"You're the lucky one, Dani": NPC Empathy and Meaningful Play in Farcry 6

Paul Scriven
RMIT University
124 La Trobe St
Melbourne VIC 3000
(03) 9925 2000
paul.scriven@rmit.edu.au

Keywords

Farcry, NPCs, pixel crush, video games, phenomenology, meaningful play

INTRODUCTION

Video games, particularly role-playing games with rich characters and compelling narratives, can foster significantly personal experiences (Daneels et al. 2021). It is not unusual to shed a tear at the loss of a companion non-player character (NPC) or feel a sense of pride and accomplishment at the end of a lengthy quest arc. In cases, these kinds of events can be associated with emotional outcomes that extend beyond the game, such as the development of romantic feelings for player characters or NPCs, sometimes known as 'pixel crush' (Waern 2011). We may love or hate NPCs, not just because of their fictional actions in the game world, but also because of our own meaningful interactions with them. This suggests a depth of engagement beyond a simple parasocial relationship (Hartmann and Goldhorn 2011) as the player is an active participant rather than a mere observer, as is the case with television or film. Players can empathise with player characters they control (Burgess and Jones 2021) or form emotional bonds with companion NPCs that accompany them on quests (Emmerich, Ring, and Masuch 2018). Research suggests that even feelings of guilt or jealousy can manifest during in-game romantic encounters (Coanda and Aupers 2021). However, this area of research is still in its infancy (Burgess and Jones 2021; Coanda and Aupers 2021; Daneels et al. 2021), and many questions remain.

To contribute to our knowledge of how and why players may develop such emotional attachments with NPCs and what this means for meaningful play, this research employs a novel phenomenological lens based on the work of Alfred Schütz for interpreting player-NPC interactions in role-playing games (publication forthcoming). This phenomenological perspective contends that player-NPC interactions are deeply-mediated, context-bound social interactions between game designers and players – technologically mediated relationships between real people who may never meet (i.e., they are functionally anonymous to each other), employing socially structured and symbolic means of interaction via the narrative game world and associated game mechanics. The fictional game world becomes a stage upon which we role-play with the digital performance of another (or, as is common in modern game design, the collective artistic expression of a host of others), even if this co-performance isn't in real-world simultaneity. This perspective allows us to employ an interpretive methodology to identify the social structures present, and to better unpack how and why our interactions with NPCs are meaningful.

Using *Farcry 6* (Ubisoft 2021) as a case study, this lens is applied to undertake an analysis of the player's character Dani and their interactions with the game's non-player characters in the fictional island country of Yara. Character actions and narratives are explored to reveal their ideal-typical motivations, how these archetypal characters are crafted in such a way to give the player ready access to role-playing Dani, and how this causes the characters to feel somewhat familiar – facilitating our ability to emotionally connect with them, or not. Application of the phenomenological lens is accomplished by analysing and interpreting cutscene events (player character interactions with NPCs), in-game dialogue with and between NPCs, the context of quest objectives and the narrative outcomes of these quests. Findings are presented as a discussion of how the game uses ideal-typical character identities, values, and behaviours to facilitate player empathy with both hero and villain NPCs, and how these motivate the player to, essentially, keep playing the game.

The analysis finds that NPCs in *Farcry 6* draw heavily on archetypal and at times stereotypical narratives, motivations, and behaviours, creating barriers to player-NPC affinity. This makes the NPCs familiar to a wider player base, but limits opportunities to forge deeper connections with individual characters and their narratives. Player-NPC interaction in *Farcry 6* is often constrained to a context of guerilla conflict or violence. The analysis also finds that a lack of choice when interacting with NPCs, particularly dialogue or activity options that influence NPC and game narratives, don't enable the player to develop stronger empathy with the NPCs: in *Farcry 6* the player is "playing-along" with the game narrative, but isn't allowed the chance to role-play their character or make decisions that affect outcomes the game world. Although the player may disagree with the demands placed upon them by NPCs, they are often "railroaded" into accepting these demands to advance through the game.

This indicates that the affordance of player choice could be a key factor in establishing player-NPC affinity and empathy. It may be more difficult to emotionally identify with a digital character based on a superficial, pre-scripted relationship with a stereotypical NPC persona, in contrast to a deeper relationship that is forged upon diversity in NPC narratives, and player choices with unknown outcomes. Further work is needed to conceptually and empirically unpack the association between choice and empathy in video game worlds.

BIO
Dr Paul Scriven is a social research lecturer at RMIT University. An avid gamer and social researcher, he has a keen interest in understanding the unique nature of shared experience in online spaces, and how these spaces contribute to new forms of social interaction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Burgess, Jacqueline, and Christian Jones. 2021. "The Female Video Game Player-character Persona and Emotional Attachment." *Persona Studies* 6 (2). https://doi.org/10.21153/psj2020vol6no2art963.

Coanda, Iulia, and Stef Aupers. 2021. "Post-human encounters: Humanising the technological Other in videogames." *New Media & Society* 23 (5): 1236-1256. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820912388.

Daneels, Rowan, Nicholas D. Bowman, Daniel Possler, and Elisa D. Mekler. 2021. "The 'Eudaimonic Experience': A Scoping Review of the Concept in Digital Games Research." *2021* 9 (2): 13. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i2.3824.

Emmerich, Katharina, Patrizia Ring, and Maic Masuch. 2018. "I'm Glad You Are on My Side: How to Design Compelling Game Companions." Proceedings of

the 2018 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play, Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

Hartmann, Tilo, and Charlotte Goldhorn. 2011. "Horton and Wohl Revisited: Exploring Viewers' Experience of Parasocial Interaction." *Journal of Communication* 61: 1101-1121.

Ubisoft. 2021. *Farcry 6*. PC, version 1.1.1. Ubisoft Entertainment SA.

Waern, Annika. 2011. "'I'm in love with someone that doesn't exist!'; Bleed in the context of a computer game." *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 3 (3): 239-257. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.3.3.239_1.