Feeling Friction: Difficulty and Space in *Psychonauts 2*

Keywords

Space, LeFebvre, difficulty, Psychonauts, texture, friction, emotion, platformer

INTRODUCTION

Though several of Henri LeFebvre's spatial theories have historically been used within game studies, his theory of texture – as expanded on by André Jansson – has only recently been applied to the medium (Janik, 2020; Jansson, 2007; LeFebvre, 1974). Texture is the theory that our experience in a space is shaped by our needs and capabilities within that space; for games, this means that how we play through a space depends on factors such as our experience with games and what goals we are playing for (speedrunning versus 'normal' play, for instance) (Janik, 2020). As part of a fictional and artistic medium, game spaces impart fictional and artistic meaning through play (Mosca, 2013, 18-20). Therefore, as texture changes the experience of playing in a space, it also changes the meaning of the space. Using texture as a starting point this paper argues for a theory of friction: that deliberate shifts in difficulty, where the developer makes a game easier or harder relative to the player's assumed capabilities, further shape the experience and thus the meaning of that space. Through the case study of *Psychonauts 2* (Double Fine, 2021) – a game lauded for its spatial design, emotional storytelling, and accessibility – this paper analyses the use of friction in the levels Psi King's Sensorium and Bob's Bottles to create moments of dual mechanical and affective difficulty that help the game achieve its Gothic-comedic goals (Jagoda, 2018, 201)

The *Psychonauts* series (Double Fine, 2005-2021) follows a child psychic named Raz as he solves mysteries by entering people's minds to find information and provide therapy. Each level takes place in a different character's mind, presented in the form of a 3D platformer, where the collectibles are memories, the enemies are negative emotions, and the space as a whole represents a major personal crisis or mental illness. Psi King's Sensorium represents synesthesia and hyperesthesia; Bob's Bottles represents alcoholism. These are the minds of a married couple – Helmut and Bob – who are so overwhelmed by their problems that they have forgotten their relationship. Both levels require Raz to overcome obstacles representing their physical suffering to reach restorative memories of their partner.

Fiction that treats the mind as a physical setting – a 'mindscape' – was popularised in the late 18th and early 19th century by artists and writers such as Piranesi and De Quincey, and carried into 20th and 21st century visual media in films such as *Last Year at Marienbad* (Resnais, 1961) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004) (Lai, 2013, 224-225; Roach, 1978, 91, 95; White, 2009, 95-97; Wilson, 2018, 165). The original mindscapes were Gothic, because neurology and psychology – attempts to understand how the mind worked – were seen as dark pursuits only suitable for discussion in dark fiction (Stiles, 2012, 1, 14). As neurology and psychology have become reputable fields there has been a greater desire to see mindscapes framed positively, in happier genres. But the foundational visual language that conveys to an audience that a mindscape *is* a mindscape remains Gothic (Kearns, 1987, 3). Therefore, modern mindscapes aiming for positivity must find a way to move from or merge the Gothic into other genres. The *Psychonauts* series uses gameplay to emphasize its visual

and narrative shifts from Gothicism to comedy and other light genres, such as romance or the musical, by contrasting mentally-unhealthy/aesthetically-dark/mechanically-difficult sections of its levels against mentally-healthy/aesthetically-light/mechanically-easy sections, making the player feel the shift in both an emotional *and* tactile sense.

Conventional elements of platformer texture – acrobatic tests, mini-boss encounters, and hidden collectibles – are used by *Psychonauts 2* to modulate difficulty, increasing or decreasing friction to accentuate negative or positive emotions created by the genre and narrative of each section. For instance, in a sad section of Bob's Bottles representing his mother's death, the player struggles against a mini-boss in a Gothic pit made of bottleglass, whereas in the joyful section representing his wedding, the player walks easily through a romantic white wedding cake to reach the altar. Feeling transfers from the space to the player via the friction of play. Friction's centrality to *Psychonauts 2*'s meaning-making process is emphasized by the fact the game's plentiful accessibility options – such as invincibility – do not change these elements, just remove the penalties for failing them. The presence of each challenge is important to each section's meaning.

By naming the concept of friction – the use of conventional textural elements of a game to create gradations of difficulty that emphasize the generic, fictional, and artistic meaning of its spaces – this paper aims to cncourage reflection on the experiential benefits of difficulty in games. Ultimately, for us to truly feel spaces in games, for full spatial experience, it is necessary for them to have both roughness and smoothness, ease and difficulty, different textures that produce different friction in hand.

BIO
Madeleine Mackenzie is a PhD student at the University of Sydney whose work focuses on spatiality in games, particularly in terms of how spaces from real life and other mediums are adapted for interactive media such as video games. Their abstract is taken from a case study for their thesis, which looks at how various spaces from the Gothic genre have been adapted for video games, and what these adaptational choices indicate interactivity can add to fictional space. In addition to their academic work, they are a narrative game developer (*Inverness Nights* (2017), *Catacomb Prince* (2019)).

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