

Play, skip, jump: warp devices in videogames

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Introduction

Theories related to the discussion of space within videogames are often focused on ideas such as player relationships with their avatar (Wolf, 2001), (King and Krzywinska, 2006), (Stockburger, 2006), bounded landscapes (King and Krzywinska) or genres of videogames (Wolf, 2001), (Rollings and Adams, 2003) amongst others. This paper instead, discusses the various routes through gamespace in particular those of the path and the track. In doing so, the focus then shifts to an understanding of warp devices found along the paths of the game world and the experiences they can create for the player.

Routes, paths and tracks

There are various routes through the space of the videogame allowing the player to move from point A to point B. The two most distinct types can be seen to be that of the path and that of the track, each providing a differing experience of being able to move through and explore the game world. Whereas the path is bi-directional, enabling the player to move their avatar in both directions freely, the track is unidirectional forcing the player's avatar in one direction only. In the past, the track has been likened to the unicursal paths of the labyrinth as discussed by Fernandez-Vara, who states that '[i]f there is a single path the game feels as though it is "on rails" like a theme park ride: the user cannot choose where to go. Unicursal structures are thus scarce in videogames. Even games that go "on rails" such as *House of the Dead* (1997), offer branching paths' (Fernandez-Vara, 2007). The path of the labyrinth is often discussed as being unicursal in that it has one path from beginning to end, in contrast to the multicursal (multiple pathed) maze that offers the walker choice in which path to take to reach the end. Unlike the paths of the labyrinth, where the walker is free to move in both directions, either from the start to the finish or the finish to the start, the track can be likened to railway tracks, or the 'on rails' theme

park rides as mentioned previously. Much like the layout of various railways tracks, tracks found within videogames can be comprised of different types. Those compared to unicursal paths, can be seen as 'tracks with active volition' with either single or multiple tracks. These types of tracks allow the player to move their avatar in one direction, but there are some choices to be made, such as overcoming enemies along the way of the track, or maybe deciding to take one track route over another. In contrast to this, there are 'tracks with suspended volition'. These tracks do not offer the player a choice of direction or extra navigation along the track; the player's avatar is carried along them. Instead, these tracks are the most fixed type of route within the gamespace, and it is tracks such as these that question the role of the player and their experience once on them. 'Tracks with suspended volition' are the main focus of this paper as it explores the relationships between warp devices and tracks such as these in movement through the worlds of various videogames.

Warp devices

The paths of videogames hold objects that players have to work out how to use. These objects may be in the form of different types of keys, used to unlock gates along a path in order to open up new ones. There are however other objects found along the path that seek to disrupt the path, and the warp device is one such object that changes the shape of the path within the gameworld. The term device can be understood as either a permanent object on the landscape or a portable object found to be used when required by the player. There has always appeared to be a fascination with transporting ourselves to other areas through thoughts of time machines and time travel. This is linked to ideas of teleportation and warping, found throughout fiction and more recently trying to link that fiction with scientific fact (see Al-Khalili, 1999). Warp functions can be seen to exist in various novels, films and television series, such as the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*, the TARDIS in *Doctor Who*, and even the bed in *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. Each instance of the warp sees the characters within such fictions use a device to transport them somewhere else. These ideas of the warp are part of our cultural imaginary and indicate how we understand time and space differently within fictional environments. Each instance of the warp acts as a 'device' for changing time, space and narrative elements within fiction, and through its presence in various media types, we can recognise the warp as a common 'cultural artefact'. It is only natural therefore that this progression of fiction has been recreated within the videogame, where once again constructions of time, narrative and play can be understood in various ways.

The warp can be discussed as having three main functions:

1. Warps break the fluidity of the path. The player is taken from one path to a separate path (even if the new path can be seen, the original path is still broken in order to reach it).
2. The navigational control of the player is taken away whilst in the warp. The player becomes viewer for the time they are in the warp.
3. Time and narrative structures can change whilst in, or after the warp, as the fluidity of the previous path has been broken.

It is these functions that will be discussed in understanding the player experience through space whilst using a warp device. As mentioned previously in differentiating between paths and tracks, it can be seen that by breaking the player's original path within the game, and removing navigational control, the experience of the player's avatar changes from being on paths within the gamespace to being on tracks. It is whilst in the warp, that the player's avatar is on 'tracks with suspended volition' as discussed above. This changes the avatars position within the gameworld, and in this instance it can be seen that the player shifts from a role of being able to interact with the game environment, to being a viewer of the environment. The shift between path and track is particularly evident in the game *Ratchet and Clank: Tools of Destruction* where the player's avatar is forced along certain sections by warp panels in the way of the path. These warp devices make sure the player is following a particular route in the game and also allow the player to momentarily view the architecture of parts of the game level. During the warp sequence, the player's avatar is taken from lower to higher pieces of architecture, allowing the player to see more of the gameworld. This creates an impression of the gameworld appearing to be larger than it actually is, therefore can cause the player to believe there is much more that needs to be explored. In viewing, rather than interacting with, the gameworld the player is also able to see parts of the level they may or may not be able to experience, therefore giving clues as to what else is to come. Warps such as these also move the player's avatar in one direction, with no way of getting back to the original path. Therefore in many ways, a sense of real exploration is stripped from the player.

As well as breaking the fluidity of the path and affecting navigation, warp devices can also restructure temporal and narrative elements within the gameworld. Juul discusses two separate notions of time when playing within the gameworld. He

discusses time within the real world of the player (that of 'play time') and the time passing within the gameworld (that of 'fictional time') (Juul, 2005; 142). In games where the player experiences a 1:1 mapping of play time to fictional time, the experience of moving the avatar along the path is occurring within the same time dimension as that of the real world the player is playing in. It is through understanding different mappings of time existing in different instances in the virtual game world as opposed to that of the quotidian, that players can accept the possibility of warps within the game. By playing in a virtual world, natural world occurrences do not have to be obeyed, and the laws of physics can be changed so that moving through walls, skipping parts of levels, accidentally falling down a tube and ending up in a new location, or normally sequential narrative structures being re-ordered, can all be accomplished within the game setting. As Huizinga states, 'Play is distinct from "ordinary" life both as to locality and duration. This is the third main characteristic of play: its secludedness, its limitedness. It is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning' (Huizinga 1970: 9).

Prince of Persia: Sands of Time is a key example of a videogame re-working the rules and altering time through the player's discovery of devices. The game contains a special trigger for players to rewind time at certain points within the game, allowing them to stop themselves falling to their deaths. The capacity to rewind the game indicates a warp sequence within the level for the player. This sequence can be seen as part puzzle and part spatial navigation. It allows the player's avatar the opportunity to avoid (or delay) death. This acts as part of the puzzle to be solved, using the player's ability/knowledge of the game to judge when to use the trigger. At the same time, the player can change the timing of the game, therefore changing the narrative sequence. The game changes the narrative for the player to try and succeed at not dying the second time round and previous events are shown in a fraction of the time than when they were first played through this the act of rewinding. All the time the player remains in a warp until the rewind sequence is complete and can regain full navigational control along the path once again. So not only does the warp distort our perspective of time within the gameworld, it can also manipulate the narrative experience, whether intentionally or by chance.

Warp devices can exist as built in puzzles to games, as those described above, or they can be inadvertent, found by those players seeking to find hidden extras within a game. The warp found in *Super Mario Bros* by what Newman terms 'glitch-hunters' (Newman 2008) is one such type of inadvertent warp. By accessing a supposedly

secret part of the game in World 1-2 of the game, players are faced with the choice of three extra tunnels or pipes. These pipes are found within other levels of the game, and can often function as warp tunnels to areas where the player's avatar can pick up extra items such as gold coins as part of the built in game structure. At the end of World 1-2, the hidden area with the new pipes is not part of the pre-designed game, but a glitch left within the gameworld found by players exploring the system. Two of the warp pipes take the players to a 'new' level termed by players to be 'level minus 1'. The level is actually similar to World 2-2 in the game, yet there is no way out of this newly found level. As Newman notes, 'it is a cul-de-sac, an endlessly scrolling level that offers little or no variety for the gamer and certainly nothing novel as it is made up of elements present in other sequences' (Newman 2008: 119). It is here that the inadvertent warp can trap the player, making them restart the game in order to play the originally designed sequence once again. The pipe warp device breaks the original path, and although new paths are found there is no way to gain access to the previous ones. Therefore warps can act as points of no return, as player's avatars are forced in one direction and in many ways, the exploration can then end once the new path has been discovered. So, although warps can benefit the player, and help them to experience new paths within gameworlds, they can also hinder the players progress and force them to start levels over again in the hope of avoiding some warp traps later on. Recognising these devices for their strengths and weaknesses can then help the player learn how to make the most out of path and track sequences throughout the game in order to complete the game to the player's own satisfaction.

Conclusion

The warp can be seen to give the player a sense of empowerment in the represented world, which then need not follow quotidian space/time congruences. These elements of the warp device allow for a restructuring of narrative, as well as different understandings of the construction of space and the architecture found within game levels. The warp therefore changes the player experience from the bi-directional path to the unidirectional track and in doing so, changes the nature of player interaction for that instant. In defining a vocabulary of paths and tracks it is possible to understand the type of track related to the warp device; the track with suspended volition that offers the player no choice. This distinction then adds to current discussions about space and exploration within game worlds including the player's freedom of movement and what can be discovered in different levels. Warps can be deliberately

built in puzzles of the gameworld, or they may be found inadvertent through bugs, glitches, or extra code left in the system. These different instances of the warp combine to understand how gamespaces are explored and negotiated by the player and how the spaces of the gameworld open up new challenges to be overcome and learnt through this act of play.

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