

Re-mediation of “The Outsider”

Narratives in digital culture 2015 — Mini-project

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ABSTRACT

The Outsider is a game-adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft’s short story of the same name. The game was developed using the free CryEngine 3 SDK and is seen from a first-person perspective. The game uses spatial immersion and environmental storytelling in order to let the player interpret the story. The game makes use of voice audio clips that trigger at certain locations. It also features jump-cuts where the player is suddenly transported to a different location, without explaining what actually happens. This is done to hint about prior events, thereby making the story feel bigger and more expansive. A video walkthrough of the game can be watched via this link: <https://youtu.be/LZsbUpRY1WA>

General Terms

Narrative

Keywords

Narrative, environmental storytelling, re-mediation, H.P. Lovecraft

1. THE OUTSIDER

1.1 Plot Synopsis

The Outsider is an American horror short story written by H.P. Lovecraft and published in 1926. It’s a story about a person who has been living in an empty castle for his entire life. The story is written in a first-person perspective. The narrator is living a lonely life, having no contact with anybody. The narrator’s memory is fuzzy: he neither knows who he is, where he is from or what he is. The castle he lives in acts like a prison; he has never seen natural lights.

At some point, the narrator decides to climb the castle. After a long climb, he finally reaches a trapdoor that he goes through. To his surprise, he is not at great heights as he anticipated, but at the ground level of a new world. Taking in his new surroundings, he slowly moves through the countryside, until he reaches another castle. Here, he faces

a group of people. For unknown reasons, the people starts screaming and flee from him. The narrator is afraid of what is lurking in the darkness. He believes he saw something in one of the corners. Approaching, the narrator gradually realizes what he is looking at: a mirror, reflecting the image of himself. At this point, the narrator realizes that he is not a human being, but a terrible monster — this is the reason why the people ran away. The narrator then has an inner monologue describing his feelings towards this discovery, eventually ending in his acceptance of being an “outsider”.



Figure 1: Intro sequence.

1.2 Game Re-Mediation

I have chosen to re-mediate the story in the form of a first-person controlled computer game, developed using the free CryEngine SDK (see Figure 1). Since the original story is narrated via inner monologues, it seems appropriate to use a first-person perspective in a game, combined with voice audio clips. The game has been designed to follow the structure of the original text.

1.3 Themes

The major themes in the story are loneliness and self-discovery, as well as the atmosphere, which is described to be dark and gloomy. The narrator finds himself in an isolated world where everything is alien to him. He has never seen anything alive but “the noiseless rats and bats and spiders”. He can’t recall hearing the voice of any human being. His only encounters with the outside world is what he reads in ancient books that lie scattered in the castle. In the game, the player finds himself alone without any knowledge of what to do and where to go. The purpose is to communicate the feeling of loneliness.



Figure 2: The player enters a lighthouse.

1.4 Spatial Immersion

There is great emphasis on the spatial immersion, i.e., the sense of being part of a virtual world, by the use of environmental storytelling [4]. Therefore, the atmosphere is very important. According to [2], an atmosphere will facilitate the process of mental simulation and enrich our mental representation of future narrative events. The spatial immersion can be compared to the setting of a story. The setting has some built-in preconceptions, like a genre, that can utilize the audience’s already-existing knowledge and presumptions about a space. This ties in with the concept of environmental storytelling through the disnarrated, i.e., by giving clues of what might have happened at a certain location. Figures 3 and 4 show examples of locations that indicate some kind of narrative prior to the player’s arrival. This fuels the player’s imagination, letting the world feel bigger and more expansive than it actually is.



Figure 3: The player encounters a campsite.

It is important that the player feels as part of the world, by playing it from a first-person point of view. The game is played with traditional keyboard/mouse controls, like many other first-person computer games. The player is able to explore the virtual world, but doesn’t have a direct impact on the story itself. The player controls the virtual body in the virtual world, exploring and examining objects and subspaces.

The choice of a non-linear narrative structure depends on how much freedom the player should be allowed, e.g., how

much the story can branch in different directions. It also depends on how nuanced the possible interactions/choices are. This game doesn’t allow for a lot of interaction, and, consequently, the narrative doesn’t feature much of non-linear elements. Instead, in order to ensure narrative coherence, the game tries to stick to the structure of the original text. The structure of the story is loosely based on the *vector with side-branches* concept provided by [3]. This is achieved through the level design of the game. The game’s world seems fairly open, letting the player explore on his own. Depending on what directions the player takes, the story’s structure changes.

In order to build immersion, the game doesn’t feature any non-diegetic elements, such as graphical user interfaces (GUI). However, the game will trigger various voice audio clips at specific locations, similar to the inner monologue in the original story. These are considered to be part of the diegesis, since it is the narrator’s inner thoughts.



Figure 4: Abandoned working area.

For example, in the beginning of the game, the player enters a lighthouse and starts to climb upwards (see Figure 2). However, when he reaches the top, he finds himself not high up in the sky, but at ground level (see Figure 5). This triggers a voice clip where the narrator speaks about his surprise: *“Most daemoniacal of all shocks is that of the abysmally unexpected and grotesquely unbelievable. Nothing I had before undergone could compare in terror with what I now saw; with the bizarre marvels that sight implied. The sight itself was as simple as it was stupefying, for it was merely this: instead of a dizzying prospect of treetops seen from a lofty eminence, there stretched around me on a level through the grating nothing less than the solid ground.”*

Temporal immersion and plot go hand in hand, since they are both about gradually building up knowledge for the audience and thereby create suspense. With *The Outsider*, the player and narrator start with almost no knowledge of neither the world or the narrator’s background. As the player moves forward, he hears the narrator’s inner thoughts. The player will naturally try to combine these thoughts in order to understand the causations. The temporal and emotional immersion are almost identical, since the emotional attachment to the narrator will build up through time. At the final revelation (both for the narrator and the player), the player might either sympathize with the narrator or completely disconnect and feel apathy.



Figure 5: When the player reaches the top of the lighthouse, he finds himself on ground level. This triggers a voice clip.

1.5 Hinting About The Plot

The intention is to let the goals of the system and goals of the narrative conflate into each other [1]. This will mainly be done using a first-person perspective. Instead of just reading about the narrator in *The Outsider*, the player *becomes* the outsider. This is especially important for the finale of the story, where the player encounters a group of men and discovers something fatal about the narrator (see Figure 6). The player will feel this revelation himself (as opposed to just reading about it), thereby changing his perspective on the game and make him reflect on his previous actions.



Figure 6: When the player encounters these men, they suddenly start attacking him.

The story is relatively didascalic in the beginning, but throughout the game, things start to become more abstract and open-ended. The intelligibility does not necessarily have to be very big. The same goes for the author/audience distance; it is not important whether the player understands the exact original intentions behind the narrative. If a player walks away with a different understanding than originally intended, that is totally fine.

At certain locations, the game makes jump-cuts to other scenarios, presumably happening at a different location at a different time. One example of this is when the player reaches a small campsite (see Figure 3), the game suddenly jumps to a burning house where a group of people are screaming

(see Figure 7). The game never explicitly describes what happened, leaving it up to the player's interpretation. Similarly, the game jumps to red water that looks like blood. At the same time, the player can hear a child crying.



Figure 7: The game suddenly jumps to a burning house, indicating that something happened in the past.

1.6 Design Considerations and Deviations from the Original Text

The spatial structure of the game needs to afford the audio clips. Since the audio clips have certain lengths, it is important that the audio triggers are spaced even enough, so that multiple audio clips don't overlap each other. This in turn gives some creative challenges, since the spaces need to be big enough for the clips to play through, but they should still be compact enough to be interesting for the player.

The game tries to follow the original text as closely as possible, although certain creative liberties have been taken, mainly due to the verbose nature of the text. The ending of the game deviates slightly from the text. In the text version, the narrator ends by looking at a mirror of himself (revealing his true nature). However, the image of the monster is still created by the reader's own imagination. This is not possible in a visual medium such as games: either you show the monster (leaving nothing to the imagination), or you don't show anything at all. The latter option was chosen, since it is believed that the reader's imagination will always be stronger than what could be shown explicitly in the game. Instead, the game ends by fading to black and letting the narrator speak his final words: *"I did not shriek, but all the fiendish ghouls that ride the night-wind shrieked for me as in that same second there crashed down upon my mind a single and fleeting avalanche of soul-annihilating memory. I know always that I am an outsider; a stranger in this century and among those who are still men."* Even if the player doesn't completely understand what happened, he might still have a feeling of the narrator's situation. This approach has been prioritized over spoon-feeding the player the "correct" interpretation.

2. REFERENCES

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