

Call for Papers
Worlding Science Fiction Conference
December 6-8, 2018
University of Graz, Austria

**There and Back Again:
The Shared World Building Experiences of Video Gamers and Game Designers**

Panel curated by Peter Kuling (University of Ottawa)
& Cassandra Silver (University of Toronto)

This panel explores how science fiction video game worlds function as spaces built by both game designers and players in tandem, and consequently how these worlds become performance environments where players' uses of space, time, and functionality literally alter game worlds through patches, updates, exploits, and unexpected world interactions. The panel will also consider how game worlds are meaningfully extended by supplementary content created by gaming communities.

Although world builders across genres and media have a stake in creating a cohesive space in which to situate their narrative(s), reader response theorists like Fish (1980), Iser (1980), Jauss (1982), and more recently Gerrig (1993) and Sikora et al (2011), remind us that aesthetic objects exist in relationship with their audiences. From this perspective, created worlds cannot be coherent but are rather produced and negotiated between the fiction and the person(s) exploring that world. We propose that, in video games, particularly those with varying levels of open world opportunities, the "player response" is intrinsically connected to world-building; we follow Smethurst and Craps in asserting that "the player identifies [...] with the entire space of the game world, using the controller and/or instrumentalized protagonist in order to become telepresent in the game" (2015). This complex and mutually defined relationship between game world and gamer is integral to video game storytelling as higher rates of world identification "correlat[e] with higher levels of [what Csikszentmihalyi called] flow" (Soutter & Hitchens 2016).

Through their exploration of time and space within these virtual environments and their attribution of meaning to world elements and lore, the narrative investment made by gamers often envisions and directly influences future evolutions of the game worlds in which they participate. Further, supplementary media platforms like Reddit, YouTube, and Twitch situate games and gamers in a larger discourse about user-generated digital content (Reißmann et al 2017; Gabriel et al 2015; Harwood & Garry 2014; Cover 2006). We are interested in reading game worlds through this lens because we believe that players and their characters complicate earlier models of reader response theory; in this paradigm,

players are hybridized spectators, performers, dramaturges, and amateur game designers all at once.

We are seeking papers in our panel that, among other things, explore:

- Social elements in online video games and how these might extend into game worlds and include contingent (fictive) realities (Cairns et al 2013);
- Fan contributions to evolving game worlds (complete or not) that persist in that game or develop via media beyond the digital text;
- Player expertise in certain types of game world (Klevjer & Hovden 2017), and how that expertise translates (or not) into better navigation of new experiences of similar types of world design;
- Game worlds' character construction tools and how these delimit the way a player *can* experience that world and simultaneously how these open up possibilities for how a player might invest themselves further; or
- Games exploiting senses of empathy and responsibility built by the game world in order to have the player do things, in-game, that are morally questionable (Smethurst & Craps 2015).

All proposals need to be submitted online here: <http://www.worlding-sf.com/>. The deadline for submissions is April 15.

Please note that the conference is set up to allow for remote presentations via Skype for those scholars who might have difficulty getting to Austria.

If you have questions about this panel, you may write to Peter Kuling at pjk@uottawa.ca and/or Cassandra Silver at cassandra.silver@mail.utoronto.ca.

Works Cited

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