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Postmodern Video Games: Meta Devices and the Player-Character

Relationship

Summary

Although postmodernism has been extensively discussed and analyzed as a movement in architecture, literature, film, painting, and music, there have been very few attempts to explicitly use it in the context of video games. Although there are several scholars who have discussed the use of meta devices in games, their research often avoids the explicit references to postmodernism which has peaked at the time of the development of the first video games. While digital games are still often discussed in the terms of a very young medium, game scholars recognize that in the last few decades they have become an influential, complex, and inherently political form of art that can and should be considered on the equal footing with other media.

Thus, the fundamental idea that informs the research conducted in this dissertation is that, on the one hand, digital games as a medium embody the ideas and beliefs of postmodernism, and that, on the other hand, one can recognize a separate, distinct group of meta games characterized by their purposeful use of postmodern meta devices. Having recognized that the interest in meta games within both the game scholarship and development lacks systematization, this dissertation directly embeds its discussion in the postmodern theories and frameworks and offers an in-depth analysis of those meta devices that are the most commonly used in video games.

These devices are considered in regard to how they manipulate the player-character emotional distance and relationship. Meta techniques, such as breaking the fourth wall, hypermediacy, or the use of the unreliable narrator, disrupt the suspension of disbelief and force

the players to engage with the texts in a more critical, self-aware manner. Recognizing that there is little overlap between game scholarship regarding emotional investment and the use of self-reflexive techniques, the discussion presented in the individual chapters shows that the forms found in meta games cannot be seen only as experiments with the boundaries and rules of the medium but that they serve to create specific intimacy between players and the characters.

The dissertation consist of two theoretical and four analytical chapters. The theoretical chapters offer overview of key concepts relating to meta within various media and across different periods as well as specifically within the video game research. Subsequently, each of the analytical chapters discusses the use of a specific meta device in video games with the emphasis on how they utilize the interactive character of digital games to evoke emotional responses in the player, manipulate the distance between them and the characters, and influence their relationship with the game. Thus, the third chapter features the discussion of the type of fourth-wall breaking that is unique to video games; fourth chapter concentrates on the unreliable narrator; the fifth chapter offers an analysis of the ways in which hypermediacy manifests in what is referred to as interface games, and the sixth chapter discusses embedded game structures.

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