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Replaying Minecraft? Sandbox building meets Action JRPGs

Introduction

Since 1986, the *Dragon Quest* series, created by Yuji Horii, has been one of the main Role-Playing Game series internationally (2016). The series gained fame outside of Japan as *Dragon Warriors*, before it became known as *Dragon Quest*. A new addition to this series is *Dragon Quest Builders* (2016), a ブロックメイク RPG that combines role-playing game elements with *Minecraft* mechanics.

DQB tries to combine the idea of *Minecraft*'s open sandbox mechanics with a structured storyline. However, this combination of structure and freedom raises a series of questions:

Research questions

How has *Minecraft* influenced this important Japanese game series? How does the roleplay/story-mode influence the Minecraft-like/sandbox freedom of DQB? What is the relation between the story mode and the free building mode of the game?

Method

We critically compare the sandbox style mechanics and gameplay of *Minecraft* to *DQB*, and examine how the emphasis on story, quests and characters change the sandbox openness of *Minecraft* into a more restricted game type. For this analysis we use quest theory (Tosca 2003, Aarseth 2005) and game mechanics theories, e.g. Sicart (2008). In the analysis we show how *Minecraft*'s total openness and flexibility is contained by the need for keeping the narrative development on track. DQB consists of two different modes, a progressing story mode and an open-world landscape, but the connection between the two is one-way: items and characters from the story mode can be brought to the open sandbox mode, but not vice versa.

Finally, we will examine how players respond to these limitations, by looking at letzplay DQB videos and comments in the discussion sections of these videos. Are players expecting a *Minecraft*-like freedom; are they trying to work around these limitations; or are they accepting apparent limitations caused by the marriage between two very different game modes? With games like *Skyrim*, there are numerous examples of how players break the intended structure of the game by building "uber-weapons" or having fun with the Non-Playing Characters (NPCs). In *Minecraft*, on the other hand, it is hard to play subversively, because there is no strongly authored narrative to play against. We will look at examples of subversive DQB play and discuss how the relative lack of freedom in DQB restrains the players in contrast to the Western sandbox games.

Conclusion

The paper will show what happens when a popular game concept, the open-world building game genre, is mixed with a traditional Japanese story-oriented game genre, the action RPG. We show that the *Minecraft* ideal of the open gameworld is limited by the needs of storytelling, in a less integrated but also less subversive way than other ludo-narrative open-landscape games, e.g. the *Fallout* or *Elder Scrolls* series. As Picard and Pelletier-Gallon (2015) claim, research on the dynamics between the games of Japan and the West seems to be lacking in game studies. As we observe, the particular combination evident in DQB shows that even the so-called classical JRPGs (Kiyoshi, 2012) can still evolve.

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