Big Impact from Smaller Worlds

“Well, then, why don't you show me what a first-class script is like through your own actions?”

-Ramón Salazar -Resident Evil 4

This article isn’t going to be a rant about how the classics are the ultimate experience. I want to illustrate a point about immersion in games, and how they foster deep connections to carefully crafted worlds. I will concede that this is somewhat of a critique of modern gaming and my concerns about the stability of the industry at the highest levels.

Right now things are very shaky in the gaming world. Life at the top has never been more stressful for the industry’s biggest developers. Again, I’m not going to turn this into a rant about what I think they’re doing wrong. Well, I am, but I am not going to do so from a position of outrage over the industry’s missteps and social/political agendas. Granted, there is a lot to say about the social topics on display in modern gaming, but I see this as a shift in our culture. These things can be handled tactfully and tastefully later on. Right now creatives are in the process of learning how to appropriately represent these things to all audiences.

The major failure that I think the industry is making is the inclusion of too much content in a game without enough substance. It seems like an oxymoron, doesn’t it? Think about games like Starfield. There are entirely too many planets to ever explore. I understand that people in the industry want to keep people invested in their games so they can retain them as players for future projects such as expansions and DLC. In the case of Starfield it also feels like the same game I’ve been playing since 2010. I’m not saying this game is bad, it is just entirely too bloated to not break any significant ground. Bethesda struck gold with Skyrim 15 years ago. One of the major reasons this was a success was because the scope of the game was just big enough. They put the feeling of an entire world into one region of Tamriel.

If we go back even further we can see the industry testing the boundaries of what amount of content felt right to full immerse the player. I think a shining example of this is the trilogy of Grand Thef Auto games during the Playstation 2’s lifespan. We had GTA 3 kick in the doors and practically create the sandbox genre. Their map wasn’t even that big, but it felt just big enough to make the player feel like they were a resident of Liberty City. Vice City, the second game took this a step further and gave players a bigger set of maps to explore, as well as plenty of new types of vehicles to explore with, and even let you buy houses to stake your claim in the world. I’m not entirely familiar with San Andreas, however, from what I understand the scope of the game is about as broad as you would want a game like that to be. This tradition has continued throughout the years and I feel like Rockstar has a pretty good idea about how to reign in the player with content that feels broad, genuine and engaging.

Going back to Starfield, lets compare the game to something similar. No Man’s Sky has a truly staggering amount of content. While I haven’t played the game as much as some other people the options are seemingly too vast to explore in an entire lifetime. What they do differently than Starfield is focusing on letting the player carve out their own niche in the vastness of the environment. You build your world, and it can be as big or as small as you want it to be. The same can be said of other similar titles like Minecraft, and even games that are smaller in scope like Subnautica. There’s a reason these immensely vast games work. They provide the player with the tools they need to create their own world and experience the worlds created by their friends.

Now for the meat of my assertion. Let’s go back even further. We will step one step farther back in time to the generation of hardware before the Playstation 2. Let’s talk about Mario 64 first. This game blew the world away for so many people when it debuted. Think about how they were able to make this world click with only 8 megabytes of space to work with. They made each level an open field for you to explore and created several challenges to provide the player with a unique experience each time they jumped back through the portal. They tied it all together by giving you an entire castle to explore brimming with secrets and ample opportunity to explore and find hidden treats. All of this was achieved with minimal dialog and very few cinematics. The action was presented in such a way that it was iconic without breaking the player out of the action excessively.

This was all part of the age of cinematic, and iconic experiences that elevated the experiences offered to audiences. Another notable game that has been criminally forgotten is Jetforce Gemini, again on the Nintendo 64. Coming in at only 32 megabytes this game offers several planets and larch space ships to explore with fast arcade shooter action. It also offered a variety of multiplayer options which are not the most memorable part of the game, but still had a place in gaming history. The same can be said of other titles like Donkey Kong 64, and Golden Eye. I could list so many examples of utilizing minimal space to create visionary experiences But I think I’ve illustrated my point clearly enough.

At the same time, we had games like Final Fantasy 7, 8, and 9 on the PS1. These games had vastly superior methods of storing data, and generated immersive cinematic experiences and they continue to be re-released and remade on contemporary hardware to this day. Let’s consider Final Fantasy 7 for a moment. Anyone who follows the speedrunning scene for this game will most likely be aware that while Final Fantasy 7 occupies 3 CD-ROMs the entire game is present on every disk. The individual disks have different pre-rendered cutscene videos on them. This is why when you speedrun the game in a category that uses exploits to access portions of the game that are on different disks you will encounter the appropriate sections of the game, but the cutscenes being played will all be from the first disk. Again, this game, and the other subsequent sequels did occupy quite a bit of space, but the actual meat of the game is characteristically minimalistic which was a standard practice at the time. Teams back then were very small compared to today’s development staff on major projects. These small teams churned out a significant amount of content with very little time and resources.

Briefly, let’s go back even further to games like Mario Brothers 1, 2 (USA), and 3 on the NES. One of the things that stands out is how each game in the series managed to make the world feel even bigger than before. To note, Mario 1 was only 40 Kilobytes of space but featured 32 levels. Back in 1985, this was an absurd amount of content, and when you think about how little space the game takes up it is truly a marvel. The sequel, Mario Bros. 2, which was a rebrand of Doki Doki Panic in the US was just under twice the storage size but had players exploring each new level and solving puzzles that required keys, environmental interactions with bombs, and exciting bonus slot games in between to give you a chance at winning some extra lives. There were secrets that increased your health and it was all packaged together and presented in a way that was quite different from the original Mario Bros.

And then there’s Mario Bros. 3. You might think that I will be proving myself wrong in my assertion that less can be more when I say the following because the game is over 5 times the amount of data compared to Mario Bros. 2, but let us look to the actual design philosophy of the game. Each stage had many more levels than the typical 3 or 4 from the previous games. The first zone comes in at 8 Levels if you don’t include all the potential bonus content like minigames and mushroom houses. Nintendo’s approach to this game was to make it feel bigger, not by making the levels bigger, but by creating exciting fast-paced levels that were usually much shorter than stages in the previous games. They had shorter stages, but more of them in each zone. By the time you get to level 8 you really feel like you’re in Bowser’s domain facing incredible odds. The game appears massive because the levels are short but deadly.

This is the kind of approach that I argue makes games truly great. Immersive simulations will always have their audience but I fear that they are becoming far too bloated to be done any justice given the vast amount of resources and people required to create worlds that are so grand in scope. I think that nothing illustrates my point better than Assassin’s Creed Mirage. The game was much smaller than the previous games but captures the feel of the original few games well because of how well it works within its smaller scale. This is what the industry needs to do. They need to give you something to connect with without