Emptiness Beckons: The Allure of Space in Speculative Game Fictions

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ABSTRACT

Video games can be narratives, intellectual riddles, or tests of acuity and dexterity. A prominent majority of games are also spaces, movement through which is necessary to tackle challenges or advance a story. The spatiality of video games has been examined in terms of its modalities (Stockburger 2006); its narrative role (Jenkins 2004); its psychological impact on gamers (Madigan 2015); or how navigating in-games spaces can enhance spatial skills (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 1994). I would like to propose a way of looking at video game spaces from the perspective of Speculative Realism, a relatively recent but vibrant philosophical school with some tentative connections to the world of video games (Ian Bogost, a representative of Object Oriented Ontology, one of the four principal strands of Speculative Realism, is also a major video game critic and philosopher). More specifically, I think the concept of "allure," proposed by Graham Harman and articulated in *Guerrilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (2005), can be used to account for how in-game spaces attract gamers and become attractive elements of games in their own right.

Harman's "allure" is grounded in the ontological recognition that, as Steven Shaviro succinctly summarizes, "objects always withdraw from us, and from one another. We are never able to grasp them more than partially" (2010, 8). Allure "of concrete objects, not of universals" (Harman 2005, 248) arises in generally aesthetic situations. It occurs when the object intimates the existence of not only its qualities that are immediately prehensible (graphical representation), but also further depths, deeper, hidden existence (history, position in larger spaces). Allure is thus a kind of relationship, not a quality of an object that may or may not be evident to us. At the same time though, Harman asserts that "[w]hat we find in allure are absent objects signaling from beyond – from a level of reality that we do not currently occupy and can never occupy, since it belongs to the object itself and not to any relation we could ever have with it" (2005, 246). Steven Shaviro has used "allure" to discuss recent film and music video (2010), but I find this concept particularly applicable to video games and in-game worlds.

While Harman himself has remained rather uninterested in virtual objects, I assert that his "allure" can be used to successfully account for the promise of many in-game spaces, including those that do not seem particularly remarkable, such as desolate landscapes or abandoned buildings. This is particularly true for science fiction or fantasy games, in which the attractiveness of non-mimetic worlds is often a key to the title's success.

To demonstrate my point, I will discuss the construction of such spaces in *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007), a game which established the eponymous franchise's reputation. While the game's trilogy has been praised for the construction of its characters (Jørgensen 2010) and its narrative (Bizocchi and Tanenbaum 2012), among its strongest assets is, to my mind, a sense of vastness which the in-game universe is invested with. While in-game locations, as in many other games, are often conservatively circumscribed (see [Aarseth 2008] for his discussion of Azeroth's illusive size in *World of Warcraft*), game designers have used a number of strategies that make them attractive in a way that can be described as allure. Using selected in-game locations (predominantly empty moons and planets; abandoned bases and warehouses; Commander Shepard's apartment) and through a recourse to their aesthetic representation and narrative embeddedness, I will examine such strategies and demonstrate how the deployment of "allure" can explain *Mass Effect*'s success when it comes to the degree of pervasiveness and immersion.

Keywords
Speculative Realism, allure, in-game worlds, science-fiction games, Mass Effect

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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