

I Cried to Dream Again: Discovery and Meaning-Making in Walking Simulators

Mona Bozdog

Abertay University
Bell Street,
Dundee, DD1 1HG
1504960@abertay.ac.uk

Dayna Galloway

Abertay University
Bell Street,
Dundee, DD1 1HG
d.galloway@abertay.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a reclaiming of walking simulators as rich, self-contained, layered, and complex game worlds that pull their audiences in and engage them through experiential aesthetics and the mechanics of exploration. In order to do so, we will be focusing on the relationship between environment and narrative in two notable examples of the genre - *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012) and *Proteus* (Ed Key and David Kanaga, 2013). We will argue that, similar to immersive, site-specific performance, the (island) setting enables story, constricts and conditions movement, generates atmosphere, and immerses the player in an experiential, self-contained world. Furthermore walking simulators engage their players in an immersive environment by allowing the fulfillment of the environment's action potential (Di Benedetto, 2012). We will draw from literary, games and performance studies, namely Kincaid's typologies of Islomania ("island as dream state, the object of desire, the ideal") and Insularity ("the island as prison or fortress that holds us apart from the rest of the world") (2007, 463), Di Benedetto's argument for action potential in set design (2012), and Jenkin's properties of environmental storytelling (2004). *Dear Esther* and *Proteus* are islands in that they are self-contained spaces with their own rules and regulations. They are also places on the fringe of mainstream gaming culture that elude the rules and norms of the 'mainland' and push the boundaries of what games can do. The peaceful, single player, first person, non-conflictual, non-competitive gameplay enabled by the island setting enhances affective, narrative, spatial, and kinaesthetic involvement (Calleja, 2011:38). The tension that arises from this duality – the island being highly desirable but at the same time inaccessible – is what has fueled the creative interest of generations of artists (Kincaid 2007). Placing the story on an island provides the designers with an easy solution to limiting the game-world. It is also a good way of tapping into the player's cultural references that will influence their experience and reception while also creating genre-specific expectations from the player. The world of the game is easier to accept because islands have particular units of space and time, the presence of any object on an island could be easily justified, and elements of magic or the supernatural could potentially exist there unbeknownst to

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the mainlanders. Islands have a different logic in that they are paradoxically both a safe space and a space that can be very hard to escape. The limited mechanics in terms of possible actions reinforces the game-as-dream-state interpretation in both games, but it is the combination of limited mechanics and individual aesthetic design choices for each particular game that positions *Proteus* as Islomania and *Dear Esther* as Insularity. This paper is a starting point for a bridging between walking simulators and immersive performance, in using the environment dramaturgically to generate meaning. Both art forms design a complex experience; they draw the participant into a self-contained, sensory and experiential world and cast her in a double role as both observer and performer. Walking and exploration are the essential mechanics for placing the body (be it physical or virtual) within the designed fictional world. The Island as limitation and, simultaneously, imaginative stimulus is a functional metaphor that illustrates both Machon's notion of in-its-own-worldness (2013) and Calleja's fluid, bi-directional concept of incorporation (2011)

Keywords

Walking simulators, immersion, exploration, islands, performance

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