Polyphonic representation in games narratives

Players, designers and academics alike have long desired the experience of immersion – of being transported to another world, either as a sensory experience or merely in imagination. The foundation for such an experience, whether attainable or not, is the existence of a comprehensive world to be transported into. Such a world can be represented in multiple ways and using many different materials and stimuli, e.g. through an extensive virtual space that the player can traverse, or by giving the player the possibility of rich and diverse interaction with the objects in the game.

This paper however, will focus on how worlds may be represented using a particular narrative device. The Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) introduced the concept of *polyphony* to describe a certain style of writing that he found particular in the works of the Russian author Dostoevsky. Polyphony can be understood as the use of multiple voices to represent a fictive world. While the world is represented as a whole, it is constructed by the interaction of multiple relatively independent points of knowledge (Bakhtin 1984). Contrary to the *monologic* novel where events, characters and their inner and outer life is described from the fixed point of view of the narrator, in the polyphonic novel the story is told with multiple voices, each stemming from characters, who are not treated as objects of authorial discourse but rather subjects of their own directly signifying discourse. Using this style of polyphony the author is able to represent a heterogeneity of materials and discourses and ideas from the point of view of the characters who inhabit the world rather than the narrator (Bakhtin 1984).

While the concept of polyphony is presented as a stylistic device of the written novel, it also offers an interesting perspective on digital games as well. Games with strong role-playing elements often offer rich opportunity for the player to engage with non-playable characters through interaction and conversation. Digital games seldom makes use of a strong narrator, and the story is instead often told through a fragmented assemblage of e.g. conversations with characters, images and notes, letters, flash-backs and so forth. Furthermore, the concept of polyphony allows for the conception of characters as entities that are

relatively independent from both the narrator and the player point of view, which in games make senses even more so than in the written novel.

This paper will use the concept of polyphony to shed light on the ways in which digital games represent. This exploration will be done through examples from at least three games. The games chosen for the analysis is *Final Fantasy VII* (Square 1997) and *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013) and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks 2011). While all games contain strong role-playing elements and is populated by a great number of characters, *Final Fantasy VII* and *Bioshock Infinite* are relatively linear and story-driven. *Skyrim*, on the other hand, offer a rich open world that can freely be explored by the player. In addition in *Final Fantasy VII* and *Bioshock Infinite* the protagonist and the player is left with the task of making sense of the world and his own role in it. This is in part done through engagement with the many voices of the games, either by talking with game characters, reading letters or listening to audio recordings.

Suggested literature:

Bakhtin, M. 1984. Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. Minneapolis/London:
University of Minnesota Press.

Bakhtin, M. 1986. Speech Genres and Other Late Essays. Austin: University of
Texas Press.

Calleja, G. 2011. In-game: From immersion to Incorporation, Cambridge, MA: The
MIT Press

Ryan ML. 2001. Narrative as Virtual Reality. Immersion and Interactivity in
Literature and Electronic Media. Baltimore/London: The John
Hopkins University Press.