

Games, Radio and the Inferred World

Pinchbeck, D. 2006. Games, Radio and the Inferred World. In *Regarding Radio*, G. Fuller & S. Thiermann (eds.) Leipzig: Spector

This paper examines the use of radio in videogames as a cultural and functional object; a symbolic device that enables a distinct relationship to be formed between player and system. It is argued that effective use of radio contributes greatly to the constructed in-game reality, fleshing out the scope, depth and vitality of the inferred world that games prompt their players to invest in.

The games discussed here fall within the genres of action/adventure and role-playing. To an extent, they all work on the premise that the player will project themselves into the game world; that, on at least the first play, a sense of subjective experience from within the logic of the ludic world will be evoked. This experience falls somewhere between empathic involvement and presence. Fundamental to a successfully engaging game is the preservation of this sense of internal logic or consistency, and a suitable balance between player affordances and environmental and narrative depth. Balancing the stability of the world and its stories against a perceived degree of freedom and capacity to affect change is both critical and extremely difficult. This becomes particularly evident when non-combatant avatars are added to the world to enhance the former. First person perspective games, for example, make extensive use of narratives that lend themselves to extended periods of lone activity – escape, invasion and revenge motifs. There are exceptions to this, such as the recently released *Half Life: Episode One* (2006), where the player is accompanied for most of the game by

an non-player character (NPC), or Bungie's Halo (2000), where NPC squad mates fight alongside the player. Advances in artificial intelligence notwithstanding, unless the system plans on supplying an experience that requires no agency, no other to ever be present, such as the first incarnation of Doom (1993), increasing the information embedded within the game world without compromising playability is a real issue. Thus, semantic game design, or the deployment of iconic or symbolic markers within a game experience to heighten the sense of reality, becomes a process of supplying minimum cues, or evocative leads, coercing the player to imaginatively follow.

There are two immediate points to consider about this process before tackling the subject of radio explicitly. Firstly, it goes without saying that this process of constructing a valid and consistent internal reality is both semantic and structural. Secondly, games are all about manipulating the player: controlling expectation, choice and action so that a reduced field of experience delivers a satisfying experience. I have argued elsewhere that the acceptance of this reduced set is perfectly natural and builds upon the biological and psychological assemblage of higher consciousness, taking advantage of the physical and mental mechanisms of filtration that are an underlying feature of being in the world (Pinchbeck 2006). Our subjective reality is always already inferred, a process known as distal attribution, or the attaching of significant reality (as opposed to realism) to perceptual information (Loomis 1992). We are perfectly used to bootstrapping reality from fragmented or incomplete incoming stimuli. Schema theory postulates that the process may then become formalized, so systems for assisting the emergence of meaning are applied from memory, rather than the organization having to expend valuable resources dealing with each new iteration. It can certainly be argued that most media designers operate

on the assumption that media schema exist and users understand both the context in which media is engaged with and the manner in which elements of content relate to one another.

It also follows that it is perfectly possible to carry media schema over from one medium to another, and if one medium is embedded within another, the user will engage with it on its own terms. In which case, the question becomes, what is this thing, radio, and how specifically does it impact upon the player and the play?

Radio implies reality. We do not question the existence of the source, projecting agency is not problematic. It is this conceptual integrity as a medium that makes radio powerful in the construction of stable, persistent game realities. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (2004), widely considered to be hugely engaging, vast and non-linear, demonstrates this vividly. It features eight FM stations, each with a distinct mix of real world tracks, giving the game a strong context. But there is more to it than that: allowing the player to switch and select stations expands the environment far beyond the visual display; the number of stations suggests a complex social world, requiring a diversity of media. The player can subjectively impact upon this world, adjusting emotional flow by selecting their soundtrack. Further, the fact that this is radio enables a greater development of narrative sequencing to occur, as a parallel stream of content is *attached* to the action, rather than *constructed* in response to it. In essence, it moves the experience away from the filmic, with its pre-determined sequence, and more towards a persistent, pre-existent reality. At the same time, the radio impacts upon play, taking advantage of the tendency for action to begin to drift towards synchronisation to music. Rather than an addition, a gimmick to increase sense of

interactivity within the game, radio in GTA is a powerful means of enabling an inferred reality and maintaining a dynamic relationship between this reality and the act of play. It's not just about corroborative detail, to use Morie's terminology (Morie 2003), but taking advantage of our natural tendency to take fragmented stimuli and use them to infer and construct persistent realities from.

Id Software's *Doom 3* (2004), whilst profoundly linear and un-interactive in its use of radio, nevertheless makes extensive use of the medium's capacity to suggest a wholly engaging elsewhere. Early in the game, the player is isolated from all other human contact by a demonic invasion: their radio is in constant life, with large numbers of unseen others barking orders, screaming for help, filling in suggestive details about the world that extend the scope of the game beyond the immediacy of play. As the game progresses, the increasing radio silence raises the tension and sense of isolation. It is telling that the game swiftly loses focus, narrative and diversity once the initial dramatic device of silence has settled in – in a science-fiction reality, radio grounds the action to normality, to what is known, providing an foil to the escalation of horror imagery being deployed.

This use of radio as a conduit, capitalizing this conceptual function as an object which brings together disparate realities, constitutes a major ludic device in Konami's *Silent Hill* (2000), which relies heavily upon the development of a slowly building, unsettling atmosphere of horror and unreality. Large portions of the game take place in pitch black with only limited illumination afforded by the flashlight. Any exterior scenes are swamped in mist, limiting visibility. The narrative, which remains deeply ambiguous, suggests that the titular town has fallen into a space between two worlds.

Early in the game, the player finds a broken radio which, from then on, bursts into static whenever a monster is close to the player. Again, we see the radio serving several distinct functions – ludically, it alerts the player and allows them to respond to the environments; emotionally it contributes to the score and heightens tension in real-time without requiring visual representation; symbolically, it bridges the worlds, acting as a channel by which the unreal is broadcast into the real. Drawing upon cultural expectations of radio, alongside electronic voice phenomenon, the game thus draws the player to, and then subverts, the radio’s unique capacity to transmit agency without physicality.

Not only does radio infer an unseen but existent reality, it also conveys authority. As a media form, it has a distinct conceptual structure that is anchored in a nostalgic age when broadcast was centralized, inherently conservative and essentially deemed trustworthy. The lack of images means less potential for sensationalism, less of the emotional tricks we have becoming culturally acclimatized to on television. At the same time, radio is less anarchic than the internet, when the only stability or trust in material can come from cross-referencing. Radio implies a stable authoritative source. As such, it is incredibly useful for driving narrative and play along in game environments: added to the ludic device each stage of play reducing in complexity towards single outcomes, and it is little wonder that so many action games use radio to keep play moving. Although the same progression can be enabled by ludic schema alone, with cut-scenes introducing each episode of play and establishing goals; periodically pushing the emotive aspect of play along and tuning goals as play progresses is a powerful tool. Crytek’s *Far Cry* (2004) uses radio communication with Doyle, an ambiguous ally, to adjust the player’s targets regularly, on top of cut-scene

narrative progression. In this way, the narrative remains in the present; there is a greater suggestion that the player is actually affecting the environment. It's smoke and mirrors of course, but effective game design is essentially psychological manipulation. In a relatively non-linear game, it also keeps the player on course towards an identified outcome. Additionally, using radio allows the ambiguity of the authority figure to be built upon, to the narrative sting at the end of the game.

Additionally, Far Cry is certainly less likely to fall into a situation where expectations overtake system capabilities. In other words, as more emphasis is placed upon deepening emotional ties with NPCs, the realism of these avatars becomes ever more important, and subtleties become more evident in their absence (the clichéd and forced relationship within Far Cry's other major avatar, Val, is a good case in point). This is sometimes referred to as the *uncanny valley*, where as fidelity gets closer to reality, any shortfalls are amplified in significance. Certainly, radio bypasses shortfalls in visualization and movement. It also allows more flexibility in terms of projection of agency, as the listener naturally fills in the gaps in signals with their own construction.

When considering our subjective reality as necessarily inferred from fragmented perceptual data, with the assistance of schema and a tendency for narrative to emerge, it can be seen that radio is a perfect means of enhancing the sense of reality of a game world. As a medium, it operates on the basis of inference of existence and authoritative truth from an unseen other, across a non-physical communication space; it is highly known and its schema easily map across to ludic experiences; it enables complex information to be transmitted and assimilated whilst keeping the system cost low, and

the not disrupting play (as a fundamental non-interactive medium, it does not set false expectations of choice or control in the way that a mobile phone would, for example). Lastly, it bridges worlds, creating a portal for information from an unknown other. In a medium built upon the compromise between the generated and the generative, radio has proved itself a powerful means of deploying and controlling ludic reality.

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