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A Journey to Game's Landscapes

From April 2020 to May 2020

Introduction

During my Erasmus internship at the Jyväskylä Art Museum, I decided to create an online survey with the museum team. We collected data about gamers who gave their thoughts about games and who they would personally identify as a gamer. The survey lasted two months, from April to May 2020. We asked people to join in through different platforms and ended up getting 36 participants from five different countries. Even though the investigated group of participants is rather small, it can still illustrate a part of the gamer community.

The first plan was to collect the data at the museum, but according to the current situation our plans had to change. We did an online survey for the participants to fill where they had to choose a game they wanted to play the most. Originally there was only two games (Skyrim and Minecraft) to choose from, but the finished survey gave more options.

The survey was in two parts with different questions. Part one included some expectations the participants had and part two addressed their actual experiences of the game and how they felt while playing it.

Step One

Let's take a look at the first part of the survey by starting to compare the statistical numbers.

The idea that video games are only a male hobby or passion is quite strong in the current society. However, the survey demonstrates that in our small group we investigated the supposition is wrong: there was 44% male, 44% female and 12% other.

Also, it is often heard that video gaming is a childish thing to do and it is compared to play with toys. That idea in our investigated group is also false: only 5% of the people was under 18 and the big majority of 64% was between 19 and 29 years old. Surprisingly, we also had 31% of people above 30 years old witch shows that there is no particular age to like video games.

And what is comes to gamers themselves, it's said that they are often seen as a very closed community and if people like or play video games, they are an obligatory part of the gamer community, despite their options. We asked to our participants if they recognize themselves as a gamer and the majority 69% said yes. However, 31% of people said no so not everyone agreed about that selective aspect of the community. People can also percept it as something toxic which they don't want to be part of.


About the artistic legibility of video games and the answers to the question "Do you think that video game is a form of art?" we had some interesting responses.

People see video a game as:

1. A medium to express the creativity of the player (Minecraft for example).

2. A visual media creating colors and depending of the artistic value of different games.

3. A new way to approach narration, literature and movies.

4. A combination of different art forms like music, visual design or storytelling.

5. An all new art form through its interactivity, different from one player to another.

6. Thinking anything is art.

7. Thinking entertainment has never been art and valuing games as street art or pop music.

8. A way of conveying emotions and feelings through sound and music.

9. A new approach of art through skillful players solving problems.

10. The creation of an all-new world.

As we can see the different answers are sometimes going in the same direction and sometimes towards the absolute opposite one. People often compare the artistic value of video games with the classic art forms like music or even drawing. Not as many people consider video games as a form of art only because of its own particularly lik interaction. And finally some people simply cannot understand the artistic value of games by expecting art to be something beautiful in an old fashioned way.
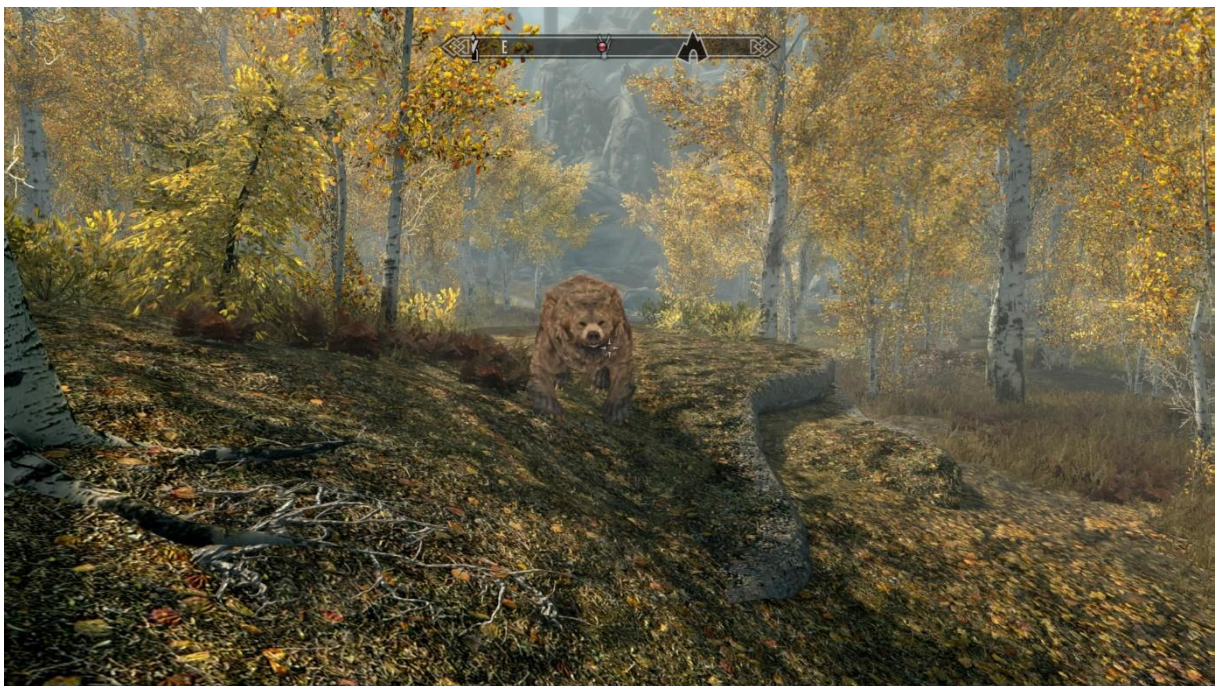
Step Two

Now if we will start to look at the second part of the survey where people have already played and are now restituting their experiences. The participants had very different types of experiences and feelings. Peaceful or busy, the choice of the game here is crucial as much as the mindset the player is in while actually playing.

Some people actually played as a virtual tourist which the survey suggested to do. Even in very not-contemplative gameplay, like Battlefield 1942, it is still manageable to keep that point of view. Battlefield for example pushes the player not to pay any attention to the surrounding landscape but if the player wants to, he can just wonder around and contemplate some interesting and beautiful spots. But going against the will of the game can sometimes turn surprisingly dangerous when the player is spotted by the enemies.

"Well, a Sherman tank did explode my jeep while I was sightseeing, that was intense."

Sometimes it is hard to keep that contemplative mode on since the game ineluctably wants the gamer to play and not to look as much because by looking the fundamental of the games mechanics, the playing is about interaction and contemplation is the exact opposite. We can even call that

perspective a way of anti-gameplaying. When the game doesn't really aloud you to have a "tourist point of view", lot of people are finding themselves gathering resources and just trying to survive by keeping their interaction coherent with the game itself. Also, the tempo of the game is very important in the position the player can have and if the game is very nervous, the player would not have the opportunity to focus on the different landscapes. If the game is challenging non-stop, through enemies waves for example, exploring and contemplating becomes very difficult to process as such as the game is wanting the player to stop.

"I was walking in the jungle, trying to find a clearing in the deep dark wood when some wild dinosaur attacked me. I tried to escape but I was lost in the jungle, without a map, without a compass, not seeing the sun…"

If the player is not experimented, wondering around in the wild environment of a new game can be intimidating. And so, by being into quieter place, where the gameplay experience could appear very pleasant in comparison to a loud and threatening.

"Picking locks was fun. You could concentrate in peace and it was interesting to see what's behind the lock."

Picking locks is a very precis piece of a game called Skyrim: it is special in the way that it "cuts" the player out of the current moment. While giving it a try the environment around the player stops and everything stands still. This gameplay approach can appeal to the eyes of a discreet player who wants to avoid fighting as much as possible. Also, I want to highlight one more thing: in the game the player can choose different types of character skills he wants to play (rubber, warrior, wizard etc.)

which makes it normal that the game pushes the player in the field where he is more comfortable, so the chosen skills can be his main skills in the future.

The player can also have a very technique point of view about the game by trying to understand how the game mechanics are working and what are its limits. This specific approach is more about the game as a physical object rather than a new world to explore. But it is still an exploration simply through a different point of view (more like a technical exploration).

"I explored the techniques of the game, character generators, moving in various grounds and in water, rhythm of day and night…"

Sometimes a game, as Animal Crossing New Horizons, is putting the player in a different perspective. For example, it can put the focus on the personalization of the player's environment, rather than on pure exploration of unknown territory. Through that type of mechanic, the game is presenting the local environment as player's propriety. So, the feeling of belonging in a place the player owns is much stronger. Usually people are playing this type of games in a need to feel relaxed and inspired, because the games are also allowing them to express their creativity through personalization and more.

"I miss the game. I feel that in the game I can express myself on the contrary I can't do in real life just now. I can go freely and meet my friends virtually if they visited me in my island. There is a strong feeling of holiday in the island because the sun is shining almost all the time and nothing must be done. I can do whatever I want and nobody is defining me."

However, some games are so wide in the variety of experiences they can offer so that the possibility of just wondering around is in a way a part of the game and game playing. As much as the player can just ignore the landscape around, he can also ignore some enemies far away and avoid most of the interaction if he wants to. Skyrim is a perfect example of that type of quiet exploration.

"I wandered in the woods and killed a couple of bears. During the trip I found a new village that I have never visited. I walk on the cliffs nearby. From there you could see very well to the wide open valley. I wait until it was night and I admired northern lights."

Skyrim is so well put together that the exploration is very common for most of the players. The player goes for a walk, to a fight, to puzzle, to a conversation or even in a book for a few minutes. So, when the player has spent that much time in a place doing so many different things and exploring every inch of the map, the feeling of belonging is again very powerful and turns the game into something new: a place that is as much familiar as the players own room.

"Yes I miss the game! it was fun to hang out in the places where I have spent time solving small puzzles. Next time I would like to go to Solstheim (the extension of the game). I have played Skyrim so much that my touristic mind miss new landscapes."

Sometimes a game that offers a variety of details from picking up flowers to catching butterflies or even sawing logs, create feelings much more realistic in player's mind. Through those very simple interactions the player has more of a lifelike perception of the surrounding environment. If he is constantly doing incredible things like killing dragon or conquer enemy's city, those remarkable moments become daily and not as important. So that is why those are very useless interaction, as seen before, becomes the essential of the game and the feeling the player has about it. The environment seems much more realistic and as if in real life, sometimes nothing interesting is happening. That timing is also very important for the player to have a break and to be able to rest between two important quests.

"The Elder Scrolls game series has always been close to my heart because of the open world and the simple tasks in it. (..) I made a couple small tasks, explored a little the environment and also some rivers, picked a lot of various plants and climbed to the top of a mountain. (…) Exploring by yourself is always fun especially if the game structure favor it. And I suppose that after seeing the possibilities of the game my longing for the game will increase."

However, some games are more about the accomplishment of tasks and less about the experience of player as an individual. That is why is commonly said that MMO (= massively multiplayer games) games are very time consuming. Here the cooperation between other player (of the same team) is essential and the players own experience exists just so he can join the other.

"I played World of Warcraft for 4 to 6 hours. The new expanding part is published and people are waiting for that. My guild manages to get through World of Warcraft last raid of the present expand. I felt relieved because now I can play more casual. I don't miss a fictive space. It's a game."

Sometimes playing a game people used to love in the past is nice and made them travel a lot even though they stayed still on their sofa. Video game offers an escape from the real world as an open window into the player's fantasy. The perception of the player can be altered and dived into an alternative reality. If you the player is already familiarizing himself with the environment by previously playing to the particular game he chose, the feeling is like meeting an old friend. The feeling of belonging melts with the familiarity of a place that the player has already been through by creating strong emotions.

"I felt that during gaming I forgot the world around me and after ending the game I felt funny to realize that I never moved from my sofa. I felt relaxed and brighten. I do miss the world of the game but not playing the game. I remember that I didn't like Xenoblade Chronicles 2 very much from the beginning. The world of the game is worth to visit but I prefer other open world games than this one. The world in an open world game is important to me and if there is a world that I feel comfortable I go back over and over again and I notice that I miss there too."

Also, as every familiar environment, it can feel nice to discover something new in something already well known. Having a new perception of the surrounding game, through a touristic mindset for example, the game can be an opportunity to discover new unknown parts of the game.

"In Fallout 76 I adventured and searched certain targets I have wanted to visit from a map. It was fun to see new things in the game in which the most of the map is gloomy and dead desert."

As seen before, now we have a better perception of what is the player's experience and what the video games can offer to its user. Depending on the point of view the player has about the game, his mindset of being into playing, the chosen game and his global experiences are going to be as unique as the player. The beauty of the interactive medium is that it will be absolutely different from one player to another because they will not react the same to the challenges that the game presents.

Through that small window on that endless world of what video games are, I hope I gave you a better comprehension of what is that new medium. Video games have a lot to offer and they open brand new perspective of artistic creation and user experiences. They can be a learning device, an open window to escape reality or even creative tool: your own video game experience depends on you!