

“Existing” in the game space -analyzing *Forget Me Not: Palette* from an embodied perspective

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Abstract. “Embodied perspective” explores the ability of video games to allow players to 'be' in the game, and can be analyzed in terms of avatars, spatiality, and performance. This essay will analyze the horror role-playing game *Forget Me Not: Palette* in the “Embodied perspective” .

Keywords: embodied perspective, game spatiality, game avatars, game performance

1. Introduction

Role-Playing Game (RPG) is a classic game type in which the player takes on the role of one or several characters to fight enemies, collect equipment and complete tasks. Under this major category there is a smaller branch, the Japanese horror RPG. Most Japanese horror RPGs cut out character progression, combat, and other RPG elements, and focus on the core gameplay of “Explore - Solve puzzles - Obtain key items”. Therefore, game plot and role-playing are the most important elements of such games.

This essay builds on the research methods and theories presented in the PowerPoints and Readings of course SM6328 to analyze the player and avatar, spaces and performances around the horror role-playing game *Forget Me Not: Palette*.

2. The avatar - playing a character or playing yourself

In *Enter the Avatar: The Phenomenology of Prosthetic Telepresence in Computer Games* [1], Klevjer states that a character is an “avatar” of the player. It is a vehicle (container) for the player to control. Since there is no way for the player to physically enter the game space, a medium that exists in the game space is required. The player acts in the game by controlling this medium. In this case the avatar character is more of a tool to serve the player than a “person” . Character's abilities, image are all designed to fulfil the player's actions in the game. In other words, the player is not an avatar, but is playing himself in the game, acting according to his own preferences, habits and perceptions.

However, I think that in a plot-driven role-playing game, a character is more than just a “vehicle”. In addition to the functionality of being “manipulated” by the player, the game author gives the character a unique appearance, personality, and even story background, and tries to mould the character into a “real” individual. It's like a play, where the director designs the plot, sets the stage, arranges the other actors and hands the player a costume and a script, inviting the player to take on the role of the character and participate in the performance. In this case, the character avatar is both the player's medium in the game and the role that needs to be performed. In order to better interpret the character, the player usually sees themselves as the character itself, acting in the persona of the character. Unlike theatre, however, in games the player is both actor and audience.

In the game *Forget Me Not: Palette*, the player has two avatars to perform, Dr. Shian , a well-known psychiatrist, and B.D, a young girl who has lost her memory. At the beginning of the game, the player takes on the role of Dr. Shian, who is threatened by a mysterious woman to do psychotherapy for B.D over the phone to retrieve her memories.

Forget Me Not: Palette has a special gameplay mechanic, when the player as Dr. Shian calls B.D, the viewpoint will switch to B.D and need to control B.D to explore the memory maze to find the memory fragments. However, when B.D runs out of action points, the viewpoint will switch to Dr. Shian again. This repeated cycle of character perspective switching results in the player's sense of immersion being automatically divided into two parts. It is natural to think that Dr. Shian and B.D are two individual characters. The author uses this to create an identity trick - Dr. Shian is B.D. Dr. Shian is an identity created by the character B.D. So in fact, *Forget Me Not: Palette* has only one avatar character - B.D.

Generally speaking, there are two types of avatars, those that can be seen and controlled directly, and those that cannot be seen as a whole (first-person view, with a camera instead of a character model). In order to make the player more convinced that B.D and Dr. Shian are two separate characters, in *Forget Me Not: Palette*, the player can actually see and control these two avatars. Not only that, but the UI, the appearance of the avatars, and the way they speak play an important role in guiding. Newman's view of avatars as tools that provide the player with information and abilities. However, in this game, the author exploits the player's trust in "tools" to create this trick.

Daniel Vella in *"It's A-Me/Mario": Playing As A Ludic Character* [2] refers to Salen and Zimmerman's idea —“a replacement of the “immersive fallacy” of total identification with a notion of doubleconsciousness” This idea is that the player can play a character in the game world and still be aware of his/her existence as a player controlling the game object. It is interesting to note that in the game B.D loses her memories and thinks she is Dr. Shian, while the player is guided by the author to think

that the player is Dr. Shian from the very beginning. When the truth is revealed at the end, a state of perfect psychological synchronisation is achieved even though the player realizes that he is not the avatar character.

3. “What can I do, where can I go?”

According to phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau Ponty), “subject is not a mind that has a body, but a mind that is a body” – subject is not “I think”, but rather an “I can” . An avatar character allows the player to perform the actions they wish to perform in a game via their gaming device. This is especially true in action games when the player has developed muscle memory by becoming skilled with the joystick/keyboard. Controlling the avatar to attack, defend, and roll can even become an instinctive response during combat. However, since horror RPGs cut out the combat ,the player's “I can” is more about “where I can go and what I can get.”

In *<Forget Me Not: Palette>* there is very little “I can ” for the player, whether the player is playing as Dr. Shian or B.D. The action is very limited. This is due to the game's mechanics, as in *Forget Me Not: Palette* the avatar character's ability to act serves the plot and gameplay. For example, at the beginning of the game, Dr. Shian is threatened by a mysterious woman outside the clinic, so the player can only call B.D. in the clinic room, and occasionally investigate some special props in the room. Similarly, B.D is designed as a girl who has lost her memory, so the player will be limited by the amount of Spirit HP when exploring the Memory Maze. “Spirit HP” is shown in the action point bar on the right side of the game interface, and is a concept similar to HP. When B.D's Spirit HP runs out, she will get a headache and the player's identity will change back to Dr. Shian. There is very little Spirit HP in the early stages of the game. Without Spirit HP the player can't go to new scenes to advance the plot, and to get Spirit HP player have to unlock scenes they haven't been to, which puts the player in a closed loop in the early stages.

In addition to the avatar characters that the player can control, the actions of NPCs also play an important role in the game. Especially in horror puzzle RPGs, authors will use NPCs to design mysteries that will naturally make the player want to solve them. While playing *Forget Me Not: Palette* I didn't understand the behavior of the mysterious woman outside the door, and it wasn't until the end of the game that I realized that she was B.D's adoptive mother, and had acted in such a way in order to awaken B.D's memory. When I reviewed the game with the truth in mind, I realized that the author had hinted her identity early on. “character’s actions cannot be divorced from the intentionality behind them, even if it is problematic and difficult to pin down” When the player knows the truth and then analyses the character's behavior, the character will be shaped more vividly.

4. The spatiality of *<Forget Me Not: Palette>*

Aarseth: “The defining element in computer games is spatiality.” Firstly, the spatiality of the game can be reflected in the “interaction” (space-image (Gunzel)) [3], i.e. the game space can be understood as a picture that can be manipulated by the player. Unlike video, in the game space, the player can not only see the image, but also influence it. As a 2D game, each scene in *Forget Me Not: Palette* is presented as an image. The author arranges various items that can be interacted with in these scenes, such as memory fragments that can be retrieved, obstacles that need to be broken, doors that are connected to each scene, props that restore mental HP, and so on. By interacting with the scene, the player gains a unique experience of “motion as navigation” .

“Computer games described not in light of a preconceived frame of reference but “as played” based on what is “given in the experience“(Husserl) of play” . Discussing the game space should be combined with the game experience. In a normal horror RPG, the game space is a whole composed of individual scenes. But due to *Forget Me Not: Palette* special game mechanics, we can divide the whole space into 2 parts.

Reality space in the game: The “real space” in the game is B.D.'s hideout, a derelict room. It is an interesting fact that since B.D. identifies herself as Dr. Shian after she loses her memories, the “real space” is also presented to the player as the image of a “psychiatric clinic” until she remembers the truth. All physical events take place inside this space. In this space, the player takes on the role of B.D's imagined identity, Dr. Shian.

The virtual space in the game —the memory maze: The Memory Maze is not a real physical space in the game, it is a combination of various scenes from B.D's memory connected in an unordered way. In this abstract space the player takes on the role of B.D. “computer game space is pixels on the screen, we cannot “exist in” computer game space like we exist in the meatspace, there is no proprioception!” In *Forget Me Not: Palette*, the author has visualized and embodied the abstract feeling of “memory confusion” .When the player controls the “avatar character” to explore the memory maze, the feeling of “chaos and confusion” is literally extended from the game to the player's body through the real-life experience. (The experience of being lost in reality is very similar to the experience of being lost in the game.) At this point, the game space seems to be the real space.

However, the experience in the game space will not be exactly the same as in the real world, because the game space will be designed to serve the game more. In *Forget Me Not: Palette*, considering the efficiency of the game, the author designed some shortcuts to help the player quickly return to the previous scene after exploring a new memory scene, which is a convenience not found in the real life experience.

5. Performance frame in <*Forget Me Not: Palette*>

“games can be props, stages and instruments for performance, even simultaneously, and also more” . The word “performance” originated in theatre and was later invoked in video games. Therefore they share the same basic elements of performance: Time, Objects, Non-productivity, Rules, Performance Spaces.(Play's the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance) [4]

Time: Time is adapted to the performance, and does not need to be kept constant with real-world time. There are two timelines in *Forget Me Not: Palette* - the timeline in the physical world and the timeline in the Memory Maze. The physical world timeline starts when Dr. Shian meets the mysterious woman and ends when he retrieves his memories, which is about one night in the game. The timeline in the Memory Maze begins with the murder of B.D's father's family 20 years ago and ends with B.D's loss of memory a few years ago. Due to the chaotic order of this space, the timeline is also disordered. The story of what happens over 20 years is compressed into about 4 hours of gameplay.

Objects: A major element of traditional RPG is the shop, where players can use game currency to purchase props at different prices, which in turn give the player different abilities. The difference is that in *Forget Me Not: Palette*, the value of the objects is reflected in the role of providing information and advancing the plot. Whenever the player finds all the objects in a scene, a memory can be unlocked, and when all the memories are unlocked, the game's goal is reached.

Non-productivity , Rules and Performance Spaces: “Performance activities are a shared and regulated experience within a space.”As a free game from many years ago, the performance in *Forget Me Not: Palette* does not produce money or other goods that maybe useful outside of it. (Unless the player gains from playing the game live.) At the same time, its rules are simple - explore the maze and find items.

On top of the most basic frameworks of theatre performance, video games have developed their own specific performance frameworks - mechanics, dynamics, aesthetics. Games are different from theatre in that the performance of a game needs to be realized through code, assets, etc. Mechanisms are embodied in the code that contains all aspects of the game, including rules, space, items, etc. Dynamics are the counterparts of the game system, i.e., the events that occur when the game is played. Aesthetics is defined as “the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with the game system”, and is the experience and emotion resulting from the player's interaction with the game system (Play's the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance) [4].

6. Performance elements in <*Forget Me Not: Palette*>

“There are 3 elements of gameplay as performance—The game ,The player-performer, Audience.” As a whole, *Forget Me Not: Palette* functions as an existential totality for the gameplay performance. The author uses 2D graphics to present a complex story and game system that allows the player to take on roles in the game and search for the truth. At the same time, he is extremely good at making use of the player's “fixed ideas”. Through the game mechanics and game text design, the player's psychology is very cleverly guided, letting player fall into the misunderstanding at the very beginning.

On the one hand, players are the audience of the game because they are the ones who experience the game; on the other hand, players actively interact with the game and are important actors who push the whole plot forward. “The player-performer is co-constituted from human and technology, and their motility involves skills and modalities not available to 'plain' humans.” The player enters the game world through an “avatar character”, switching between playing as Dr. Shian and B.D. When the game ends and the memories are retrieved, two identities merge to become a whole person again, and the player begins to reflect on the deeper meaning of what the game is trying to express. In addition, for the audience other than the player “to appreciate the actions of the player-performer in gameplay performance we both technomorphise ourselves as audience, and anthropomorphise what we experience as the player-performer.”

7. Conclusion

In fact, horror RPG is a small category with no funds to innovate, and its gameplay framework has already been broadened to its limits. In this situation, *Forget Me Not: Palette* stands out from other horror RPGs with its unique gameplay mechanics.

In terms of the player and the avatars, the game divides a complete character into two “avatars”, and the player, through his actions, combines the two identities into one, this act having a double significance—It's both the player's act of clearing the game in real space and B.D's act of retrieving her memories within the game space.

From a spatial perspective, the most important feature of *Forget Me Not: Palette* is the co-existence of real space and virtual space, and their mutual influence. The author expresses the abstract memory in the form of a physical space and uses this space to simulate the feeling of being "lost" in the real world. In this way, the “proprioception” extends from inside the game to outside the game.

Finally, from the perspective of performance, in *Forget Me Not: Palette* the player is both actor and audience, experiencing the game experience while actively interacting with the game and interpreting it.

References

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