

Landscape Theory for Computer Games

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INTRODUCTION

The analysis of landscape in computer games has had a brief yet productive history in game studies. This paper presents a review of how computer games have been discussed according to their use of landscape, and presents a conception of landscape that can be used as an analytical tool to contextualize computer games. Landscape theory brings together fields such as geography, anthropology, art history and philosophy to discuss the processes by which societies shape the physical environment and how the physical environment shapes them. The utility of this approach for computer game studies will be to scrutinize the use of landscape in computer games, and examine how they present broader issues surrounding the relationship between humanity and the physical environment. The methodologies of landscape theory and computer game studies share many similar traits and trajectories. Their common concerns, such as the role of space, place, representation and experience establish a strong bridge, across which we can compare and contrast solutions to these thematic problems. This paper examines existing literature that discusses computer games in terms of landscape, and considers areas where computer game studies would benefit from the critical input of landscape theory.

Espen Aarseth (2000) wrote that while the complexities of computer game simulations creates a pretext for critical input from a seemingly infinite number of fields, a specific methodology for computer game studies, one that responds to the unique affordances and experiential qualities of games, will produce the most useful analysis and criticism. Play-based methodologies such as Aarseth's 2003 framework use the experience of the player as the primary means through which to identify and discuss meaning. Extending beyond this, existing attempts to analyse computer games as landscapes have yielded fascinating results. Bjarke Liboriussen made an important link between player experience and the work of philosopher and landscape phenomenologist Edward Casey, that linked player experience to cognitive mapping (Liboriussen 2008). Daniel Vella examined player experience as a form of being-in-the-world in order to compare the standing-reserve quality of the *Minecraft* landscape to works of landscape literature such as *Robinson Crusoe* (Vella 2013). Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp provided an ethnographic account of player inhabitation of *EverQuest* to articulate the differences between visual semiotic

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meaning and ludological significance within the computer game landscape (Hayot 2009). Paul Martin used the landscape-based concepts of the sublime and the picturesque to position the relationship between the player avatar and the game landscape as the dominant structure within *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2009). Throughout this paper, I trace the development of play-based methodologies, through their discussions of space and place, to representation and the phenomenology of experience. At each point, I link these discussions to similar discourse in landscape theory. I demonstrate not only a structural congruence between landscape theory and computer game studies, but also offer refinements in terms of how landscape should be understood as it relates to computer game studies.

Landscape theory concerns the physical environment, the representations that are made of it, and the dynamic relationships that bind the two. As the complexity and sophistication of computer game worlds continues to accelerate, we need a methodology that can assimilate these worlds into a broader ontological framework. Geographer and landscape theorist Jay Appleton famously referred to landscape as “a kind of backcloth o the whole of human history.” (1975, 2), while art historian Elizabeth Helsinger wrote that “we want to keep the term “landscape,” if for no other reason than to access the long history of what landscape has been in other times and places, as we catch it in this moment, perhaps, of renewal and transformation, and prepare to study its designs in the future.”¹ (2008, 340) The focus in computer game studies on the phenomenology of player experience would benefit from a consideration of how landscape theory balances phenomenological approaches with the wealth of contextual histories they have accrued. By writing about landscape and computer games, we can connect the criticism made within game studies to a broad historical discourse concerning the history and trajectory of the shaping and representation of the physical environment. In this paper, I offer a methodological overview of how landscape theory can be applied to computer game studies. I consider four basic questions: why should we write about landscape and computer games? How should we write about landscape and computer games? How does landscape theory challenge the discourse within computer game studies? And how do computer game studies challenge the discourse within landscape theory?

BIO

Peter Nelson is a visual artist and researcher. His PhD research at City University Hong Kong concerns landscape theory and computer games. Using a methodology derived from the intersection of these two fields, he analyses how the landscapes of computer games both reflect and affect perceptions of and relationships with the physical environment. Peter has been working between Australia and East Asia for the past 10 years, and has undertaken residency projects with Taipei Artist Village (Taipei), Organhaus (Chongqing), Red Gate Gallery (Beijing), Serial Space (Sydney) and the City of Sydney. He has held solo and group exhibitions with HanArt TZ Gallery (Hong Kong), The National Palace Museum (Taiwan), The Sichuan Fine Art Academy Museum (Chongqing) and Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Hong Kong).

ENDNOTES

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