage and so must go back. This device is important in tying down the character to any narrative obligations or design agendas at work within the game.

Precisely because we must find our way out of one situation and into the next, RPG game events have the feeling, and operate, as a pre-eminent structure or fateline, one that pervades a special importance to being somewhere[3]. There's always another door to find, a message with information we'll need, an inconspicuous amulet that proves to be absolutely necessary later…

It is at this point that the RPG develops an intensity not capable in the story.

Now within the dancing patterns of pixels we have a message, it is as though these places and events were left there for us especially. Potentialised with a greater significance than others, they feel like evidence of a universal logic or order within the gameworld.

The universal logic I'm speaking of here is not necessarily strategically set-up to produce the player within a solipsistic universe, so much as being foundational to game design itself; there wouldn't be a game without the task of earning the right of way. That there needs to be a series of tasks to perform before being able to access another level means that objects and events have the feeling, when playing, of being grouped around you. As a result these objects and situations seem to be reflections or apparitions of some kind of intentionality or will of the gameworld.

Because of this dynamic association with the gameworld through the centralised operations of the user, we can think of objects and events within the gameworld as relational objects, or to use Serres's term, 'quasi objects'. These potentialised objects and situations organise not only other objects and situations within the gameworld, but inversely organise the movements of the player as well. More than just a symbol, the quasi-object, because it is a relational object, is written into a morphology that

binds the universe of the gameworld together, both in time and through the user.

Edward Casey notes that places attract and gather, objects, languages, people, places and things and that these are held in a particular configuration and as such make a relational sense between them. These relations support this universal logic that manifests in play as a total atmosphere, an indescribable mood that is particular to and pervades all things in the game

RPG's are full of objects, situations and chains of events that work beyond the mere associative attraction/likeness of metaphor, but work in themselves and together to produce learnable operating systems that often transcend specific games themselves. Many quasi-objects are recognisable even across game genres, like the convention of the health pack. In operation these objects etc need not have any representative association with objects etc in the real-world. They only need to work as a landscape, as a weapon, or a health pack to soon become those things; what begins as a metaphor soon becomes the thing it stands in for (where the metaphor is a rhetorical association that hasn't yet been operated). When you're down to 1, the health pack is very real.

4. PERFORMING 'REAL'

"Symbols, or general signs, have become associated with their meanings by usage. Such are most words and phrases and speeches and books and libraries."

Charles Sanders Pierce

This works even where there is only a bare likeness, as in PacMan. However the signs of this game only suggest a situation that comprises of a maze, ghosts and two sizes of yellow dots. It does not promise to be any more than the sum of these components - that is its charm. The system of signs in a RPG however emphatically promise a worldspace through the depiction of geographical, anthropomorphic and social correlatives that when operated, in other words become related, produce a worldspace. In this way RPG's do not need to strictly mimic or simulate real world systems to effect the sense of working as a complete world. In fact it is often the inherent other worldliness of RPG's that allow for them to operate in their own magical way, with no need for explanation. This is true of most science fiction - at a certain point we must give in to the fact that the alternate world works on a set of rules incompatible with our own. This same resolve allows for game symbols to become working objects, taking the rest of the worldspace along with them. Because objects and events in the RPG are operable, they do not need to be activated and supported by the imagination, and so they are quickly forgotten as the stuff of fiction.

Fuller and Jenkins, in their, 'Nintendo and The New World Travel Writing,' however insist that these universal logics found in RPG's are one and the same with the story. Furthermore they qualify the RPG, as providing means for the player to restage the founding myths of rennaisance period of America, ultimately as a means of attaining symbolic control, They say,

"The R.P.G not only allows players to identify with the founding myths of the American Nation but to restage them, to bring them into the sphere of direct social experience... an R.P.G takes children and their own needs to master their social space and turns them into virtual colonists driven by a desire to master and control digital space."

Aside from this problematic association with the American Founding myths - a great majority of games are made and played by the Japanese, and secondly that prerequisite of the player of the RPG is a child (Sony estimates that upto 20 percent of it's players are over 35 years) - we can question the assumption that any RPG is played purely to attain mastery of a landscape, in the sense of becoming a god figure. Mastery may be temporarily achieved, but the RPG gamescapes are never held and managed purely in the sense of the domination of territory as in a game like Civilisation II or the turn based battle games. The RPG gamescape ultimately refreshes itself ready to treat any player the same way all over again. We always begin at some point of entrance (or level), and in order of progression, from the known into the foreign. We know that these places are inhabited, and that the game will consistently and willingly respond, as though itself a single sensate entity; we enter these worlds superstitious, as animists, building as we go a system of object, site and event and learning it's rhythms. Because these landscapes will ultimately return to their original condition, occupation is privileged with having no responsibility to long term consequence, to history, as a record of these successes. More importantly, experience of this forgetful or refreshing landscape is cumulatively advantaged through repeat performance - we get to practice getting good at being somewhere, something not allowed for within the condensed thresholds of the urban landscape. In this way the RPG can be understood as a kind of psychological holiday within the thick of everyday life.

It is an incredible feeling to know a place in a game so well that every exacted movement or operation is requitted with precisely the response you anticipated. No longer is the game a complex of trigger operation and interpretation, the interval between perception and action, game and player, is closed along with any consciousness that this is all happening within illusory space.

Another way of putting, 'getting good at being somewhere' is becoming local.

Edward S. Casey in, "How To Get From Space To Place" qualifies place as both occupation and the production of knowledge from occupation; in other words it needs only to become local to become an authentic place.

"...precisely as surrounded by depths and horizons, the perceiver finds herself in the midst of an entire teeming place-world rather than in a confusing kaleidoscope of free floating sensory data. The coherence of perception at the primary level is supplied by the depths and horizons of the very place we occupy as sentient subjects. We come to the world - we come into it and keep returning to it - as places already there.....There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it...Such knowledge, genuinely local knowledge, is itself experiential in the manner of lived experience..."

The power very particular to the format of the game is that knowledge is aquired through a performance of memory. Taking Casey's own cue, we get 'from space to place' by learning how each representative situation or area works through operations within them. In this way, the local knowledge that is produced in a RPG is different from other interactive systems (like other games) because earning it is simultaneously the feeling of confident occupation.

For Casey, 'space' is a hypothetical universal originating in Euclidean geometry, it can only exist without beings because to put beings into a space is to immediately produce knowledge, which in turn produces place. In this way we can address the problem of Casey's prerequisite for the experience of place - how does the user get inside the gameworld, in the sense of being in that place? To resolve this we'll look at the avatar for it's representative sensitivities and, as a kind of dynamic suture.

5. ID-WARE

ID software's Castle Wolfenstein 3D is arguably the first fully 3D game. Gamers were amazed to find themselves looking out through the eyes of the agent within a fully rendered world seamlessly scripted to movements. This viewpoint has since been synonomous with the first person shooter style of game, often coupling the visual field with crosshairs in a cyborgian blend of vision and weapon. The RPG has a different phenomenology of optics, one that at first appears to be contradictory to the project of writing the user into the game experience.

From the action dominant diluted RPG forms like TombRaider whose intermittent filmic cuts and interactive camera tracking set up the gamer as a movie director, to the turn based, character heavy traditional RPG's like Squaresoft's Final Fantasy series, the gamers viewpoint is a floating eye following the character as they are negotiated through the gamescape. In several lighter strains of RPG like Zelda and TombRaider, the user eye shares most of the perceptual horizons of the character but is higher up, often looking over the shoulder or sometimes out and around the avatar occupying an advantageous perspective of the situation. The more classic RPG's like Planescape, Baldur's Gate and Final Fantasy posit the user perspective in a priviledged top down view of the situation, much more is revealed of the surrounding environment. Both these view points seek to spare no details of the characters interaction with space, it is about an absolute exposure of the operations of the avatar in the environment, and as such all the threats to the well being of that character are transposed into a body oriented vulnerability. We watch these characters be maimed, tire and die and as such they becomes the subject of a covetous or protective gaze, simply because we can see them. The first person shooter viewpoint is perfect for shooters like Sierra's Half-life or ID Software's Quake for this reason; because we can't see our representative bodies our own our representative death is less significant, so much so that when playing some first person shooters ones numerous deaths become about as significant as a paper-cut. This viewpoint allows the pure and undistracted engagement in combat. Deus Ex though being a great game, claims to be an RPG while ambitiously operating within the first person optic. But because we never get to see ourselves in the game3, roleplay must be heavily

supported by the imagination to compete with this first person interface for action, and investment in ones chosen role is more difficult.

The RPG asks that the player steps from these more utilitarian relationships with the avatar and into a relationship with a character - a kind of avatar that embodies not only a greater portion of representative humanness, but in doing so widens capacity for empathic investment.

In an RPG the character plays an essential role in the milieu of the game and as such is less preoccupied with combat than with an excellent adventure. Because of this, gameplay is of a slower pace and the life expectancy of the character is generally greater allowing more time and more vehicle for investing in their representative lives This intensifies as we move into the more traditionally derived (pencil and paper based) RPG strains like Baldur's Gate and Final Fantasy. Instead of looking through the body into the gamescape, the avatar of an RPG is configured as the subject of a reflexive and responsible gaze that is forever assessing possible courses of action for the avatar as we coordinate it in relationship to the events of any given situation. It is the gamers projected empathy and felt responsibility for the representative sensitivities and mortality of the character that produces an extended Cartesian reflex. This active relation constitutes a kind of cybernetic selfhood that in turn binds the gamer with the character through a foldback of both real and representative sensitivities.

Now, with this avatar/user bind in place, we can see how an RPG satisfies Casey's prerequisite of being in that place.

The avatar of an RPG is not a visitor of the gameworld, so much as a denizen of it both in milieu, and innately in it's internal construction. Numerous basic social exchanges produce and affirm the subjectivity of the avatar, weaving it into the milieu of the gamescape as a life existing amongst other lives. This subjectivity exponentially increased with the advent of network gaming and multiplayer, where other real time players interact with the user. But the avatar is written into the game on a more innate level.

6. INTER-ANIMATIONS

The very logic of game design ensures that the representative body of the avatar is already capable of completing any challenges that the game has in store. The avatar is ultimately the most capable of competing with the challenges ahead of them, a part of the world through what they can do in it. It feels this way from the moment we begin playing because we know that the gameworld was made entirely for us. As an agent a priori of the universal design, they are even more than just a denizen. These factors ensure that the players decisions are transported into the game, beyond the pure intentionality of the first person shooter game. They operate the mechanics, myths and logics of the gamescape through a fleshed out subject of that world, and as such the world feeds back through that embodiment, in turn animating the gamer. It is this feeding back of the world through the gamer that is contiguous with Kant's seminal theory of inter-animation where place and the subject are autopoetically engaged in a continuous and dynamic reciprocation - a necessary factor for Kant in the production of place.

If as Casey says, that place has openings, thresholds, sensitive zonings that mimic the flesh of the body, then the same is true for the game. There is a shared pneumatic fleshlike structure between avatar and gameworld; the digital flesh of the body/avatar shares the same flesh of the gameworld. But this is not enough to produce a sense of place. The body must move within the place, as a dynamic component of it's flows. And Casey agrees, by noting that Galilieo's configuration of the body, as a punctiform object committed to the laws of gravitation and physics and without it's own self motion, is not capable of producing place.

Casey asserts that, "precisely by allowing us to make diverse entry into a given place…the body insinuates itself subtly and multiply into encompassing regions". In his essay, 'How to get from Space to Place', he looks at Kant's bilateral body. With brachiations and multiply articulated structure, it has multiple and extensive simultaneous engagements with space, producing a bodily subjectivity as an extension of space > place. This also works as a means of place interfacing back onto the body through multiple sensitive points. Of course the representative sensitivities of the avatar cannot compete with that of the gamers own, even though many gamers will tell you they feel every pain of the avatar. But on a more intrinsic level however, in the sense of the bodily structure, the avatars subjectivity very much a part of it's place, written into the gamescape as an extension of it's symmetries and distances.

But what is special about the digital body of the RPG avatar, is that it's very structure, by being designed as ultimately perfectly fit to operate in the game world it already contains the necessary intervals of the gameworld, a perfect subject of it's physical dimensions; of it's anatomical challenges. For instance, of all the jumps we cannot make in a game, there is always a jump we are meant to make. In other words where ever the avatar can operate, their body is best suited to operate - and so often it is what we cannot do that leads us to what we are supposed to do, a perfect and reliable reciprocation of effort. Each ladder, river, dungeon, car park is made for the operations of this body in particular, even if against it. The avatars body is direct expression of their environment, written into the gamescape as a capacity for it's distances.

It seems we have come back to Bergson's body of intervals, from which we project possible courses of action in the gamescape. Looking at Lara in action we can see just how much an avatar can contain the geometry of the world in it's very intervals. Each movement fulfills a dimension in the gamescape.

These environments, as a geometric precipitation of the intervals of the avatar's own body works as the pure transmission of the geometric intellect, as a total manifestation of the Euclidean ideal we are supposedly so innately best suited to. Maybe this why operations in a gameworld can sometimes feel so fundamentally reassuring…

But though the avatar is so very much part of the gameworld in these ways, a body and a place tend to present themselves as particular; eg my body in this place. The body of the avatar is claimed by the gamer as an extension of this assertion. and so by way of this relation the gamer is equally frustrated by the avatar's containment. This dynamic exchange of real and representative sensitivies in the frustrations and competitions of gameplay

facilitates an exchange that oscillates in and out of awareness of the iconographic individuations of avatars like Link or Lara - we sway between roleplay and becoming.

It takes a lot of work to get through a game - finding a way to the next place is always a significant event...And in an RPG often it's not what you do, it's when or how you do it. There's a scene in TombRaider III where the gamer has to find a switch that turns the whole room upside down, to allow access to a tiny window that's impossible to reach the other way up. It takes most gamers days to work that one out.

If there's one performative relation denominative to most videogames, it is the determination and overcoming of boundaries through gameplay. These boundaries describe the limits of experience in a game while also doubling as a kind of perceptual horizon. To open up another view or access another area is to open up a new field for action. In other words it's through the transgression of these boundaries that consecutive places reveal themselves to the gamer, the world exists before we get there, but we've got to get to know it to get through it.

As we saw earlier, place in an RPG is performed, and through the boundary, further places are performed into existence. It is this reflexive exchange, operating through memory, of the difference between environments, that produces the worldspace as potentially infinite. It does not need to be infinite, so much as the effect of it contained within the logic of the very action of progression. And, because we so often group, name and remember places by what we do in them, to play RPG's is to accumulate numerous secret histories, atlases and a sense of having lived in another world. These are histories and experiences that other gamers understand, where they can say, "you know that place where…"

7. FROM SPACE TO PLACE

The gamescapes of the RPG come as a result of early developments in the stepsister industries of virtual reality and simulation, yet don't seek to emulate the real. While the RPG might borrow from the technical advances of these practices, the agendas of the polygon are decidedly redirected into the production of other worlds. Polygons in an RPG collaborate as a skin for the production of a gamescape dense with signs, superstitions cosmologies and milieu. These are alternative ways of being in a world, alternative to the very logic that is innate in the substrate of their very make-up, that of polygons - the geometric unit of an ancient model that sought to measure and emulate the universe as accurately as possible. Ironically it is this conversion of the polygon that has redirected the founding

agendas of the 'digital space', reworking it in such a way as to be capable of personal investment, to become habitable - in short, a place.

8. Footnotes

[1] for purposes of this paper the terms RPG refers to a single player game employing an avatar undergoing a character development throughout the course of the game.

[2] the 'point' of the subject is often referred to in game play, developer tools and 3d modelling software as a 'camera'

[3] whereas in many other genres of game this sense of pre-destination is often carefully disguised in the interests of realism or other milieu / design agenda's

9. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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