UNREALISTICNESS

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Resumen

Los mundos virtuales emergen de la ficción; son verdaderos en la medida que se saben falsos. Por ejemplo, se puede creer en la magia o que los dragones existen en ese contexto. Asímismo, cualquier afirmación sobre lo real que este enmarcada en la ficción se designa como verdad o falsedad depedendiendo del mundo donde se manifieste. Por ejemplo, la gravedad y los lentes existen tanto en el mundo virtual, como en el real. En este sentido, la ficción puede eser verdad dentro de la virtualidad, ya que en ese contexto lo real no puede categorizarse solo bajos parametros de lo ficcional o no ficional. Este artículo busca reflexionar en qué sentido estas categorías podrían afectar de manera positiva o negativa la experiencia de juego y la perscepción de realidad del jugador al verse inmerso en un mundo virtual.

Abstract

Virtual worlds are works of fiction. As such, they treat as true propositions which are known to be false (such as "magic works" and "dragons exist"). Any propositions not covered by the fiction derive their truth or falsehood from the world in which we live (such as "gravity works" and "spectacles exist"). However, some statements are true within the virtual world that are addressed by neither the fiction nor the non-fiction that it overrides. These contextually-unsupported statements are said to be unrealistic. Their impact on the player is generally negative, because it undermines the player's trust in the virtual world. However, if their presence serves to show that the virtual world admits its fallibility, then the result can in the end be positive.

Palabras clave

Ficción, verdad, mundo virtual, jugador, contexto.

Keywords

Fiction, true, Virtual Words, player, context.

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Fig. 01. Left to right: Koh Rabntah, Tahla Molkoh, J'khebica

Introduction

Figure 1 shows three Miqo'te non-player characters from the massively-multiplayer online role-playing game, "Final Fantasy XIV" (Square Enix, 2013).

In the fiction of the game, the Miqo'te are a species of humanoid exhibiting certain feline characteristics, the most noticeable of which are a tail and pointy cat-ears. The ears are placed towards the back of the head in a "ten to two" position.

As can be seen from Figure 1, it's not unusual for Miqo'te to wear spectacles. J'khebica even features in a quest ("Blindsided") which requires the player to make her a new pair.

Why don't these spectacles fall off?

Well they could be held on by elastic hidden under the hair, but if that were the case then the glasses wouldn't need arms at the side: the elastic would be attached directly to the lens frame. The arms could be pressing inwards, resting on some kind of protuberance that isn't prominent enough to show but is sufficient to act as a ledge; they would need to be much more lightweight than those shown in Figure 1 for this to work, though, especially given that this is a game involving combat (Tahla Molkoh's glasses stay firmly in place even when she's attacked). Koh Rabntah could be sliding her glasses into her Alice band, but that doesn't explain how Tahla Molkoh or J'khebica keep theirs from falling off. It's possible that the Miqo'te tie their spectacles to discreet knots of hair, but J'khebica wears her hair loose; besides, with some hair styles it's even possible to see the ear hooks at the end of the arms, which would be a different shape if they were meant to be woven-in.

Frankly, pince-nez glasses would be a much more practical solution for Miqo'te than glasses designed for people with human ear placement. Why, then, do Miqo'te nevertheless persist in wearing unsuitable spectacles even when, like J'khebica, they have them custom-made?

Defaults

The fictional world in which the Miqo'te live has dragons. If a player is prepared to accept that it has dragons, why would they question how its cat people correct poor eyesight?

Well, just because a world has dragons, that doesn't mean anything goes.

When you play a game or read a novel or watch a movie, you are entering a world of fiction. There are truths about the world depicted in the fiction that are not true of the world in which we live. You are a medieval general. Sherlock Holmes is a person. A mother and daughter are looking for love. The fiction of the game, novel or movie constitutes the premise you have to accept if you're to invest yourself in its world.

What about everything the fiction doesn't describe, though? Well, it defaults to how it is in the non-fictional world (Tolkien, On Fairy Stories, 1964). Horses can't shoot arrows. Queen Victoria was a person. People live in the United States of America. This is because any divergence from what we know to be true is a potential distraction; the fewer distractions, the more cognitive effort can be invested in maintaining the fiction. As we don't have to think about accepting as true that which we know to be

true, it becomes easier to accept temporarily as true that which we know to be false.

So far, so good.

What if we observe something in the imaginary world that is accounted for by neither the fiction nor the reality it overlays? Arrows fly further than they should. Watson limps in the wrong leg. Germans speak English to each other.

Well, these we have to accept at face value: they simply can't be explained in context. That said, they can nonetheless be explained. Longer-range arrows make for better gameplay[1]. Watson limps in the wrong leg because Arthur Conan Doyle forgot in which one he'd previously written that he was wounded. An English-speaking audience won't necessarily comprehend a conversation in German. These discordances are there for reasons outside the setting of the fictional world, caused by the fact that the fiction itself is fundamentally an artefact of the world in which we live.

Although such incongruities may well be understandable, they're somehow unsatisfactory. They poke unseemly holes in the fabric of the fictional world. We can't buy into them; we simply have to embrace them and move on. This, as we shall see shortly, makes the situation less than ideal.

Trust

We have an understanding of the world in which we live, which is why we use it to fill in any gaps left by the fiction. We need to be able to make rational deductions about what will happen if we do this or that, or what must have happened for things to be like that or this. If the fiction doesn't tell us otherwise, the only basis we have for our reasoning is the non-fiction upon which the fiction is constructed. If either the fiction or the non-fiction is unreliable, it completely undermines any attempt to make sense of events in the imaginary world.

This is true of any work of fiction.

Suppose we're reading a novel. We're following a story: we want to be able to think about why things have happened and what that means for what will happen. This requires us to have an operational model of the fictional world. Without one, we can't establish hypotheses or make inferences. In the 2010 TV series "Sherlock" (Gatiss & Moffat, 2010), Watson's change of leg-to-limp-in is found to be psychosomatic as a result of post-traumatic stress (he was in the army), so placing it nicely within the fiction. As a result, the next time we see something seemingly at odds with the fiction, we can feel more confident that there'll be an in-fiction explanation rather than an out-of-fiction one.

This raises the issue of trust. When you have a good game designer, or a good novelist, or a good director, you can trust that what happens happens because it fits the fiction. If the enemy doesn't advance its forces, then it's waiting for support from its allies; it's not because of bad artificial intelligence. If a boy hugs himself while being asked questions, then he's afraid; it's not just a bit of acting business to slow down the pacing. If the grandmother starts to lose weight, it's because she's developing a terminal illness; it's not because the actress has changed her personal trainer.

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In the early days of virtual world development, we called this concept *realisticness*. A better word would be *verisimilitude*, but realisticness was preferred because it tended to be used in the negative: concepts were said to be *unrealistic* if what happened didn't match the player's understand of what "should" happen. If I drop a hedgehog off a tall cliff, the hedgehog should die. My character dies when I fall off that cliff: so should the hedgehog. The hedgehog doesn't die, though. That's unrealistic[2].

If the hedgehog had previously been flagged as being magical, OK, the player might then feel able to give it the benefit of the doubt: a magical hedgehog perhaps *could* survive such a fall. If it seems to be just a regular hedgehog, though, what then? Well, in a game that you feel you can trust, the fact that it didn't die is telling you something interesting that you can now investigate. Perhaps it really is magical, despite its

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[1] *In "Civilization V" (Firaxis Games, 2010), you could shoot them across the English Channel.*
[2] *This example is from my early virtual world, "MUD2" (Trubshaw & Bartle, 1985).*

ordinary appearance – llet's find out! In a game you couldn't trust, you would not feel justified in exploring this possibility; it probably will turn out to be a nothing-special hedgehog that ought to die when tossed from a cliff but doesn't, so what's the point?

In this example, the sense of unrealisticness arose because something happened that the fiction didn't cover and that the non-fiction said should work differently; it was resolved because further investigation revealed that the fiction did actually cover it[3]. Unrealisticness can also arise when the fiction as it has been established fails to hold. I've just melted a hole through a castle wall with this wand: why can't I use it to negotiate this insurmountable waist-high fence? Yes, I know that in the mundane world I can't do much damage to a fence using a stick, but this one can melt holes in walls so it ought to be able to remove a less substantial obstacle with relative ease.

Unrealisticness can more rarely be encountered when the fiction is missing an aspect that ought to be there but isn't. This is often hard to spot. For example, did you notice that there's something not present in "The Lord of the Rings" (Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, 1954) that ought to be there had the peoples of Middle Earth developed in the same way that every society in human history has? It's quite interesting to speculate why "there is no religion at all in *The Lord of the Rings* – no temples, shrines, priests, prayers, amulets, scriptures, ikons, idols – *nothing!*" (Carter, 1973). Not having religion in Middle Earth is unrealistic.

Fiction Failure

When something is unrealistic, then, it means there's an inconsistency. Either the fiction has failed or the non-fiction has failed and the fiction can't cover the failure. In both cases it's bad fiction, and this is why people don't like it: their model of the made-up world is being broken for no good reason and their theories about what might happen next are now worthless[4].

As a non-game example, consider the TV series "Game of Thrones" (Benioff & Weiss, 2011). Very few of the named characters in this show wear headgear. They can be in a land of permafrost with icy winds blasting down sheets of snow on them, but they don't .

put on hats. They can be in the baking heat of a desert, yet not shade their heads. They can be in the middle of a battle, but won't sport a helmet. Their other clothes will be eminently appropriate – furs, silks, armour – and have carefully-considered detailing, but their heads will nevertheless be bare. Crowns, tiaras and maybe a hood are the most we're likely to see.

This oddity was noted by fans of the show, some of whom commented that it wasn't realistic. Other characters wore sensible headgear, but very few of the main ones did.

Well, fire-breathing dragons aren't realistic either, and they're a big feature of "Game of Thrones". The same fans who griped about the lack of hats were not at all fazed by the presence of dragons. Why was this?

The answer is that the fiction explains the dragons but it's silent on the subject of inadvisable headwear preferences.

There are several reasonable explanations that could have been provided to satisfy the fans, including: "Not wearing hats is a sign of rank" (in-fiction response); "Ooer, we hadn't noticed that, we'll put them in hats from now on" (it's-a-bug response); and "Yes, they should be wearing hats, but then you'd complain you couldn't tell who the main characters were" (pragmatic response)[5]. It would not, however, be reasonable to respond "Why are you saying that hat-wearing is unrealistic when there are dragons in the world?". This is because we know the answer: the dragons are covered by the fiction, but the lack of headwear doesn't seem to be. If the fiction addressed the issue, the lack of headwear wouldn't qualify as being unrealistic.

This point is important because of what it says about trust. Also in the "Game of Thrones" TV series, there's a sequence in season 7, episode 6 ("Beyond the Wall"), in which the character Jon Snow falls into water through broken ice and is utterly drenched through, yet he drags himself out into the polar conditions without any ill effects.

Realistically, Jon should have hypothermia, yet he doesn't. OK, so why doesn't he? Well, if I can trust the fiction, it's telling me something. Maybe his sword is

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[3] Spoiler alert: yes, in "MUD2" the hedgehog was indeed magical.
[4] "To be able to live a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it." (MacDonald, 1893).
[5] This is (a paraphrase of) the actual reason, as furnished by the actor Kit Harington; he asked to wear a hat while filming in Iceland but was told that sensible headwear made it too difficult to differentiate people in that environment (Vineyard, 2017).

magically protecting him? Maybe he has an innate ability to resist cold that mirrors the one Daenerys Targaryen has to resist heat? Maybe something as-yet-unknown warmed the water? All these hypotheses have intriguing implications. However, if the reason he doesn't suffer is that he's wearing plot armour, well that simply isn't good enough. It's effectively saying, "Don't worry your pretty head about it, audience dear, just accept it like you accept the dragons". The point is, if I did accept it like I accept the dragons, then his survival should mean something special: the dragons are something special.

Realisticness matters.

Redemption

When designers design virtual worlds, they design them to map onto the physical world in most respects. However, they will gloss over some things that are deemed to be inconveniences (few insist that your character uses the lavatory[6]) and they will add key elements of difference that they regard as beneficial (say, magic works). The rest of the virtual world is as it is in our world. The same can be said of books and movies, of course, but virtual worlds are more than these: they're realities.

So it is with "Final Fantasy XIV", but in a more productive way. In the great scheme of things, of course it's not important that Miqo'te rest their glasses on ears where they don't have ears. This is a whimsical world which at times goes out of its way to acknowledge just how bonkers it is. That's kind of the point, though. Little examples such as this serve to reinforce the idea that you *can't* actually trust everything all of the time; on occasion, you do simply have to go with the flow.

In other words, it's establishing the principle that the game world *isn't* realistic, and that you can expect minor plot holes and inconsitencies from time to time. It's being honest with the player, which is rather refreshing.

Realisticness matters, yes, but if you don't have it then that in itself can tell you something about the virtual world, too.

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[6] *Strictly speaking, the lavatory is a convenience.*

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