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CHAPTER 21

Interfacing the Narrative Experience

1. INTRODUCTION

I have a research interest in interfaces to games that are played, not on computers, but in the physical environment and that ultimately transform the world into a game board for computer games. Of specific interest to this agenda are activities that are narrative and social in their nature, not only in the interaction between people, but also in people's interaction with the physical world. Having spent time role-playing in online environments, in awe of their mechanisms for story generation and interactive game worlds, I still have to argue their failure to provide convincing and truly interactive environments for narrative experiences. Put differently, the unmistakable division between character and player, and between character environment and player environment in online role-playing, characteristically fail to induce a desirable level of suspension of disbelief. In contrast, *live role-playing games* offer particularly relevant examples of games where the physical world is adapted as a mature interface to an engaging and creative immersion in an interactive, social, and narrative context. They support social and collective exercises in emergent narrative creation where every participant, is part of the design effort. These narratives take place in a magical and imaginary domain in the cross-section between physical reality and fantastic fiction offering the kind of immersion that most interactive narratives promise as a technical goal, but have yet to deliver, where there is no physical division between player, character, and narrative. Some might argue that this level of immersion is the holy grail of interactive fiction and indeed entertainment, where the narrative thread, or content if you will, is embedded in physical locations and in objects around us, creating a tangible, ubiquitous, and even context-sensitive interface for the participants or players to unleash at.

In this chapter, I share observations and analysis drawn from participating in live role-playing events, primarily in the *Lorien Trust* game system. By studying the use of artefacts and physical game locations in this process, and observing how stories emerge from the interaction between players I hope to inform design thinking about

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interfaces to *narrative experiences* and to provide insights relevant to the topic of this book – *design for enjoyment*.

2. LIVE ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

To define live role-playing (LRP) games is a knotty task, but for the purposes of this text, a definition that puts forward its essence is that LRP is a *dramatic* and *narrative* game form in which players portray fictional characters that come to life in a *web of stories*. The narrative emerges in the interaction between *characters*, *objects*, and *physical locations*. By dramatic, it is implied that roles are assumed in person rather than through virtual or abstract means, and by narrative it is implied that a main product or goal of these games is of a story nature.

Figure 1. *Live Role-players at Lorien Trust's 'The Gathering' in 2002*

Almost exclusively fictitious, the purpose of LRP games is primarily the dramatization of a make-believe world. They are fiction adventures, and although governed by a body of rules and background information that frame both individual role-play and the progression of the overall storyline, they are predominantly improvisational. Characters with ambitions and professions, dreams and hopes, come together to interact, react, and impact the narrative outcome in an unrehearsed but still measured fashion. While games are not stories, the narrative element of LRP is nothing less than pervasive, and the stories that are generated in the role-play

are interactive stories that are lived and experienced with all senses. LRP spawns a highly engaging and immersive narrative environment in which the story is read and written simultaneously, inviting participation and providing the guidance to allow players to perform and partake by putting their creative imagination to work.

2.1 Live vs. online role-playing

An important difference between online role-playing games (RPG) and LRP is clearly noticeable in how LRP players interact directly with the narrative, while online environments do not allow for the same sophisticated sensory engagement. This is primarily due to the fact that our means of interacting with the real world (our perception of and navigation in space, sensory input, how we organize and manipulate artefacts, and so on) are transformed into abstractions in online environments. This highlights the substantial difference in using the world as a *metaphor* for interaction, as in the case of online games, and using it as a *medium* for interaction, as in the case of LRP where the immediacy of the physical world is extremely relevant. The online role-player is a puppeteer while the LRP player is a person going through a transformation into a character. One of the reasons LRP worlds are so engaging is that the experiences a character is subjected to also happen to its player.

3. LRP CASE STUDY

Drawing from the understanding that the physical world is a powerful facilitator of LRP games, a compelling design challenge for digital narratives and games is to extend them into the physical domain. If we create game worlds where points of interaction are not confined to a virtual environment and a personal interface, but rather support distributed and tangible interaction qualities, we can make advances towards truly immersive narrative experiences. Some previous work within this agenda includes the *Tangible MUD* (Falk: 2002) project where computer game mechanisms were designed to reside in physical objects – a spell-book and a desk lamp – and the *Pirates!* project (Björk, *et al* 2001) in which physical locations were mapped to computer game locations. The key motivation in the Tangible MUD project was to unveil what kinds of sensory gratification tangible interaction points can add to computer gameplay. The key motivation with *Pirates!* was to restore the social dimension of play to computer games by bringing the players back to the physical environment. Integrating tangible game objects and locations, future entertainment and interactive narratives will provide a "sensory proof" of its reality that is in stark contrast to the reality the interaction space of graphical games offer. LRP games offer the opportunity to further this research in that they allow us to study how the richness of the physical world supports and enhances engagement and story creation within the game context.

3.1 *Players, costume, and character identity*

The nature of character interaction in LRP games typically causes them to depend on social structures that cannot be formalized under a rules system. LRP players bring their personal attributes and social skills to their characters, which become highly viable resources in their role-play. Additionally, a character concept typically evolves through the interaction with other characters. This suggests a strong dependence on active and interactive players, which in turn indicates that the challenge of the game is less technical, and more of an interpersonal nature.

Three aspects of how players transform into game personas are of particular relevance to this study. Firstly, attention to detail in costume and accessories and other personal props is typically great, to the point of a player using very different costumes when playing different characters. Costumes are important instruments for supporting a player's transformation into and identification with their character. Secondly, as costume is tailor-made for a character, it serves as an outward statement about the character, thus not only strengthening the individual role, but also the interaction with others. Thirdly, a lot of effort is spent on preparation; most players will have spent a significant amount of time making costumes, planning strategies, synchronising actions with other players, and so forth. The time and attention spent on taking on a role reflects the dedication to the player culture, which ultimately is highly appreciated by the community they are part of. Contrast this transformation with the graphical representation avatars provide players of computer games. Donning a costume and performing a role in person is a representation of character that has yet to be made possible in computer games.

Figure 2. *The narrative emerges in the interaction between players*

3.1.1 Objects and Locations

The physical environment is the game world, or the stage on which the narrative is performed. This integration of game space and physical space creates a graspable game environment that players have to literally navigate in order to reveal the narrative content. Physical structures may be erected to enhance the game world, serving as specific locations of importance to the narrative, and where location-dependant role-play takes place. The physicality of the game world contributes to creating a highly immersive and tangible experience, in which the narrative induces very real physical sensations such as fear and excitement.

LRP players frequently use physical artefacts as props and tools in their role-play, primarily to back up their character roles. Commonly referred to as *physical representations* (or *physreps*), they represent game objects with tangible presence and functionality in the game. Mechanisms named *lammies* (because they are laminated pieces of paper) formalize physreps' functionality in the game. Figure 3 shows an example, an amber talisman that protects its wearer from certain diseases. The numbers printed on the lammie are codes referring to properties of the artefact, such as its value, origin, if it is magical, and so forth, which players with the appropriate skills can check against so called lore-sheets. In this fashion, a lammie is something of a *plug-and-play* feature of the game world. It offers a way to sanctify and transform arbitrary objects into official game artefacts.

Figures 3 & 4. *Physical artefacts populate the game environment*

4. PRINCIPLES FOR DESIGN

To computer game designers, the game engine is a piece of software that simulates and renders the game world. It deals with e.g. visual effects, such as the animation of characters and objects, the texture of surfaces and other details in the environment. In LRP games, what I refer to as the game engine, in a relaxed sense of the term, are mechanisms that render textures of a more cultural nature. Understanding these mechanisms may be an important step in understanding what factors make successful interactive or game narratives. Which factors make up more and which make up less enjoyable or engaging experience are still subject for further

research, but there are properties of LRP games that are instrumental to creating the conditions for engaging and creative role-playing, which suggests implications for design. They are primarily motivated by the ways in which LRP environments extend and transform the physical world into environments that nurture and encourage players' engagement.

4.1 A believable game world

Computer gaming environments are increasingly realistic in using the physical world as a model for their game worlds. Many games have as a feature next to photographic graphical representations of the game environment in their attention to detail in scenery. LRP environments are founded on a different attention to detail, where the game world is believable and convincing because there is no separation between the game world and the physical world. We can note that physreps, including the environment itself, rarely take token shapes or forms, but are instead carefully crafted to convey purpose through physical manifestation. If an amber pendant is needed to make an amulet – such as the one in figure 3 – players use an amber pendant, not a feather or a stone. Elaborately populating the environment with theatrical props and game artefacts, as exemplified by the old library filled witch books (figure 5), and an alchemy lab (figure 6), is one way to make the players believe in and agree with what happens to their characters. Allowing the game to extend into the physical world is key to fostering coherent and meaningful role-playing relationships between characters and the game world.

Figures 5 & 6. *Convincing game environments, populated with game artefacts*

4.2 Magical interfaces

While believability is important, at least on the level of physical form, LRP worlds are typically rendered fantastic rather than realistic in regards to functionality. Therefore, what you see may not necessarily be what you get, and if that message is encoded and reflected in the design of an artefact, it often sparks curiosity and

beckons the player to interact with the object. As an example of magical objects, take the puzzle in figure 4, which when solved not only spells out a message, but also functions as a key that unlocks the vessel that contains a particularly nasty lich creature. In this example, the player will know what to do, or how to interact with the puzzle, but cannot be certain what the result of that interaction is. The fact that it begins to suggest its functionality – the word "Death" is being spelled out when the pieces are put together – is part of encoding this particular artefact's magical message. When the game world is designed with mystery and concealed facts in mind, it adds to creating an alluring, if not seductive, environment that strengthens players' interest and even commitment to engage with the game world. Interestingly, players are habitually sensitive to the fact that game artefacts often have unexpected effects, and their interaction with them is reflected in their typically curious but very careful approach to them.

4.3   Tangible and aesthetic interfaces

Aesthetics play an important role in creating engagement and maintaining the appeal of the environment. It deals with the expressive identity of things, their form and shape and how we experience them with our senses, and is of great consequence in rendering the reality of the fictitious game world and making it meaningful to the players. While aesthetics traditionally deals with what appeals to the senses in terms of e.g. shapes and colours, what is emphasised here are the aspects that aid the *elegance of make-believe*. They are part of making the unreal real and giving integrity to the game world. Tangible interfaces, props, and costume, play a significant role, not only in that they are physical details that support the extension and manifestation of the game world in the physical world, but also because humans are inherently good at relating to and manipulating such objects.

4.4   Dedicated vs. token representation

Most objects and locations are incorporated into game play with context of use in mind, which again is reflected in the design. It is noteworthy that important game artefacts are often highly dedicated, specialised, and articulated tools for role-play, as in the case of the puzzle in figure 4, which is a unique item created for one specific purpose. This tends to put emphasis on the design of interfaces that communicate contextual functionality, rather than being generic or universal in their physical appearance. When designed with their context of use in mind, they are powerful tools in transforming the physical world into a game world. The costumes players don and the accessories they choose to illustrate their characters' positions or professions are some examples of this principle, as suggested by figures 1 and 2.

5. CONCLUSION

Our knowledge of the physical world and the skills with which we engage with it are powerful facilitators to LRP games. The artefacts, costumes, game-specific locations and buildings transform the physical world into a magic place where fantastic narratives are spawned. The level of engagement such a game environment creates – with no physical division between player, character, space, and narrative – is the kind of immersion many interactive narratives and computer games seek to achieve but where they typically fail. By looking at the appropriation of artefacts and physical game locations in LRP games, and observing how the stories emerge from the interaction between all these components, we can inform the design process for interfaces to interactive narrative applications.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

7. REFERENCES

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