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 i*nfrastructure-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' deceptions. 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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