

Playing with Mother Nature: Video Games, Space, and Ecology.

De-territorializing Nature: An analysis of social and spatial change in videogames

Mark McGeady and Gareth Schott

Video games offer fans specific iconographic landscapes that act as an inspiring signifying system, providing much of the material form by which game players actively generate, create and reflect upon conceptions of nature and the earth. This process grounds the game environment as a spatial representation that manifests a strong affective and conceptual relationship to the everyday practices of game players. This essay proposes to examine this relationship in the context of fan-cultures, specifically of the emergent possibilities that center on modes of cultural or economic development that do not compromise the land.

To analyze video games with this aim requires a shift of emphasis away from the textual properties of the gamescape, toward an examination of the way video games structure simulation. As Frasca (2003) argues: "Simulation does not simply retain the (usually audiovisual) characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviors" (p.223). Inherent in this movement is the argument that the cognitive, emotional or experiential flows of the game player resonate or interact in a reciprocal fashion to those of the game itself. It is the nature of this reciprocity that is instrumental in understanding how video game environments offer a complex way to understand our place in lived social reality. The arguments posited here differ from other treatments (e.g. Buckley, 2004) that tend to suggest, that unlike the act of playing the game, the two-dimensional representation on screen does not itself "constitute a spatial practice". Alternatively, we argue that the two-dimensional chain of signifiers co-opts the space 'the real' (lived social space) for intense moments in gameplay. Simulation therefore, contracts the environment as an immersive attendant to the two-dimensional screen. The illusion of depth no longer sits in isolation as part of the tools of narrative representation, but is integral to the construction of a theatre (the space in which the game is played) of concentrated self-awareness.

Embedded in alternate settings such as the (Odd)world of a game such as *Munch's Oddysee* (Oddworld Inhabitants), are specific knowledge systems that are derived through the active process of negotiation occurring in the 'metagame' communities. The model world of life forms and habitats, and even more dynamically, the world as experienced or lived by players, emerge through a process of projection and re-projection. Maps of gamescapes, while instigated by game-designers, are re-conceived in the lived space (Lefebvre, 1974) of fan-culture and re-projected as a multiplicity of possible outcomes. This reading elevates the function of the player/fan 'body' in triggering changes to how spatial environments are perceived. As Deleuze (1989) has argued it is not "that the body thinks, but,

obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought.” (p.189)

This essay will also illustrate these outcomes in the context of games such as *Abe* and *Munch's Odyssey*, in both the particular manner these cultural artifacts have been expressed, and in the developing agency of those communities of practice that are expressing them. Examples of player agency will be tied, and explored in relation to the “strategic location” of Soja’s Thirdspace (Soja, 1996, p.68), not solely as a site of reflection on the game environment, but as an interval or duration of unpredictable patterns (Bergson, 1888) where experiential markers that are used to orientate in time and space can be reorganized. It is from this active reorganization that spatial practice is altered and new spaces created.