

Immersive lore-friendliness. Game modifications as intertextual tropes

Tomasz Z. Majkowski

Jagiellonian University in Krakow

Ul. Gołębia 24

31-007 Kraków

+48505917375

tomasz.majkowski@uj.edu.pl

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

After five years since the debut, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and its three official add-ons are surrounded by tens of thousands of player-created modifications: there are more than 45 000 mods on Skyrim Nexus website alone. Some of them are small and unassuming: retextures of existing armors or additional NPC companions, governed by vanilla (unmodded) AI. Others can be of enormous proportions: new lands and quests longer than official, paid DLCs or total overhauls of game rules and mechanics. Already impressive number of mods can go even higher if one takes into account content available on Steam Workshop (close to 85 000 mods, partially overlapping with Nexus offer), Lovers Lab (1700 mods, mostly adult-oriented and pornographic) or private blogs owned by modders reluctant to post on Nexus. High quantity of user-generated content is partially related to developer's policy of releasing free modding tool soon after the game premiere. Yet, no other Bethesda game encouraged modders to generate such immense body of work: there are 27 000 modifications for *TES IV: Oblivion* on Nexus sites and 16 000 for *Fallout: New Vegas*. Both numbers are, of course, extremely high, but pales a bit in comparison with Viking-themed iteration of *The Elder Scrolls* series. This is why it seems possible that *Skyrim* not only allows users to create mods with apparent ease – it also somehow provokes them to do so.

To navigate in such dense environment, several ways to identify mod are created. Each mod falls into category, describing which part of the game was modified. There is also endorsement system which can be seen as a measure of particular work's quality, at least in general public eyes. One can also encounter several guides, advising particular mod setup to create desired *Skyrim* experience, from survival to hentai anime. But even without such tools it is easy to create provisional topology of mods, dividing them into two basic groups. First, there are modifications that tries to transform original game experience, by replacing winter world of *Skyrim* with tropical jungle, changing female armors into chainmail bikinis or adding features and cheats that allows creating videos or screenshots without gameplay baggage.

The other group is formed by mods trying to enhance vanilla experience without destroying the mood of snow-covered, Norse-inspired *Skyrim* world. In their simplest form they enrich aesthetics of the game by replacing basic textures with higher resolution versions. But there are also complete game overhauls, marked by community as lore-friendly and immersive: the first category indicates their general alignment with established encyclopedia of *The Elder Scrolls*. The second one, sometimes used even in

Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG

© 2016 Authors. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

modification title – from *Immersive Armors* to *Immersive Indigestion* – marks it as a cure to some kind of dissonance, present in the vanilla game, that prohibits players from enjoying total immersion. Some of them just adds variety, to decrease recurrence of game assets. Other aims to fix non-immersive features, from too direct explanations of the quest goals to lack of NPCs reactions toward PC attire or add features absent from basic game: death from hypothermia or need to eat, bathe and shave.

Those two categories rise several question. Lore-friendliness is a subject of hot debate among fans, divided between group familiar with whole *TES* series and those faithful to Viking-like style of this particular iteration. Immersiveness seems to be even more interesting, as it aims to reconcile game aesthetics, story and mechanics or patch what is seemingly broken. As such, this kind of modifications can be seen as good-faith response to the dissonance created by friction between demands of various game elements. This observation rises subsequent questions: how is the friction identified? What are the strategies to smoothen it? Why is this particular game so open to such treatment?

To provide some answers I'd like to employ Michael Riffaterre's intertextual take on Pierce's "interpretant" category and describe various game elements mended with lore-friendly, immersive mods as demanding additional explanation by employing an intertext. Without it, the act of playing seems incomplete. The intertext can vary from previous *TES* games lore, video game conventional solutions, desire for challenge common within gamers subculture, knowledge of medieval Scandinavia and so on. The immersive mod can be seen as material artifact of intertextual interpretation: by adding or changing the elements from vanilla *Skyrim*, a modder tries to incorporate context s/he perceives as valid directly into the game experience, and shares this interpretation with the community, to receive validation. Therefore, it seems possible to analyze common tendencies within lore-friendly, immersive mods and establish general rule for identification problematic parts of the game and identify various cultural contexts, engaged by players. This can lead toward two important conclusions: description of general rules behind perceiving dissonance within the game and identification of cultural background commonly shared by *TESV: Skyrim* players.

Keywords

Game modification, Intertextuality, Semiotics, Skyrim

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bethesda Game Studios (2011) *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* [PC Computer], Bethesda Softworks. Rockville USA: played January 2016
- Champion E (ed.): *Game Mods: Design, Theory and Criticism*, ETC Press, Pittsburgh PA, 2012
- Kapell M. W. (ed.) *Story Divide in Game Studies*, McFarland, Jefferson NC, 2016
- Owens, T. "Modding the History of Science: Values at Play in Modder Discussions of Sid Meier's *CIVILIZATION*", *Simulation & Gaming* vol. 42 no. 4 (2011) pp. 481-495
- Puente, H. Tosca S. "The Social Dimension of Collective Storytelling in *Skyrim*", in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013 Conference*. Available at: <http://b.gatech.edu/1POV76t> (accessed Jan. 2016)
- Riffaterre, M. "The Interpretant in Literary Semiotics", in *The American Journal of Semiotics* vol. 4, no. 4 (1985), pp. 41-55
- Wirman H. "Gender and Identity in Game-Modifying Communities", *Simulation & Gaming* vol. 45 no. 1 (2014) pp. 70-94