

Axel Stockburger
contact: axels@sil.at

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HEAD LEFT - CLIMB UP - JUMP IN

What do Walkthrough Texts Reveal About the Representational
Navigable Spaces in Video and Computer Games?

Computer and videogames have generated a considerable field of discursive activity: from texts by and for users, through game reviews and on to the recent emergence of academic interest. Within this large array of different types, one can find a special form called the walkthrough.

The interpretation of these texts might produce a valuable entry point for the analysis of different aspects of digital games.

A walkthrough is a specific kind of descriptive text that is produced mainly for strategy-type games, which demand a series of complex interactions for the completion of the game. The walkthrough essentially "walks you through" all the elements of a game to help you complete it. The compound term walkthrough incorporates firstly an allusion to the act of walking - the movement between two points that registers as spatial differentiation - and secondly, its suffix implies a transition from a start to some sort of end".

This spatial resonance suggests that walkthroughs are in some way dealing with space, therefore it is curious that none of the definitions one can find on the various gaming sites specifically relate walkthrough texts to space or spatial representation. Most definitions explain walkthrough texts as guides to the functions and solutions to the riddles in games. As the texts owe their existence to the various different games they are dealing with, there are a wide range of styles and forms.

Walkthroughs are predominantly produced for games that have complex spatial structures (such as labyrinths and mazes) and sets of riddles that need to be solved. Both features can be found in games stemming from the genres of strategy and adventure. As a common element all of these texts share a major concern with the location of objects within the territory of the game.

My main focus in this paper will be precisely on this spatializing function and everything it can reveal about the specific spatial qualities of certain types of digital games.

If walkthroughs are to a large extent dealing with the description and therefore the representation of spaces, which are in turn particular representations of spaces themselves, we are entering a field of complex relations. As Michel de Certeau mentions in "The Practice of Everyday Life": "*Stories traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.*"¹

In order to distinguish between the two distinct areas of spatial representation, namely the simulated space of the game, and the overlaying grid of spatialisation within the text I will draw upon Henri Lefebvre's unitary theory of space developed in his book "The Production of Space"². Just as the everyday experience of space leads to an understanding of space emerging through the act of moving and thereby producing space, the same could be observed within the apparatus of computergames: the spatial experience is directly linked to the functions of navigation and emerges synced to the rhythm of the frame-rate.

Lefebvre's theory is to a large extent occupied with understanding space as a social product, and with the identification of representational spaces as cloaking devices for capitalist power structures. He did not directly anticipate the advent of simulated navigable spaces, but might have subsumed them under the same set of strategies of distraction and disguising the actual distribution of powers in post-industrial societies. However, considering the subject I will neglect this important aspect of his work. His treatment of Space leads to a the triadic model of *spatial practice* (embracing the spheres of production and reproduction), *representations of space* (knowledge, signs and codes related to the production of space) and *representational spaces* (complex symbolic structures often derived from an interaction with the coded representations of space in the form of artifacts).³

These three fields are held in a dynamic relation to each other. For the task of analysing walkthrough texts I will closely follow his model of space and relate the realm of production of these texts to *spatial practise*, the texts themselves with the field of *representations of space* and the actual games as artefacts to the class of *representational spaces*.

The advent of the Internet has amplified the formation of special interest groups and communities in constant communication. The so called gaming community has shown itself to be actively taking part in the production of games themselves, and any type of information related to them.

Most texts emerge from this dynamic community of people, although there is a small number of walkthroughs being produced by the game publishers along with the game to generate additional revenue. Very often a player of a specific game starts to write the text and others add elements and parts to it over time. Therefore the production of these texts is part of a social act, a collective writing effort that eventually leads to a finished text which is then swapped and distributed on numerous dedicated websites. The texts are published in different stages marking the production process; in most cases the different stages of the text are marked by version numbers from 0.1 (alpha version) through to the final 1.0 version, closely following the conventions of the production of the games themselves. In fact, by writing those texts the players act very much like beta-testers analysing the full potential of each situation within the game, sometimes they even go as far as to write about technical faults concerning glitches, bugs and obvious programming errors. By writing such a text the authors confirm to themselves and the community that they have either been the first to master a game and/or are the ones who have discovered all the possible elements and features provided by the game. Authors who show a high amount of dedication to a game and have thereby gained expertise and competence are regarded as authorities in the field and often have a large e-mail clientele asking for hints and tips.

The texts are published on the www and are nearly always accompanied by some sort of public licensing scheme that allows others to use and publish the text under the condition of naming the authors and the prohibition of asking money for it. Spatial practice in the context of the production of walkthroughs can therefore be understood as being part of the social interactions that constitute the gaming community and keep it alive.

I have chosen the walkthrough text for the 3D game Tomb Raider II⁴ by Mark Smith⁵ for a closer examination because the game has managed to reach an iconic popularity and has entered the public consciousness.

In the case of Tomb Raider the narrative of the game is constructed in the form of an extensive journey that leads from the great wall of China, through Venice, an offshore oil rig, a ship wreck to a Tibetan temple. Concerning the narrative elements there is a long preceding history of literature working along the lines of travel, from Homer's "Odyssey", through Swift's "Gullivers Travels" to Cervantes "Don Quixote".

However I am convinced that although there is a narrative structure present along the lines of travel, the main aspect of interest for the player is precisely the navigation through and the exploration of the different locations in the game. Essentially one keeps playing in order to move on to experience a new setting or location/level. Under these conditions the walkthrough shows a lot of functional similarities with tourist and travel guides.

The introduction to the text reads as follows:

"Warning: The following is a detailed walkthrough of Tomb Raider 2. It contains information that will help you solve the game. Please, DO NOT READ FROM START TO FINISH. If you do, you'll ruin the game for yourself."

This statement confirms that the game play consists to a large extent of the exploration of unknown spaces and that too much information about them would remove one of the most important elements from the game. Following the introduction there is a section of combat tips that explains in detail how to best deal with the different enemies to be encountered in the game, as well as a so called "Hardware List" that describes the different items Lara can handle in the game, such as "the stopwatch, flares and the different weapons."

The beginning of the first level, "the Great Wall of China" is reproduced as follows:

"Our journey begins in a valley very near the Great Wall. Enter the water and go to the left of the big rock. A Tiger should appear so get on the rock and kill the Tiger then jump forward to continue down the path."

The first three sentences alone contain three different forms of spatial deployment: The first sentence establishes the scenery, describing the location- *a valley near the Great Wall*. The second

sentence establishes an order of localisation by introducing an orientation mark and by relying on a coordinate system indicated by the locative "left" (of the rock). The Action-space is invoked in the third sentence: "get on the rock and kill the tiger", an imperative pointer towards the necessary agency that is the core subject of the game.

According to G.A. Miller and P.N. Johnson-Laird:

*"Ordinary languages are designed to deal with relativistic space; with space relative to objects that occupy it. Relativistic space provides three orthogonal coordinates, just as Newtonian space does, but no fixed units of angles or distance are involved, nor is there any need for coordinates to extend without limit in any direction."*⁶

This type of relativistic space, not measured in units but within a grid of object relations inherent to the game can be found throughout the walkthrough text as a kind of matrix serving orientation (*left of the rock*).

The representational space of the game Tomb Raider is produced by an oscillation between a gravitational third person perspective where the camera hovers behind the main agency, Lara's Avatar and a navigable 1st person view that can be controlled by the player. I will leave the aspect of shifting perspectives and related to that the problematic field of avatar-identification fully aside for this analysis and treat them as one consistent field of vision.

Although the text keeps the form of an imperative, directional addressing of the reader/player it originates from this consistent field of vision in form of an egocentric perspective. As A.W. Siegel and S.H. White point note:

*"The first spatial relatum we learn to use is ego. The primitive meaning of 'here' is 'where I am', 'from' is probably first understood as 'from me'. The ability to decenter does not displace the egocentric conception of space, but it supplements it; egocentric space comes to be seen as merely one among all the other possible perspectives. Egocentric use of the space concept places ego at the center of the universe. From this point of origin ego can then lay out a three-dimensional coordinate system that depends on his own orientation."*⁷

Even if we fold the two potential perspectives into one and treat them as a unified egocentric space, we are still dealing with a large number of potential representational spaces if we consider the fact

that there is a high variability for the rendered camera gaze in the game. Every player will walk along a slightly different path. The navigable space represented in the text is transformed from a formal space into an actual space when it is experienced along with the game. When players are using the text, they are switching between the representational game-space and the represented text-space. " 'Deixis' - which is the Greek word for pointing or locating - refers to those aspects of a communication whose interpretation depends on knowledge of the context in which the communication occurs."⁸ Walkthrough texts maintain an ever present deictic element, considering that " Deictic words introduce particulars of the speaker`s and hearer`s shared cognitive field into the message".⁹

The research of the problems arising from the representation of navigable space in the form of text has led to interesting results in the field of architectural theory.

The architect Kevin Lynch has developed a system of spatial elements and graphical representations, which he used to summarize other peoples accounts of cities they had visited. He distinguished between *districts, nodes, landmarks, edges and paths*. *Districts*, according to Lynch, are the medium-to-large sections of a city, conceived of as having two-dimensional extent, which a person mentally enters "*inside of: downtown, the Irish district, the West side*"¹⁰. *Nodes* are the strategic places in a city into which a person can enter, and which are the focuses of a *district* to and from which he travels, they can be junctions, transportation stops, street-corner hang outs, public squares. *Landmarks*, for Lynch, are point references external to the person. In a city, *landmarks* may be distant buildings or geographical features that can be seen from many angles and distances, or they may be primarily local: buildings, signs, trees, storefronts, doorknobs or other urban details. *Edges* are linear elements not used or considered as paths, the boundaries or seams at which two regions are related and joined together. In a city they include shores, railroad cuts, edges of development, walls, and barriers in general. *Paths* are the channels along which people move: streets, walkways, transit lines, canals, rivers, railroads. They are generally conceived of as linear, one-dimensional entities.

The similarities arising between the two tasks of describing a city and the navigable space of a computer game such as Tomb Raider2 could help us to define a system of operational elements that construct the cognitive map produced by the walkthrough texts. The headings of sections marking

different Levels such as “*The Great Wall of China*”, “*Venice*”, “*the Opera House*” are directly identifiable with the *district* elements. The *nodes* are the places where the player enters a level as well as the described vehicles such as the boat in Venice or the airplane that transports Lara to Tibet. *Landmarks* are objects described within the orientation matrix such as the propeller in: "Now you can move the box to find the passage leading past the propeller." The *edge* as an element can be read as the boundary of the given space- precisely the boundary of rendered vision for the camera, as well as all the elements that are mere texture symbols of functional elements (such as the large number of non functional doors in Venice).

However, by far the most important element in this system regarding the description of movement is the *path*. Siegel and White state that: "*the conceptual core of the system for indicating movement is the path, which usually has a distinctive, beginning and end. From and to are used if there is no specific ending or beginning.*"¹¹ In order to understand the important role of the path within walkthroughs we have to introduce two types of spatial description as noted by Michel de Certeau: descriptions of the "*map*" type and of the "*tour*" type.

Following C.Linde and W.Labov who developed this distinction in their analysis of descriptions given by New York residents about their apartments¹², the "*map*" would be something like: "*the girl`s room is next to the kitchen*" in our text: "*At the bottom of the avalanche is the Hut Key.*" Apparently only 3 percent of the New York stories use this type of description.

All the rest consists of the "*tour*" type, such as "*You come in through a low door*" in our text: "*Over to the right is a block which, you can jump to and avoid the snowballs*".

"Concerning this second type, the author points out that a circuit or 'tour' is a speech-act (an act of enunciation) that 'furnishes a minimal series of paths by which to go into each room'; and that the 'path' is a series of units that have the form of vectors that are either 'static' ('to the right', 'in front of you', etc) or 'mobile' ('if you turn to the left', etc.). In other words, description oscillates between the terms of an alternative: either seeing (the knowledge of an order of places) or going (spatialising actions)."¹³

The walkthrough text we are dealing with is absolutely dominated by the description of paths and tour-acts or spatializing actions which are kept imperative throughout: "*Go straight...do this.....do that...move up....jump down*".

Which conclusion can be drawn from these obvious similarities between descriptions of lived spaces and the descriptions of representational spaces in games such as Tomb raider2?

The qualities of spatial representation within 3d computer games have to be approached from the perspective of the “*tour*” type of spatial descriptions. The elements these computer games share with some traditional types of narration could be analysed taking into account everyday narratives of practised space. They can be described as paths through a territory that is spatially structured and chronologically ordered by active entities (such as obstacles/enemies and riddles) fulfilling the functions of “*tour guides*”. The spatial illusion only emerges through spatializing action on behalf of the playing subject. The “egocentric” representational space produced by the playing subject as part of the game apparatus is one of the main features defining computer games as distinctive types of media and therefore needs to be investigated thoroughly.

This paper has focused on one particular walkthrough for a particular game, and it might be very fruitful to take a closer look at other types of games and walkthroughs.

Our walkthrough ends with the sentence: "You'll eventually kill the boss and then return to your house for a nice hot shower."

¹ Certeau M. d., 1984, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p.115

² Lefebvre H.,1991, *The Production of Space*, Oxford, Blackwell

³ (loc. cit.), p. 343

⁴ *Tomb Raider II*, 1998, Eidos Interactive

⁵ *Tomb raider II Walkthrough, Lara's Guide to the Dagger of Xian* by Mark Smith, 1998:

<http://www.game-revolution.com/games/codes/sony/tomb2walk.htm>

⁶ Miller G.A. and Johnson-Laird P.N. , 1976, *Language and Perception*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.380

⁷ Siegel A.W. and White S.H., *The development of spatial representations of large scale environments*, 1974, in H.Reese, ed.9) *advances in child development and behaviour*, vol 10, New York, Wiley, p.394

⁸ (loc. cit.)

⁹ (loc. cit.)

¹⁰ Lynch K., 1960, *The Image of the City*, The Technology Press and Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.

¹¹ Siegel A.W. and White S.H., *The Development of Spatial Representations of Large Scale Environments*, 1974, in H.Reese, ed.9) *advances in child development and behaviour*, vol 10, New York, Wiley, p.406

¹² Linde C. and Labov W., 1975, *Spatial Networks as a Site for the Study of Language and Thought*, *Language*, 51, p. 924-939

¹³ Certeau M. d., 1984, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p.119