

Chapter 4

The Game Space of *Dear Esther* and Beyond: Perspective Shift and the Subversion of Player Agency

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that the spaces created by video games are central to the formulation of player agency in the game. More precisely, this chapter analyzes several recent independent and experimental games—Dear Esther, Menagerie, and the work of games collective Arcane Kids—to argue that the dislocation or alienation of player agency through the formal category of game space has political and aesthetic significance. The dislocation of player agency sees ‘agency’ taken away from the player and granted instead to the game space itself; players are placed at the mercy of the game space in such a way that their lack of agency is emphasized. The effect of this emphasis is to enable these games to critique the atomized, neoliberal undercurrents of contemporary cultural production.

INTRODUCTION

Game spaces are as diverse (if not more so) than real spaces: the theme-park world of Azeroth,¹ the seemingly boundless landscapes of Skyrim,² the home-made, pixelated expanse of *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2009), and even the porous and experimental spaces of *Portal* (Valve, 2007). This paper positions the particular game space of The Chinese Room’s 2012 game *Dear Esther*—which grew from a mod alongside other contemporary game experiences in order to examine what is most superficially conventional and at the same time most radical about it: the unity and homogeneity of its space. *Dear Esther* pushes the boundaries of what a video game *is* so far that project member and creative technology professor Dan Pinchbeck calls it an “interactive ghost story” (2008, p. 51) Each of the game spaces referenced above—drawn from some of the century’s most popular and innovative games—present the player with means of conceptualizing and interacting with the world that reinforce player agency. For example, in

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Minecraft and *Portal*, the player is able to alter the landscape or at least the means of moving through the landscape. In *World of Warcraft* and *Skyrim*, maps (along with the cities, dungeons and landmarks that they chart) position the player as an entity for whom the world is sometimes a play-thing at their disposal, and sometimes an adversary. The role of the game world in *Dear Esther*, however, is less predicated on the centrality of player control and agency, and, as a consequence, precipitates shifts in perspective that subvert the dominant logic of the protagonist. The game's invisible player-character is also an invisible narrator; instead of encouraging a multiplicity of protagonists through the random ordering of the narrative, *Dear Esther* erases the protagonist by reallocating the central role to the island itself.

This chapter argues that the heightened unity of *Dear Esther*'s game-world, which consists entirely of a small island whose looming agency displaces the agency of the player-character, encourages a perspective shift in the player by reducing and decentering their agency. This central argument will be supplemented by analysis of other recent games, including the work of the game collective Arcane Kids and oleomingus's "small experiment" (Oleomingus.itch.io, 2015, para. 1) entitled *Menagerie* (2015). Space operates differently in each of these instances; nevertheless, as this chapter will demonstrate, the predominance of game space over narrative (whether total or partial) signifies a significant shift in contemporary video game production. These games use the formal category of space that decenter the player in ways that speak to the particular political moment of their production. The perspective of the protagonist is normally so closely allied to the atomized subject of the (increasingly post) neoliberal³ present that when it is reduced in these games to little more than a cipher-like frame on which the space of the game exerts itself, a formidable political critique is being made. As we will see, the variety with which this critique is carried out in contemporary games points toward social and political promise from the genre.

GAME SPACE AS A CATEGORY

Game space is used here to talk about what appears to be the physical space that the player character moves through in a video game. This definition, of course, leaves a lot to be desired. What would the game space of *Tetris* (Pajitnov & Pokhiko, 1984) be? Or of *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 1987)? These are potentially illuminating questions, but the preponderance of contemporary games that use first or third-person control of a character in a three-dimensional space impels us to define the category of game space—for our purposes—as content of a video game that is viewable and/or accessible through the movement of the player. More often than not, this content fundamentally resembles the world as human beings normally experience it. Some games, such as *Prey* (Human Head Studios, 2006), defy the laws of gravity, yet nevertheless these deviations still understand the rules of our universe as the norm.

Game space, then, is intentionally created to be analogous to 'real' space; it would be a mistake, however, to simply understand game space as a metaphor for or mirror image of real space, or even as an artistic interpolation of real space. Jesper Juul (2005) has argued for game space as an intersection of restrictive rulemaking and creative worldmaking, and in rejecting game space as an imitation of real life, we can see that game space is like literary space—fictive, generated and malleable—its rules are those of a fictional space that is consciously created for readerly⁴ or playerly navigation. What is important for us about game space, however, is that its mimicry of real space allows us to apply our understanding of real space to it—the narrative stroll⁵ and strategies and tactics⁶ are both real-world spatial concepts that can readily applied to game spaces. The embrace of 'social construction' in contemporary theory

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