Narrative without Fiction, the Design of Non-Game Virtual Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Desks within a virtual 3D classroom do not provide support for the learner’s body in the real, physical world. Virtual desks do not support books, cups of coffee, or offer a surface to write on. The model of a desk is a work of fiction and implies other fictional and perhaps problematic actions. For example, is a virtual desk that supports a virtual cup of coffee a priority or even necessary for education? Going further, to what extent is a desk needed? Educators currently seek interactive and augmented realities within their physical classrooms and often break from positioning students in orderly rows. The question of the 3D desk in the virtual classroom evolves into one of why does virtual reality embrace outmoded realities, rather than leading to new ones. With the previous statement in mind, the role of fiction in virtual reality deserves greater examination.

In his text Half Real, Jesper Juul realigns the constructs of interactivity and narrative into focused terms of rules and fictions. This shift in defining video games (from what to what?) has an equal impact on non-game virtual spaces. The traditional role of fiction in video games may be seen as an impediment to innovation in non-game virtual spaces. Evidence of this impediment lies in the fact that our real and physical 3D world seems eager to be more and more virtual, dynamic, and interactive – while the space with the computer does not. It is curious that the space most capable of exploiting the power of a 3D digital reality seems chained and bound to mimetic structures and faux visions of fantasy stories. To break from fictional realities and seek new and practical design principles, this paper looks at the role of narrative without fiction in the design of non-game virtual spaces and social 3D interfaces.

Intended to be productive social and/or learning environments, non-game spaces seek to empower teams of users or learners by leveraging immersive properties, sense of presence, and unique affordances of 3D computer generated imagery. As works of non-fiction, users are not immersed in a fantasy story with only game-driven consequences, representing the other “Half” to Juul’s reality. In non-game spaces, fiction does not drive...
goals. Instead, fiction and especially fictions tied to realism, are applied to advance productive nonfiction goals.

Following an adaptation of interactive and narrative theory, this paper puts forth examples and a philosophy that offers insights into the past failings of non-game virtual spaces, establishes tangible examples of evolving design in Second Life, connects to cutting edge successes in virtual design, and links everything through a clear path borrowed from videogame theory. Specifically this text walks through a number of example 3D virtual non-game art, social, and educational projects in a lens of narrative non-fiction. Emergent interactive processes and shifts in the design of virtual spaces are detached from mirror-world fictions and seen as harbingers of a new language for 3D virtual media.

Keywords
narrative, fiction, design, non-game

BIBLIOGRAPHY