From My World to Yours: Immersion in Videogames

Most of my time in elementary school was spent sitting in classrooms staring at the clock, waiting for it to tell me that I could run home and stare at my favorite videogame at the time. I had no interest in any of the left-brained, monochromatic subjects taught at the child-prison I was forced to be every day. I enjoyed drawing and painting, but I only enjoyed art class because it was a break from the avalanche of numbers and letters. I attended elementary school in a poor district of Western Pennsylvania, a walk away from the neighboring state of Ohio. Part of the reason I hated school so much was the lack of any quality education, and I did not realize this until my family moved 360 miles south to Virginia when I was 10 years old.

School became more challenging, and classes became more specialized, especially come high school. The more art classes I took, the more I – and others – noticed my natural talent for drawing. I began to enjoy going to school just to experience the creative hour and a half nestled in between a slogging, STEM-filled education. But I still eyed the clock each day, waiting for the time to be mine again.

Each day after high school let out, I walked the half mile home and booted up my Xbox 360 with *Skyrim* inside. I spent hundreds of hours inside a fantasy realm full of luscious landscapes sprinkled with skyscraping mountains, mysterious caves tucked in the centers of evil-ridden forests, and beasts of legend awakened again that only I could defeat once and for all. I was a god amongst men, harnessing the power of dragon souls in a world that was mine to explore and plunder. A god that sat at the edge of a bed in a room absent of light, propped up against a mountain of half-fluffed pillows and powered by nearby bottles of Mountain Dew. To me, this was my life; this was what I found interesting and worth experiencing. I was immersed in a world created for me to define my own story.

Junior year of high school was a pivotal point in my life. When signing up for classes, I noticed that a 3D modeling class was available. The teacher, Mr. Clark, let us explore our own interests in that class. I, high on my recently discovered love for hockey, modeled an ice hockey rink and made an animation of a stick knocking a puck around to the backing track of Papa Roach’s “Trenches.” It was very stiff and moved unnaturally, and I laugh about it now, but I was very proud of what I made in that class. After class one spring day, I was welcomed at home by my father holding a matte black book with a familiar dragon-shaped symbol on the front.

“This is the *Skyrim* art book,” he said. “You might like it, considering you’re good at art.”

I skimmed through the pages and was taken aback by what I discovered. The book broke down the process of creating the creatures and environments that I slew and looted in my second life. My hand stopped flipping as I recognized a cave that a chapter was dissecting; it walked me through the process of building the scene, from concept to model to texture to lighting to being in-game. I had never thought about the process of creating what I experienced daily, let alone the artists behind it. I also recognized parallels between the “model” section of the chapter and what I had encountered in my 3D modeling class. That’s when it all clicked. My natural talent for art, my newfound interest in modeling, and my longtime love for videogames lent itself perfectly for a recipe to create a 3D Environment Artist out of me.

After simmering on that idea for the rest of high school, I could not imagine wanting anything more for my future than being able to make “caves” for others to experience in a game. Creating environments that evoke that feeling of awe and yearning for exploration was the driving principle behind how I wanted to create art.

Once the rush of discovering my lifetime career path wore off, I was left to ponder the question of how to effectively execute my principles in pieces that I create. Other people have succeeded; I knew that based on my own experience in *Skyrim*. I enforce my core principle of immersion by including a narrative purpose behind every object and hiding tiny details to discover at one’s own pace, but is it effective? The best way to test it would be to create a world and put a player in it. However, the time it would take to get to that point would demand I put aside my school and professional work. Because of this, my philosophy has gone mostly untested.

While I wait for opportunity to work outside of the confinement of time, I do most of my research playing highly-praised games, such as *Overwatch* and *Uncharted*, to analyze the environments and try to understand why choices were made. This often leads to my team losing or the princess getting kidnapped again, as I constantly forget that I was playing a game. From time to time, I blow the dust off my Xbox 360 and revisit the world of *Skyrim* to re-immerse myself in its fantastical nostalgia. Battling dragons and spelunking through dwarven ruins brings me back to those long, high school nights and often re-inspires me on how to create that feeling of immersion.  
 So how do I do it? How do I capture the attention of a player *so well* that they become immersed in the virtual world placed in front of them? How do I get the player to come back to my world and call it their world? I plan to explore this topic as I once explored the world of *Skyrim* in hopes that I can learn from industry professionals and hone my ability to craft immersive environments that tell their own stories.