

Visual Identity as a Form of Communication in MMORPG

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Summary

The Visual identity of an in game simulated world (virtual reality) is a factor defined and established by the visual identity of all elements of the environment. Each of the (cultural, social, biological) visual elements is part of a system defining all levels of experience within the virtual reality world. Communication forms are crucial in defining the specifics of any particular element which in turn designs specific experience (for each of the agents immersed in the virtual reality). Specific experience is dependant on visual communication rules emerged through the construction of definite visual identity elements of an in game simulated world, and an understanding of particular game requests that both the visual elements and the visual identity structure as a whole must satisfy. The theme of Visual identity is very important for future development of convincing virtual reality in MMORPG and as a part of communication research for further development of Information science.

Key words: Role playing games, simulation, visual identity, virtual reality, information science

The Virtual Reality Role Playing Game world

RPG systems appeared in the early eighties in America as a new form of socialisation through play, the reason being people often isolated themselves from social contact in front of computers, regularly missing out on classic forms of socialisation. The concept of RPG is in fact the creation of a virtual reality. The emphasis here lies on the term of virtuality that we are creating. Everything begins with a thorough analysis of societies, social structures, cultures and cultural forms, reality in its whole actually with the purpose of decomposing reality into its key elements and recomposing those elements into a new virtual reality. This virtual reality must with the basic means of recombination through which it was born receive a new structure which will determine new cultures, societies and all other aspects that make up a virtual reality. The system of playing RPG is

based on a set of rules by which every player takes on a role of certain individual from this, virtual reality created specifically for the game itself. The character that each player assumes (PC-Player character) is first and foremost determined by all the basic elements of our virtual reality. As we lay out the construction of our virtual reality setting up its basic components through the use of naturalistic, cultural, and social forms we are in fact creating new cultures, new societies, and new social relations. Of course every RPG character as a part of the system of our virtual reality will be a direct product of some specific part of our virtual cultures and societies. He will be taught to live by the moral understanding and values of his virtual culture and his cultural identity will be clearly defined by his following of their way of life.

The founding elements of virtual reality do not involve only sociocultural aspects of reality but also all the natural elements of environment which define cultures and society. Virtual reality will determine its founding elements in its very structural basis and that basis must constitute from all the elements of reality. So virtual reality needs: a virtual atlas, (climate types, terrain types, meteorological aspects of the climate including catastrophic occurrences, virtual flora and fauna (new forms of life), virtual flow of time (our virtual planet doesn't have to have the same revolution cycle as earth neither it has to keep track of time same as we do), virtual history (determining holidays and heritage), virtual art (can be important to determine social gatherings or cultural elements) and many more elements. Each of those elements will play a key role as a visual identity element although it will certainly derive from a literary basis. Races that inhabit every virtual reality are virtual themselves. Accordingly they don't have to be humans, some of the best known RPG races are Elves and Dwarves. In every virtual reality world as a part of its founding structure, we will surely find, religion, technology, magic (if appropriate), basically cultural forms. Any created virtual culture is bound to worship divinities or forces, bound to have virtual myths and legends, saints, martyrs, heroes and villains, and magic will play as much of a part as it is given to. A simple but well organized form of a Virtual reality creation process is given in the "Dungeon Masters Guide" by the D&D Design team of Wizards of the Coast in the Chapter 6: "World building" pg 153 - 164. This example does not give instructions on virtual reality building regarding its visual identity structure; it does however serve as a solid base upon which such a structure can be built.

In any Virtual reality Game world the first goal is to have any agent (player) feel at home. Meaning the level of experience the agent will receive through their character being involved in the Virtual reality as a whole must be realistic and interesting enough to provide quality uniqueness. In any Game all the communication with the virtual world comes down to the amount of information the player receives through experiencing the visual elements of that virtual reality. All agent experience is driven by the visual elements and the way they are managed. In a Role playing Game (RPG) the basic goal is to give the agent enough

means to role-play their character as a part of that virtual reality. In a MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Role Playing Game) all of the agents must be able to do so, not only in communication with the NPC (Non Player Characters) but in communication with each other. The goal of the Virtual reality is not only to give a Visual identity as a feel of a virtual world but as a means of communication that agents can use to help them role-play their characters. Basic levels of communication are agent towards virtual reality and vice versa and agent towards agent. In both cases the Visual elements and the visual identity must be complex enough to enable agents to retain total immersion in the virtual reality with all the means they might find necessary to role-play their characters. So each Race, and culture, each society, creature and object must have their specific visual elements which define certain aspects of the virtual reality and serve not only as a means of communication towards the agent, but also as a tool for the agent to communicate with other agents.

Visual Communication in Games: Meaning and Understanding

Visual communication like any language communication revolves around meaning and understanding. If we are to successfully transmit any kind of information its meaning must be understandable to anyone receiving that information. Only under those conditions we may speak of communication simply because if any of those basic principles fails there will be no communication since the message transmitted wont go through. Communication in art can be somewhat baffling regarding those two principles. We might stop to think of *L'art pour L'art* for a second. That term implies that the painting, which is in this case a visual communication transmitter between the artist and the public, is not transmitting any message we can read out of what we are simply viewing, which in term requires us to have some kind of background information to be able to fully understand the meaning. Since the meaning is not self implied and under those terms understandable that form of visual transmitter is not acceptable for usage in games. Unlike art visual communication in games must be made to satisfy these basic two principles. It must have a clear message or meaning and it must be understandable to whoever receives it. We cannot however expect to fully circumvent the need for background information but the meaning of almost every thing we can encounter in a virtual reality must have the tendency to be more or less fully self implied.

The background information factor can play a key role in understanding the true means of any visual information transmitter we might encounter. Since we are not talking about isolated elements but elements which comprise a whole of the virtual reality it is logical to assume that the meaning of one visual element can and will serve as background information on another element. The visual elements we are talking of will therefore form visual blocks and the block will ultimately shape the visual identity of our virtual world. Exact examples on the matter can be found in the article "Building a MMO with mass appeal", Sage

publications, by Nicolas Ducheneaut, Nick Yee, Eric Nickel and Robert J. Moore.

Visual Communication Blocks and Block relationships

In a more vivid example a visual communication block might give us information about a certain culture or race in our virtual reality. Let's take a race of Dwarves as an example. First and foremost to consider there is already existing background information on Dwarves and it would be folly to neglect the fact that for instance anyone who read even bits of Tolkiens "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy would have some information on the matter. If we want to stay at least somewhat true to the information we can say that we know that Dwarves in general will be described as stout little strong men with huge beards. They will be exceptional craftsmen and live underground where they are close to ore and gems which they favour in their craftsmanship. On that note some key visual elements must be the usage of metals and gems in designing elements of the dwarven culture. We might decide at this point that the Dwarves of our virtual world would be separated into Clans, and that each clan would have their colour pallets (which would remain metallic and earthen to stay true to the background information) and their symbols. The symbols would all share similar features, for instance they might all be relief with depicted tools and weapons (hardly ever an animals) and that the dwarven alphabet would be hardly ever round and without fine line fluctuations, rather precisely carved geometrical shapes or lines. With this much background information and, decisions we can easily make restrictions on the character of our visual elements of the dwarven family. Now we have a good idea that we can recognize any dwarven crafted items we may come across in our virtual world and more so draw their lineage back to a certain dwarven clan. This would be a basic example of how a "Visual communication block" is formed. In our case we may call the block the "Dwarven block" and that block is comprised of many smaller blocks. We can divide those blocks in almost any way we choose. On one side we can have certain "Dwarven Clan specific blocks" which will have their own unique visual elements and on the other hand a block might be anything in the line of "Dwarven crafted weaponry" block. These blocks are all in relation because any dwarven marked block is a part of the basic "Dwarf communication block" and having the information from the whole Dwarven block would mean knowing that culture to its fullest in terms of visual experience. Having that information we can safely say that based on our knowledge we may now recognize anything that is not part of the Dwarf block. And thus we may form any kind of a Dwarven to non dwarven visual element relation. These elements can however be a part of the same visual block. Once we determine the basic shape of weaponry which is done through background information of the type of weaponry used in the type of warfare that we might select for our virtual world we can easily know a weapon from a non weapon element. However since we have our Dwarven culture block

visual knowledge we can now tell apart a Dwarven from a non dwarven weapon.

The whole process of building visual elements and blocks is therefore in line with our basic principles of communication. In other words it is vital to acquire and value all background information, make decisions and set restrictions to further define a visual communication block. Define its meaning accordingly to benefit from the background information and make it understandable and as a part of a whole.

Visual character and characteristics

As we can notice in the process we have just described the decisions we made and our background information helped us to instantly choose defining characteristics of a certain visual block. All those characteristics like stone, metal and gems, master craftsmanship, clan symbols and lineage and so forth instantly provide the information to describe the visual character of that particular visual communication block. There are other aspects to take into consideration when fully defining a visual character of a certain block. In the designing process one often comes faced with requirements like: “That place must look sinister and scary”. In those times we need to step back and consider our background information. Does our information support the requirement or are we building into the information by complying. In any case Visual shape and form, colour and tone, contrast and many other aspects is what sets our emotions in a certain direction. Since we are building aspects of character into an existing block we have the basic Visual identity guidelines from our block. Now is the time to define our sinister block. The best way to approach the situation is to define that block using the same system we used earlier. Get all the background information on “sinister”, make decisions and set restrictions and once we have the guidelines for that particular block we can relate that block to our in example “Dwarven culture block” to make the sinister looking dwarven place.

Since we have just made an exact point in our virtual world using the visual elements and information from separate blocks we can now say that at that place in our virtual reality we have all the means of visual communication in place. As discussed in Bartle R (2004) “Designing virtual worlds”, those elements are with their character and meaning transmitting a certain desired information to the agent and the background information on which they are made, and the fact they belong to a certain family or a larger block makes them understandable as a particular element.

Visual communication as an advertisement

In reality our experience shapes our point of view and all the levels on which we can appraise a certain visual element and therefore conclude what that element means to us. Our experience and background information will play the key role in determining if we find something good or bad for us or any other kind of

posture we might have towards any kind of visual element we come across. In building a virtual reality of a Game one must take a different approach than trying to fully mimic the way things work in reality. It is best to think of an advertisement when trying to find a correct approach. At home, going to work, basically anywhere we are constantly bombarded by all kinds of advertisements trying to set our mind into thinking one way or another about a particular element. We look around and see beautiful people staring at us saying your hair will be like this if you buy a certain product, or your wrinkles will vanish if you try this product or any other kind of thing. Those things may or may not be true but all of those advertisements are giving us information through communication and all of them are made along the lines of those basic communication rules which are most valuable to us. In a game environment our virtual reality will have severe limitations and it is in fact those very limitations which force us most of all to advertise through our visual elements and therefore guide the player with the information given through those advertisements. In example or sinister looking place might be sinister for the reason to make players think twice before going there and with a good reason. The reason might well be that their character will die there if they are not well prepared. In a way the sinister character of the place will serve as an advertisement for players to keep off until they reach a certain level or progress far enough in the game. We can further more use the advertisement method to hint players to look for certain information within our virtual reality. All of this implies that there are rarely coincidental aspects in the visual communication form in a virtual reality of a game. All visual elements must serve as guides and advertise one thing or another to give us information about meanings of elements and teach us world and game mechanics.

Visual advertisement as a plot guide

As we have said earlier the goal of an advertisement is to get us thinking a certain way about certain elements or aspects of elements. In a virtual reality of a game we have to use that method to its fullest to get the most out of getting any information through to the player. Since all elements are parts of blocks and those blocks form a complex network in which all elements are corresponding we have to consider further the usage of the advertisement method in visual communication in our virtual reality. Often in movies we are led to believe certain things that might prove wrong by the end of the film. Other times we simply don't have enough information to conclude certain things (like in crime movies – "who the murderer is" situations). All this is due to simply the way the movie is directed. The problem is in the quantity and quality of information we have available to us. If we had all the information we would know who the murderer is from the beginning and the movie wouldn't be interesting. We can use this shortage of information as a valuable tool in our virtual game world. Therefore we can make misleading elements or simulate coincidences that can

baffle the player into thinking one way or another. It's safe to say that the gaming experience of a virtual reality is directed the same way movies are directed and although some information may exist as a logical part of a whole, it can be misleading or unravelled in a particular element. Those elements can be used as plot guides or mystery elements in our virtual reality but as every mystery it can only exist as a shortage of information on a matter that really is explained and logical. The mystery is enhanced by advertising that element in a certain way directing particular agent experience towards a certain end. Solving such a mystery is self rewarding and gives a great sense of accomplishment resulting in immersing the agent deeper into our virtual reality. The never ending problem is that once the mystery is revealed the agents without the experience on the matter can get all the information from agents that already solved that mystery. That is simply due to the fact that certain advertisement in a certain virtual reality world is always the same. Using these information shortage rules and our visual blocks network we can easily mimic and create mystery wherever and whenever we see fit. In a dynamic MMORPG setting where the virtual world is never finished but constantly built upon the possibilities are endless.

Visual Identity network style

Any visual identity network although built on the same principles can vary much from another visual identity network. The variation is not only due to the limitations a virtual reality as a game might have. The limiting programming and support issues are only a fraction of factors which determine exact Visual Identity style. Another factor which plays a key role in determining the exact character that our Visual network will have is the generic feel of the world we are set upon. In other words we may build a world aimed more at the younger population and make it more cartoony or make a very realistic virtual reality and set it towards another angle. The setting of our world is what makes the greatest impact. The setting is basically the global activity that goes on in our virtual reality and that setting is derived from story elements that comprise any game. A world besieged by war will definitely have a different feel than a peaceful world where all live in harmony. A futuristic setting like the "Bladerunner" will have great visual differences from a fantasy one like J. R. R. Tolkiens "Middle Earth" and so on. So defining the agent type and the setting of our virtual reality is a great place to start when looking for a style of a virtual reality Visual Identity. The style will set restrictions on definite visual elements and will determine the range of variation we are to include in our Visual identity network. All of those elements will then be directed to form agent experience which will ultimately be shaped partially by the Visual Identity style.

Multiple usages of Virtual reality Visual networks

As a step further from a MMORPG Game perspective there are many ways we can implement a MMO Virtual Reality Visual Structure into various other

fields. It is important to emphasise that it can be used as a valuable tool in education for instance as a way of simulating various historical events, which can be used in classes. We can therefore "replay" a part of history modelled as accurately as it needs to be: for instance a visit to significant battlegrounds. Here we could use our visual network to emphasise the reasons why all events occurred the way they did but using all visual aspects to better familiarise the agent (student) with any important elements, which could not fit into a lecture because of the time limitations of the class program. We could also simulate future events that would help us determine the odds of any outcome and the scenario that would need to be built to achieve a certain outcome. Virtual meetings in virtual meeting places are another method of using Virtual reality Visual networks. In this situation the reality could be modelled so that the avatars of the agents could be a realistic representation of the agent's real personas. These are only some of the ways we could use a Virtual reality Visual network but all these examples clearly show both the communicational and the educational aspects that are a vital part of this method and we need to be aware of.

Conclusion

In designing a Virtual reality in terms of Visual Identity we must satisfy the basic rules of communication. In order to get the information through the visual elements must have their meaning which has to be shaped in accordance to other visual elements forming visual blocks and ultimately a network. Those elements must all be understandable individually and as a part of a whole and the information given must be specific and engineered. All visual elements must be advertised in a certain way each fitting a particular element and this will enable us to direct advertising to form specific agent experience. All agent experience is driven by the nature of the visual elements in question and all of those must fit in with the background information, visual Identity style, and the restrictions of a particular virtual reality. Following these guidelines when engineering a virtual reality visual identity will enable us a very unique level of agent experience and an excellent level of directed communication with a focused information flow.

The believability of our Virtual reality is largely dependant upon its components which were made by decomposing reality and recomposing simulated virtual reality. This in itself ensures the reality of simulated worlds. By using an analytical, scientific approach in our Virtual reality building step we are not only supporting logic and meaning in all aspects of a game setting but ensuring the quality of information we are transmitting. Any given structure transmitted to the player in any way will therefore be educational not only in the sense of virtual reality knowledge but also in a general sense because the logic of creating any specific information is based directly as a product of specific real science and information. Building and playing a virtual reality is in its essence the same as testing your knowledge. Thus a Virtual reality of an RPG is impossible with-

out learning. From the agents perspective playing well means having the capability of self-evaluation and evaluation of ones own attributes in regard of the complexity of their surroundings as a whole. The education an agent receives by playing is therefore nonformal but very broad and at the same time very specific. All of those elements are crucial in designing a believable and playable game virtual reality. The theme of Visual identity is very important for future development of convincing virtual reality in MMORPG and as a part of communication research for further development of Information science.

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