Abstractions of a meaningless act: (spending) time in the gaming world

Author #1
Name: Vanessa Long
Org: Brunel University
Country: United Kingdom
Email: Vanessa.Long@brunel.ac.uk

However distant the universe, however futuristic the scenery, it is common in video games to see and take part in elements and activities that are familiar to the world in which we live.

These familiar objects fill and yet somehow evade our attention. Processes such as transporting oneself, exchanging money, or making contact with another individual are mechanically sound aspects of the game itself, but they remain a means to an end, and because of this they are rarely central plot points of the game. So what does including these familiar elements really mean?

These familiarities, when performed in the real world, are always subject to interpretation. This interpretation provides definition for an action or object. In a video game, objects and acts which already have specific external meaning are able to be rendered without the problem of creating this kind of understanding. However, this poses problems in depiction, for out of context, how can they retain this meaning?

Trading goods, fulfilling targets, even the very concept of movement is a re-imagining of a familiar act, albeit one which resides in a space that is beyond mere abstraction. We give and in turn are given meaning by the structures that surround us, but the realm of the game offers different insight, which in turn we offer by way of response.

The idea of these mirrored acts and objects existing in their own right as objects of meaning is important, as we cannot look at elements made to appear like their real counterparts as those elements themselves. They are separate entities, but we have knowledge of them because of this duality of circumstance. In this sense, for example, spending money in a game is understood. No explanation is required because we are already familiar with the process of spending money outside of the game, yet it is only embedded in this system in one sense: it gains meaning from it, but without this pre-conceived meaning it becomes empty.

One might state that the lessons the text of a video game teaches us apply to lessons learned in the real world, yet if an act is so abstracted from what it is in reality, how do we understand it?

I will be predominantly looking at the concepts of extremes (including the violent act), items and acts taken from reality, and familiarities between games. These will be considered particularly with reference to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. This should assist me in my exploration of the ways in which the game plays with our own imaginings of what (and indeed how) things mean, and how this can highlight and potentially even help us to understand the processes at work when we indulge in play.

Proposed indicative bibliography:

Felman S. (1977) Literature and Psychoanalysis - The Question of Reading: Otherwise. 2nd Ed., The John Hopkins University Press, London

Lacan J. Écrits - The FIRST Complete Edition in English. 2nd Ed., Fink B. (2006) Trans., Norton, London

Jagodzinski J. (2004) Youth Fantasies: The Perverse Landscape of the Media. Palgrave Macmillan

Barthes R. Mythologies. 6th ed., Lavers A (1973) Trans. Granada Publishing Ltd., London

Zizek S. (1992) Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture. The MIT Press, Massachusetts