Understanding Games through a Character-World Framework

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This paper introduces the character-world relationship as a framework for discerning how a player makes sense of a virtual world. It is established through an analysis of the Eiyuu Densetsu: Kiseki Japanese role-playing game series (2004 – present) by discussing how characters facilitate knowledge and to what degree they influence the players’ perceptions of that world.

According to Mark J.P. Wolf, imaginary worlds consists of structures which provide frameworks through which one can locate information about that specific world (2012). He distinguishes two main structures that he calls narrative and infrastructure (Ibid.), which, in this paper are called the narrative-world relationship and the infrastructure-world relationship. In the narrative-world relationship, one learns about the world through storytelling. It is considered the main activity to create imaginary worlds through single and multiple texts (e.g., Dolezel 1998; Jenkins 2006; Ryan 2004, 2013; Wolf 2012). Besides narrative, in the infrastructure-world relationship the world is expanded and transmitted through infrastructures – that is, points of reference through which readers can perceive similarities between our world and the imaginary world, thereby making sense of the imaginary world (Wolf 2012).

The Kiseki games are all progression games (Juul 2005), yet they do not display an imaginary world, but instead show a virtual world with which players can interact and influence the outcome of specific events (e.g., Aarseth 2007). While the meta-world of the Kiseki series is partially imaginary, as it consists also of additional texts such as comics, novels, and animations, the narrative-world relationship and infrastructure-world relationship do not take the players’ agency in the virtual environment as part of the Kiseki world into account (ibid.), because the frameworks only address imaginary worlds.

Wolf’s notions of infrastructure and narrative fail to capture characters’ contributions in allowing players to make sense of a virtual world. This paper argues through the Kiseki series that players’ interaction with the inhabitants provide players with information or enable them to go on quests to discover their world. As these characters can also lie or hold information back, they do not present that world as it is, which shows that they are not only a possible means for players to gain information about the world, but also that
they are able to influence players’ perception of it when they discover the characters’
decceptions. This paper addresses the gap in existing theory on imaginary worlds, and
builds forth on Wolf’s frameworks of narrative and infrastructures as ways of allowing
players to gain knowledge about worlds. It therefore establishes the character-world
relationship as an equally important framework that addresses characters as the main
element to make sense of a game world including the possibility of interaction with them.
It taps into the broader questions of how characters define worlds by answering how
characters steer and influence players’ knowledge about virtual worlds. Though the
argument is initially based the Kiseki series, this paper aims to be the start of a broader
contribution in future extended work that will focus on other (J)RPGs.

In the framework of the character-world relationship, for which the model of the implied
player (e.g., Aarseth 2007) is used to assist the analysis, characters facilitate knowledge
by acting as a gateway to the diegetic world when they share information. Every
character, including the player-character, has his or her own frame of knowledge about
the world, through which they also understand the world. By sharing information,
characters allow players to obtain their frames of knowledge partially and provide players
with a double awareness that offers them a form of additive comprehension that can
change the meaning of certain events in the Kiseki games (e.g., Fine 1983; Jenkins 2006).

Nevertheless, characters are not merely a source of information. By using the Japanese
Media Mix (Steinberg 2012; Condry 2013) as a theoretical approach in which characters
connect stories together, this paper argues that characters are the factor of continuity for
players to understand a game world, since characters organize the world they appear in
and show readers fragments of this world due to their relation to it (Schules 2015).
Specifically familiar characters who often appear in several games, whose frame of
knowledge players know, offer an indication about the circumstances in the games,
enabling players to connect events in and between games and shape their understanding.
Player-characters in the Kiseki series shape this perception as well. Due to their personal
status in the diegetic world, they provide players with a set of affordances upon which
they can choose to act. However, this infers with other options that could have been taken
(e.g., Aarseth 1997), making players themselves also partially in charge of their
perception of the world, though within the constraints of the player-characters’ own
frames of knowledge.

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