

A Poetics of Virtual Worlds

Lisbeth Klastrup

Department of Digital Aesthetics & Communication
(DIAC) IT University of Copenhagen

E-mail: lisbeth@klastrup.dk

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a possible poetics of virtual worlds, part of which is the study of those “textual” aspects of a virtual world that define it as a virtual world. It introduces the concept of “worldness” as a measurement of the particular traits that constitute the experience of a virtual world, and in an exemplary analysis examines some of the functions and aspects that define the worldness of a specific virtual world, *EverQuest*.

KEYWORDS

Virtual worlds, poetics, multi-user stories, interactive narratives, multi-user text, *EverQuest*, interaction, tellability.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual worlds, are, generally speaking, computer-media-ated, networked and spatially navigable multi-user environments. As more and more of these virtual worlds emerge on the internet, it seems pertinent to address them as phenomena in their own right, and to study them as cultural artefacts which provide new forms of aesthetic experience and entertainment. This paper presents a first outline of a poetics, the study of the “forms and laws” of virtual worlds.

Based on the fact that currently a lot of players seem willing to pay a monthly fee to play and socialise in virtual game worlds, the InformaMedia Group estimates that the revenue for online gaming (including online game worlds) will grow from \$568 (mill) in 2001 to \$5.648 (mill) in 2006¹. Certainly the introduction in 2003 of new commercial virtual world forms such as *There.com*, *Project Entropia* and *The Sims Online* seem to indicate that virtual world providers are now trying to target a new audience of users, hoping for a share of the cake, as are a number of new massively multi-player role-playing game worlds currently in the melting pot (e.g., *Eve*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *Neocron*, *Shadowbane*). An *Anarchy Online* manager estimates that in total 70 new online game worlds are now in the making [20]. As more and more people gain cheap access to the world wide web and services become easier to use, we should hence expect a massive growth in the number of people using these worlds; they are no longer marginal cultural phenomena, but are about to enter the scene of the everyday life of many inhabitants of the 21st century.

As academics we will need a vocabulary with which to discuss these worlds, if we want to engage in public and academic debate and if we want to include them in the emerging field of “cybertextual” studies.

The perspective

Previous studies of virtual worlds have approached these worlds mostly from a singular perspective: as either social spaces (i.e. virtual communities [1] or speech communities [3]); or virtual environments which

pose new design challenges from a human-computer interaction and computing perspective [11]; or as new game forms [7] or as performative environments [16], [18]. My interest is to examine the production of experience and meaning in these worlds, and I have found that the entire multitude of perspectives are needed to provide sufficient explanations. Questions guiding my research are: “How do you describe the experience of “being there” or the experience of joyfully dwelling in the virtual world? What creates this experience? And how can we interpret what happens when you *are* there?”

In order to answer these questions, this paper outlines a general framework of understanding in order to describe the creation of experience and the experience of presence in a virtual world; it presents the contents of a possible poetics, a working definition of a virtual world and the concept of “worldness” and then proceeds to an analysis of the virtual world *EverQuest*; discussing aspects of sociality, gaming, the performance of character and the emergence of narratives as lived stories; finally, it considers how all these aspects influence the experience of the specific “worldness” of *EverQuest*. It should be noted, that *EverQuest* (EQ) is just one example of a virtual world; the tools presented here should hopefully be applicable on a variety of virtual worlds; it is, however, outside of the scope of this paper to present further examples.

PRESENTING A POETICS

The word “poetics” is, in common dictionaryal understanding defined as “a treatise on poetry or *aesthetics*” (my emphasis)²; in other words, a theoretically oriented piece of writing looking at the “nature, forms and law” of a specific genre.

Whereas this paper do not exactly present itself as a traditional Aristotelian “poetics”, my primary ambition is here to lay some foundational stepping-stones, surveying the actual “field” of virtual worlds on the internet (which forms exist and what characterises them?) and examining some basic characteristics of the “forms and laws” that create the virtual world experience. In order to understand these laws, instead of just looking at virtual worlds as social spaces *or* games, we need to understand them as hybrids, which have elements of both structures. Furthermore, to fully understand the complex processes at work in creating experience, I argue that we need to encompass knowledge of online performing and of interactive storytelling and cybertextual works in an analysis too. All these elements together create the feeling of “worldness” and enable us to feel involved with, maybe even immersed in, a virtual world. But what exactly is worldness and how does it relate to a potential poetics?

In *Narrative Fiction*, the narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines the concept of poetics in this way:

Poetics is: the systematic study of literature as literature. It deals with the question “What is literature?” and with all possible questions developed from it, such as: What is art in language? What are the forms and kinds of literature? What is the nature of one literary genre or trend? What is the system of a particular poet’s

‘art’ or ‘language’? How is a story made? What are the specific aspects of works of literature? How are they constituted? How do literary texts embody ‘non-literary’ phenomena? Etc. ([13], pp.2)

My point here is not to argue that virtual worlds are literature (or art, yet), but rather that if we replace “literature” with “virtual worlds” and “poet” with “developer” in the above quote, the contents of a possible poetics of virtual worlds emerges. As a guideline, I have rephrased Rimmon-Kenan:

A poetics of virtual worlds deals with: the systematic study of virtual worlds as virtual worlds. It deals with the question “What is a virtual world?” and with all possible questions derived from it, such as: How is a virtual world an aesthetic form of expression? What are the forms and kinds of virtual worlds? What is the nature of one world genre or trend? What is the system of a particular developer’s ‘art’ and ‘means of expression’? How is a story constructed? What are the specific aspects of instances of virtual worlds? How are they constituted? How do virtual worlds embody ‘non-fictional’ phenomena? (3)

Though there is still a long way to go before we can answer all these questions, one question we can begin to answer at this point in time is the main question stated above: “What is a virtual world?” This can be done by studying the virtual world as a new form of cultural text characterised by the fact that it is “read” or used by several users at the same time. Studying the generation of text (in a broad sense) in a multi-user environment and how the interaction between users and between users and world shape the experience of text is one way to consider some specific aspects of the virtual world as a “textual” genre. Since “the specific aspects of works of literature” have elsewhere been defined as those that define the “literariness” of literature [5], it seems logical, in this case, to translate “literariness” into “worldness”. What I have been seeking to answer then is *what is the “worldness” of a virtual world?* where “worldness” can be described as those distinguishing features, “the specific aspects of instances of virtual worlds”, which make a virtual world a world.

The concept of worldness is applicable on two levels: you can speak of worldness at a very abstract level as that essential aspect which characterises all virtual worlds (i.e. a structural property) and at a specific level as a defining characteristic of an individual world (an emerging property, as perceived and experienced by the users of the world or described by the analyst). A general poetics of virtual worlds should then try to describe what influences the emergence of “worldness” and how this worldness is related to the presence of multiple users in the world and the properties of computer-mediated “interactive” texts as such. Furthermore, it should seek to provide analysts with tools to examine and understand the specific worldness of any given virtual world.

WORKING DEFINITION OF A VIRTUAL WORLD

However, before we discuss virtual worlds in more detail, we need a definition of virtual worlds that is so general that it can encompass different forms of virtual worlds, such as text-based worlds such as MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) and MOOs (MUD, Object-oriented

and 2D and 3D worlds, which use both textual and visual interfaces. A definition should also help us:

- 1) describe various genres of virtual worlds (for instance both game worlds and social worlds)
- 2) describe what distinguishes virtual worlds from virtual environments (impermanent or restricted spaces) and virtual communities (environments which focus primarily on social interaction) by emphasising both aspects of interaction between user/user and between users/world.
- 3) describe what distinguishes virtual worlds from other types of imaginary worlds such as novels or films that are not livable environments, and emphasises the experience of “worldness” (which will be addressed in more detail below), and
- 4) emphasise the fact that the virtual world is a world shared by multiple users (synchronous communication between users is possible) and thus that it is an instance of multi-user text form.

This is my attempt at a definition, which meets the preceding demands:

A virtual world is a persistent online representation, which contains the possibility of synchronous interaction between users and between user and world within the framework of a space designed as a navigable universe.

“Virtual worlds” are worlds you can move in, through persistent representation(s) of the user, in contrast to the represented worlds of traditional fictions, which are worlds presented as inhabited by real people, but not actually inhabitable.

Virtual worlds are different from other forms of virtual environments in that their scope makes it impossible to imagine them in their spatial totality.

Hence, according to this definition, chat rooms or Usenet forums are not virtual worlds, because they are not spatially extended and do not contain the possibility of interacting with the “world” itself. Neither are FPS multi-user games like Counterstrike virtual worlds, because neither the worlds nor the characters in these environments are persistent.

Examples of some major genres of virtual worlds are **social worlds** (emphasising social interaction and interaction with the world through free building) such as *LinguaMOO* or *LambdaMOO*; **game worlds** (emphasising the development of character skills through interaction with the world, primarily through manipulation and navigation of the world space) such as the 3D world *EverQuest* or the text-based world *MozartMUD* which claims to contain more than 20.000 locations, **commercial chat worlds** (which emphasises social interaction and the acquirement of social status through character presentation and character’s possession of world objects (for instance clothing, houses, pets) such as *Cybertown*, *The Palace* or *The Sims Online*.

In reality, the distinction between world genres is not so clear; for instance many game worlds encourage social interaction through, amongst other things, game rules,

and social worlds also contain “game elements” such as the possibility of “levelling” from “guest” (user with no persistent character) to “wizard” (user with extended programming rights), however distinctions might be useful in outlining a general typology of worlds and in understanding some basic differences in the design of these worlds.

THE MULTIPLE ASPECTS OF THE VIRTUAL

I have now described what the content of a poetics of virtual worlds could be; and I have presented a working definition of a virtual world. Before we proceed to a specific analysis of a virtual world, it might however be in place to discuss briefly the exact significance of the words “virtual” and “world”.

First and foremost, I argue that we should not choose between specific meanings of the words “virtual” and “world”, but leave them to be understood in a double sense: a virtual world is both something imagined, something “fake” (something pretending to be real, as we know it from realistic fiction) and something lived in, an actualised reality we create, inhabit and share with other people and a reality which is constantly transformed through the choices of users and developers. Furthermore, it is worth noting that theorists like Benjamin Wooley [22] and Marie-Laure Ryan [15] have pointed to the fact that in a computer context, the concept of “virtual” has acquired a meaning of its own, specifically linked to a technologically-shaped determination of the word: For instance, when you talk of virtual memory in a machine, it is memory that does not have constant physical placement on a disc, but in practice serves as a memory base in the moment of operation; this is a kind of computer-mediated “fakeness” or creation, which nevertheless has a concrete function; it is a tool.

The virtual can, through the philosophical tradition, also be considered as that which has not yet been actualised, is still “in potentia”. The relation between the actual and the virtual is bi-directional in this understanding: when the virtual as potentiality becomes actual (the need for a tool results in a tool), this new actuality gives birth to new potentialities (the invention of the car has forced us to invent tools with which to repair it). This is the creation of something that is irreversible once performed, “an event in the strong sense of the word” [10]. In other words, the transition from virtual to actual is, in this strong sense, from a philosophical point of view, a creation of a “problematic domain”, which questions its own being. Not only might a new material entity have made its entry into the world, but this new object might also cause us to question what the world is and how we interpret it.

As a computer-generated text, running on a (game) engine and following the instructions of a program with certain limitations, the virtual world is in one sense just a realisation of a limited potential, a concrete real. On the other hand, before it is used by someone, the bits and bytes of code which is its materiality is still something “in potentia”, a virtual. To become a lived reality, it is required that someone uses the code, that they live the world, it enables. And the way, multiple players inhabit such as huge system is unpredictable, and might give rise to ways of exploiting the system or a need for new tools to interact with it, which the designers had never

foreseen, yet nevertheless made possible when they put the world online. So we can, from this perspective, approach the virtual world exactly as a potential problematic domain. It is virtual in many ways.

The Tunnel of Ro as a problematic domain

To illustrate this point, is here an example of the problematising of the domain of the *EverQuest* world: At some point in early 2002, as a part of the Luclin expansion set, “the bazaar” was introduced as a place where players could buy and sell items, even when off-line. The addition of the bazaar quickly emptied the places in the old zones of the world, where players used to meet to informally buy and sell goods. One of these places was the “Tunnel of Ro”, inside a rock-formation in the East Commonland Zone, and a safe haven, out of the reach of all the “mobiles” (non-player creatures which might attack your character) roaming the area (a zone is a discreet area of the game world for which the server holds information about the numbers and location of players “inside”). When I first started playing, this was one of the busiest places in that part of the continent of Antonica (one of the five continents of the world of Norrath which constitutes *EverQuest*), and a lot of socialising and communication was generated around this meeting place. However, the introduction of the bazaar completely emptied the Tunnel of Ro and it is now rare to find any players there. As a result, East Commonlands has become a much less popular zone to be in. This is an example of how a design change heavily influences the experience of the world. However, it was probably the intense gathering of players in “trading areas” (and requests from players to create formalised versions of these) which gave the developers the idea for the bazaar; so it is also an example of how the way players exploit possibilities in the world (for instance using safe places for trading) ultimately may change the world itself.

FUNCTIONS OF WORLD

What do we associate with the concept of world and in which ways does the framework of world or “system” influence our experiences? On a functional level, we can break the function of world down into 4 different aspects, closely related to the experience of the world as fiction, as play and performance space, as game and as community and story producer.

The world as an interpretative framework

The world functions as interpretative framework (“fiction” or closed universe) at two levels. From a social perspective, we can approach the world as a special form of “focused gathering” – a social setting within which we interpret what is meaningful and not, acceptable and not within the social norms of this world. From a literary and possible worlds perspective, “games” (and other fictions) conjures up a fictional universe that we take as a reference point for the understanding of our actions within the world (killing a dragon is interpreted as the act “killing a dragon”, not as the continuous clicking of the mouse on some darkly coloured pixels). Hence, what we do as avatars is not interpreted as events with real world “value” or reference, on the contrary, our actions are interpreted as meaningful within the given universe which, during the act of playing, serves as the actual world reference to us. To help this act of understanding and interpreting events in-world, the world, though it is not directly narrated to us, will usually come with a

description, which allows us as users to have a sense of *shared* knowledge of, for instance as the background story of the world or its “cosmology”, i.e., the history of its creation, its evolution, religion, the knowledge of the various races and classes which inhabits it etc. Or it will come with an explicit or implicit “netiquette” or FAQ that will teach newcomers to behave according to the social rules of the world in question.

As an example, the shared awareness of *EverQuest*, the world I have been studying, could thus be expressed as the overall feeling of “EverQuest-ness”, which on an overall level also indirectly refers to intertextuality oriented notions of which events are probable and accepted and which are not in a universe of this kind. For instance, since the setting of *EverQuest* is that of a medieval-type magical universe, we will have certain expectations as to which creatures to find or not find in a fantasy world like this – we will expect to find dragons and griffins, but not computers and spaceships and we will expect of ourselves and other we meet that characters act in accordance with the behaviour of the race, they belong to (for instance halfling, orc, elf) and which we know from similar fantasy literature and games.

The world as representation or “prop”

“Prop” is a concept which I use here inspired by Kendall Walton’s application of the concept in his book on *Mimesis as Make-believe* [21]. “Prop” is normally a word for the objects used to create an atmosphere in films or on stage. Walton’s argument is that all works of representational art can also be seen as props, objects (imaginary or real) that we use to project or feign a world. When interacting with this object or “prop”, we perform or pretend that we, pretending to be someone else, are in a real world with real objects, and what we do has a real effect in this world. As such, this experience of world as agreed-on pretence play or conscious performing, seem close to the notion of playing, of *paidea*, and potentially making fun of and consciously pointing each other’s attention to the fact that one actually performs within a fiction; whereas the more strict gaming aspects of the world, *ludus*, is linked to other aspects of the world experience, such as the interaction with the game system (for further explanation of the concepts of *ludus* and *paidea*, see [2]).

The world as a simulation

Or the world as game space. This relates to the experience of the world as real-time imitation of a world physics and conceptually restricted behaviour; the rules you have to follow and figure out in order to successfully navigate within and interact with the world. The act of decoding the rules and learning to competently master them is an essential part of what gaming is, and “playing with” or “playing against” the world rules, is essentially a gaming activity, but opposed to using them as a prop in a playful way, this is gaming as *ludus*, the emergence of a behaviour which consciously adheres to the rules of the simulation in order to achieve an explicitly or implicitly defined goal. However, when the virtual world is explicitly designed as “a game”, there are both likenesses and differences between traditional games and the game world:

The virtual world as game world

What the virtual game world has in common with games

as such is the features of *choices*, the framing of the game world through a set of *rules* for how to interact with it, and the possibility of *interacting with the game environment*, features of a game which definitely seem to be essential and shared by all games. Traditionally, games come with a set goal (to win or complete it) and you play to obtain this goal through a process of working with the affordances (interaction options) and constraints (rules) the game environment offers. What the game world does not share with ordinary games is, however, the fact that there is no definite outcome, the game never stops (in principle; in practice virtual world publishers may go bankrupt!), and hence you can never win the game. As a overall game world it has an open structure within which many variations of the game rules can be carried out, however many in-world activities actually have finite goals with predetermined methods of completion, such as quests. Therefore a game world can be described as game of emergence with minor “games of progression” embedded (for further discussion of the relation between open and closed games, see [6])

Many multi-player worlds are intrinsically associated with the role-playing game genre, inspired in its computerised format by the tabletop role-playing games; “you” as player inhabit the body of a character, your avatar, through whose eyes you see the world. The implicit goal here is to improve the “stats” (statistics of health, stamina etc) and skills (dexterity, intelligence, fighting skills with sword, arrow etc) which the character is born with by gaining experience points, which at some point sends the character to a new “level” where she gains access to more skills, new objects in the world, improved health etc. It should here be noted that in pure social worlds “leveling” does not matter much, however social status can be acquired by helping others or being a good programmer, by gaining a reputation of being good at “manipulating objects” (building, decorating) or by being appointed as “librarian”, honorary member or, as mentioned previously, by “leveling” from “guest” (user with no persistent character) to “wizard”. In commercial worlds a stats and skills structure is typically not implemented, rather it is through activities and wealth your character gains a reputation and progresses in the social hierarchy. However, in general the “goal” of advancing one’s character, socially or “statistically” often remains an important part of the motivation for returning to the world.

The world as lived story in a social space

Finally, the last major function of the world is that of providing a stage for an experience of shared lived world. This is the aspect of being in the world, which is related to the experience of time, history and community development within the world. Having lived in the world for so long that you have had significant experiences or experienced significant changes you have shared – or want to share – with other players also familiar with the world, your story of “the world as lived” can, retrospectively, become a compelling story to be told. Furthermore, it also seems closely related to the experience of the emergence of a social space (for instance in massive multi-player games a guild, or an in- or out-of-world community founded on a common interest) – so it could easily also be a story of inclusion into or exclusion from smaller or larger social networks.

Story as tellable events

According to Ryan, “the theory of tellability is concerned with potential narrative appeal”, “the theory of performance with its realization” ([14], pp. 149). “Unsuccessful actions, broken promises, violated interdictions, mistaken interpretations, and double as well as single deception” are traditionally events of tellable value (ibid, pp 158). What we find in virtual worlds is exactly performances (people acting) and thus, transposing Ryan’s ideas to a multi-user environment, we need to understand “tellability” in a somewhat different light; not as a description of plots that would make good narratives (fictive people’s events narrated to a reader), but of real events, realised and performed by players (and subsequent readers) in interaction with each other and the world, which would *retrospectively* make good stories. As Tronstad has explained it in her analysis of the meaning of quests, these events of apparent narrative character in the game worlds are of performative, not constative nature. It is only when the quest has been performed that it can turn into a constative world. World designer Raph Koster in an interview refers to this as *post-facto storytelling*, that “shaping of events that did not have a narrative art into something that satisfies a story” [20]. Applying Ryan’s theory, one may say that if a quest is a good story, it is because what the players participating in it experienced was a number of events which involved experiences of conflicts, or of competitive realisations of the potential of the *virtual* world.

Now, what can produce tellable events in a virtual world? It would appear to be complex series of events or choices, which in a world like *EverQuest* could be directed and more demanding experiences like longer quests, which often involve elements of both manipulating, navigating, socially interacting and coping with the world rules. The more complex the chain of events, the bigger chance that unexpected turns of events will also take place, including the possibilities of deceptions, potential conflicts (with opposing classes, NPCs, other players’ interests) and consequently, the emergence of something “tellable”. The “epic quest” which is the ultimate test of a particular character class, and which typically results in the player being rewarded with a very unique and powerful weapon is, according to those players who have completed those, a salient example of this.

Non-trivial or “rare” events are other examples of events, which can become part of the mythology of the world as such or a community inside it. “Rare spawns” is, for instance, *EQ* slang for the appearance of mobile objects, which do not appear in the world very often, but hold valuable items, which make the slaying of these objects both difficult and desirable (articles report about guilds veritably waiting in queue to be able to slay dragons; a problem which has in fact made the *EQ* developers decide to make them spawn more often.) Other rare events can be marriages or deaths (death here in the sense that a player stops playing a character and has to give it up), which are also often events reported in academic literature ([19], [4])

Producing a “story” is in fact then to make players *live* a story, consisting of a number of events of tellable value. Ideally, all these events can, in the moment of enactment, take place “in-world” as interactive experiences not interrupted or overruled by events

character control from the player, either in-world or out-of-world. We should perhaps speak of *story-living* rather than story-telling, and think of it as the experience of interaction-in-time, a series of effective interaction events that are naturally connected. It might hence help to think of stories in “object-oriented” terms, that is, as stories which are produced through interaction with the various objects available in the world (player objects, informative objects, functional objects), and through the experience of the staging of the objects within the “setting” or the architecture of the world, rather than of story as “narrative” or as something “narrated” from above, or controlled from the outside.

ANALYSING A VIRTUAL WORLD

It should now be clear that we need to look at a virtual world from several perspectives, that is, we must understand the virtual world both as a fiction, a social space (a “virtual community”), a performative space (we perform ourselves as characters), and a special form of game (in principle non-finite). The interplay of these functions – or structures – allows the emergence of interesting stories of life lived, or the experience of unusual events, in the world.

How this interplay between structures and stories actually evolves depends on how the world is configured as an “interactive text”. In order to deconstruct the world and identify the parts which make up the whole, it is important to make distinctions between *who* is interacting (agents) and *in which way*, they are interact. I have suggested elsewhere [8][9] that we for this purpose make a distinction between **the agents** involved in an interactive event and **the form of interaction** through which they exert influence on each other or the environment and **the scope of interaction** they are allowed. Finally, a fourth perspective on interaction in the world should be added. This relates to the experience of being able to interact with the world in real time *through* time, and the system’s memory of this interaction. That is: our experience of presence in an interactive environment as one which consists of causally connected actions and choices, that is, the experience of **interaction-in-time**.

Summing up, the experience of “worldness” appears to be related to the feeling of presence and engagement in the virtual world, an experience which is the result of the particular world design (how the world is presented to us as a tool to play with), the interplay between agents and interaction forms available in the world (the world as game and social space), and the accumulated experience of “lived life” in the world (interaction-in-time and the continuous performance of persistent characters in the world).

The remainder of the paper will present a brief, exemplary analysis of one virtual world, based on the framework outlined here, in order to describe the characteristics of one specific worldness, that of *EverQuest*.

EXAMING THE WORLDNESS OF EVERQUEST

Introduction

EverQuest is one of the giants in the English-speaking MassMOG (MASSive Multiplayer Online Game) arena along with games like *Ultima Online*, *Asheron’s Call* and later generation games such as *Dark Ages of*

Camelot and *Anarchy Online*. Launched back in 1999 (beta 1998), it was also one of the first subscription-based 3D MassMOGs to hit the market and hence to have had several years to develop its game world and gaming features, including the release of three game- and world expansions: “Ruins of Kunark”, “Scars of Velious”, “Shadows of Luclin”, “Planes of Power” and the very recent “Legacy of Ykesha”. The game host, Sony Online Entertainment, claims that they now have 450.000 paying players, up to 100.000 of them playing simultaneously on the many game servers, each of which holds a copy of the *EverQuest* world.

Methodology

The empirical material I draw on for my ongoing *EverQuest* (henceforth EQ) study consists of a number of playing sessions performed on three different servers (US servers Vazaelle and Bristlebane, and the European server Antonious Bayle) taking place from April 2002 to the present day. My own play has been supplemented by conversations with players off- and online, and the reading of various related EQ sites (forums, player- and guild sites) on the World Wide Web. Data has been stored consistently in automated logs of the playing sessions and through numerous screenshots. My main character is the half-elf (race) paladin (class) Milagros and she is the primary point of reference in what follows.

In concurrence with the framework of analysis outlined above, throughout my time in the world, I have contemplated how the “virtual” aspects of EQ world *Norrath* influences my playing experience (this was briefly discussed in the preceding example of the Tunnel of Ro), and how the different functions of the world operate in practice (i.e., the world as respectively interpretative framework, prop, simulation and lived story in a social space). In practice, these functions were transformed into working research questions, such as: In what way is the interpretative framework established in EQ (i.e., how are the background story and genre conventions related)? What is it like to perform as character in the world? How does EQ function as a game? What is my experience of EQ as social space and community? How have others and I returned from the playing experience with tellable material? What is the role of agents and interaction forms in producing these various aspects of experience? And how does all this come together in experience of the specific worldness of this world, the “EverQuestness”?

I will, in what remains of this paper, primarily discuss how the performance of character, the experience of EQ as a game and the relation between game and community formation influences the world experience, the experience of “Everquestness”. For a more complete analysis and elaboration of the concepts I apply, see [9].

Interactions and interface

The screenshot in Figure 1 displays the average (old version) EQ world interface. It contains a “window to the world”, a chat and information field, and various buttons which point to further information about the avatar such as persona, spells (which spells are available to the character) and abilities. More interesting in this context is the different forms of interaction the buttons on the right side point to (the buttons on the right side are “hot buttons” to activate the most used commands).

“Combat” points to the possibility of manipulative interaction; “socials” (preset emotes) and the option of “invite” and “disband” is used in social interaction (approaching people, joining and leaving groups), and the option of “camp”, “sit” and “run” is related to the movement through and interaction with the world (you need to first sit and then camp in order to exit the world).

In this example, Milagros is currently in a group with a number of other players and the red bars above the right side buttons indicate the health state of the other player characters. The health bars are an important function when fighting as they help you keep track of how close your team members are to dying. It should also be noted that amongst other things, the button “persona” gives access to the objects the avatar possesses; these objects can be used either for manipulation (combats, for instance) or for the specific form of information retrieval known as trading.

Levels of experience I – getting to know the world Character, fiction

I quickly discovered that in a huge world like *Norrath*, getting “*the feel of the world*” to some extent depends on having played multiple characters, since different character types and classes are born in different places in the world and with varying skills, which allow them



Figure 1. The EQ interface (old version)

to explore and manipulate the world in different ways. In EQ, the player will gain an overall knowledge of the world by playing and experimenting with a number of characters (you are allowed up to 8 characters on one server), which she can use when moving the individual character around in the world, and from what I have heard, often people will perhaps try out several characters for a short time before they settle with one which suits their temper and interest. Having played this character for a while, people will then start playing and “leveling” several characters simultaneously, for instance, to try out different character types more in-depth or to try out the atmosphere on different servers. The process of “getting the feel of the world” also includes reading the background story in the manuals (in principle), reading patching information (which often includes “news” of what is happening in various places in *Norrath*) and studying information and discussions on the huge number of more or less professional forums and websites devoted to EQ.

Language

A parallel and very important aspect of becoming

familiar with the world of Norrath is to learn the local “lingo” – the huge amount of abbreviations, acronyms and commands, the use of which will distinguish the more experienced player from the newbie (= a new player). In most of EQ, that is, on the non-dedicated role-playing servers, role-playing your character in accordance with what could be expected of people inhabiting a medieval society of the chivalrous fantasy type has, in my experience, not been relevant in becoming a part of the in-world speech-community.³ Rather, the speech community emerges on the player level, and not through the “in-character” behaviour (“this is how we are expected to speak to each others as characters”). In general, much of the lingo refers to the handling or generic behaviour of characters or ritualised events such as trading of objects or information between players. Common expressions such as “PST” (please send tell, typically used when one player wants to discuss a purchase or sale “in private” with another player rather than using the zone-wide “auction” communication channel), oom (out of mana, a term used in fight to signal to the other players in a group that one’s character is out of mana (mana is roughly equal to the “current spell casting abilities”)) are typical of this or asking questions such as “what is your loc?” (location in the world, indicated by coordinates) in order to locate a player or friend. The familiarity with these terms is something you bring with you from character to character; hence the use of them also help signal your world experience to other players and is an important part of the process of being integrated in the overall EQ community.

Levels of experience II – interacting with the world

The general “feel” of the world (places to go and character types to play) and of language is knowledge which pervades the somewhat more concrete levels of experience and knowledge obtainable in the world. This is the knowledge of

The world as perceived world: the experience of the geography and spatial extension of the world, which emerges through navigating through *Norrath* and interacting with the objects in it, experiencing the difference between “city” and “wilderness” and learning to find your ways in these zones of the world etc.

The world as specific game: EQ has a quite complicated interface, and it requires playing a character for many hours, or playing several characters, before you are familiar with all the rules of playing. There are many commands and aspects of character, class, and equipment you need to know in order to advance your character quickly. Thus, the “learning curve” of the game is quite steep and you will have to play for some time before the “fun” part of the game (such as grouping with other players to hunt monsters) can begin. As EQ is an “open” game with no definite ending, there is no explicit end-goal to help determine whether you have “won” or “lost” the game, however “levelling your character” is a continuous goal for almost all players – the current maximum level is 65, but the developers have raised this number several times and are likely to do it again to keep the veteran players in the game. You level by gaining experience point (“xp”), which is given to you as “bonus”, for example after killing monsters or fulfilling quests. the developers of EQ have chosen not to disclose the exact number of experience points given

for a specific kill, nor how many experience points are required to advance from one level to the next. This opacity is part of the “mysterious” attraction of the game [for further discussion of the psychological effect of this aspect, see [23].

Many of the game rules are furthermore intrinsically related to certain explicit or implicit rules of social conduct, for instance of how you behave when you fight and how you “play” a fight successfully in order to gain experience points and secure that no participating players are treated unfairly. EQ as a game is much focused on manipulating and interacting with non-player characters such as mobiles and hence practising how to kill mobiles, determining when it is opportune to kill them and how to kill them with as little personal damage as possible is an important game proficiency, both as a solo player and in a group.

Experience of EQ as lived story and social space

As briefly indicated above, gaining the feel of the world is to some extent related to playing multiple characters, at least this is a natural effect of the fact the EQ developers have encouraged multiple character use. Characters can start out in different part of the worlds, and through playing them the player will gain an overall knowledge of the world which she can use when moving her various players around in it. The overall knowledge and experience of the world, both as spatial “world” and as a “game world” is then clearly something which resides above the individual character level. However, most players have one character which they primarily spend time on levelling and caring for, typically referred to as “my main” (at least until they reach the top level and start all over again). Evidently, you “care” for your character, since a lot of hours will go into advancing it, and care becomes pertinent especially from the moment when dying becomes somewhat of an obstacle for your advancement. Currently, it is a “rule” that until level 10, it does not really matter whether your character dies or not; if you die, you are respawned with all your belongings and no loss of experience points. However, after level 10, dying is much more serious: you will have to go back and find your dead corpse and get all the belongings, your character was wearing and carrying at the moment of death – and you will always loose some experience points. Hence, death becomes a pretty serious event, especially if you die in places where it is difficult to retrieve your corpse.

Furthermore, obviously the longer you play and the more regularly you play on the same server, the more the “standing” and reputation of your character and player behaviour will start to matter; and effect your possibilities of being accepted into a group or ultimately, a guild. A guild is an in-game society, membership of which gives you the right to carry the name of your guild as a sort of “surname” and the possibility to go on very dangerous and rewarding raids or quests together with guild members. Hence, the experience of *social life* is initially closely related to the individual player character. However, in the long run, “being social” will often involve disclosing the fact that you own or have access to several other characters, and discussing them; you might “brag” about them in Out-of-Character (OOC) mode or “call them in” for rescue if your group or guild is in a difficult battle situation. Here are some examples:

Ranekilu tells the group, 'Hehe'
 Ranekilu tells the group, 'U should c my pet'
 You say, 'I bet!'
 Ranekilu tells the group, 'With luclin'
 Ranekilu tells the group, 'Mages are cool'

Below is a longer (abbreviated) example from a group fight, where one of the players, Coea, had his wife □ character standing by to help us. He could not help bragging a bit about it, and so was teased by another group member Glee who had tried to □ome on to that particular female character. Glee □ character was a big troll-like creature so at some point the player simply placed his character on top of the absent wife □ character and succeeded in covering her completely from the screen sight of the rest of the group. Apart from illustrating the playful social interaction around player characters, this example also demonstrates a typical use of in-game lingo.⁵

Coea tells the group, 'Oh no that is my wife'
 Coea tells the group, 'In rl'
 Coea tells the group, 'She is 56 druid'
 Glee tells the group, 'Yep and im santa clause'
 Coea tells the group, 'Lol'
 Coea tells the group, 'He's silly'
 Glee tells the group, 'Lol'
 Glee tells the group, 'You cant be serious'
 Coea tells the group, 'She is not there thats why i have her afk'
 Coea tells the group, 'She isn't home right now'
 Glee tells the group, 'MAN!'
 Glee tells the group, 'I was making my move !'
 Glee tells the group, 'Lol im sitting on her'
 Coea tells the group, 'Lol well she wont get cold that way'
 Laguia tells the group, 'Glee stop that not nice'
 Coea tells the group, 'Lol'
 Aumnydar tells the group, 'Lol'
 Glee tells the group, 'Where did she go i can [sic] see her?'
 Laguia tells the group, 'Lol'
 Milagros grins.
 Glee tells the group, 'I ATE HER!'

(rl= real life, afk= away from keyboard, lol= laughing out loud, □he is 56 druid means that the character has reached level 56 and belongs to the druid class)

The Epic Quest

The merging of community or social network and the experience of lived story is apparent when the player reaches the point where her character can go on the mythical "epic quest" designed for her character class. Epic quests are often described on EQ's players' personal web pages or on guild sites. Here is a moving example of one player's description of the carnage which was the result of a particular guild's attempt to help the guild member Benik complete his epic quest by killing the dragon Faydedar. This is definitely an event of "tellable value", involving death, which is bound to become part of the mythology of this guild.

And it was pretty bad... when i swam up the tunnel, to our location after the GM got rid of faydedar, I gasped. The guides said it was worse than anything they've

seen, but I had no idea how bad it was. Benik and DARion's bodies were EVERYWHERE. Itlains' was eVERYWHERE. I followed the corpses, darion's corpse was next to benik's every corpse, several near the water, more on land, more on the ramp-- their bodies were in pairs. I imagined maybe darion following benik trying to escape it broke my heart... and i see one more corpse far away... a single one of darion on the bridge far up leading to the huts.

When I surveyed the melee deaths, I saw there were only a handful of melees. Like maybe 5 or 6? Anyway, I'll go back. I'll go back every time one of you needs him. And we'll be a LOT more prepared.

A short epic like the one above, indicates that "the tellability" of events in Norrath most likely has greatest value within a community of users of the world, since they are the ones which are able to distinguish between trivial and unusual events, such as a normal death and the more uncommon death loop. Hence, it seems that tellability is also closely related to an experience of sharing and being part of a community of equally interactive peers: a tellable event seems to be one which has "paratextual" value, that is, one which has the potential of becoming part of the texts which surround a specific world, the stories the players tell each other about their adventures (with their guild), or the advice they share with other players. This supposition is supported by the fact that entire sections of the commercial world developers' "world sites" are devoted to "Players' stories". See for instance *The Player Chronicles of Asheron's Call* (<http://zone.msn.com/asheronscall/PlayerChron.asp>) or a player site like *Kwill's Quill: Life in Norrath* about a long-term player's life in *EverQuest* (<http://www.angelfire.com/journal/kwill/>). Many guilds also include stories of important guild adventures on their site (see for instance <http://guilddahui.homestead.com/>).

CONCLUSION

I have no doubt that I will eventually come away from my days spent in Norrath with an extended epic of the life, deaths and adventures of my "main" character Milagros to recount to other researchers and fellow players. At the same time, I will also carry with me the more elusive story of my time in the world of Norrath; a story which is the accumulation of knowledge and experience which spans the life and knowledge of all my characters and includes my experience of learning to master the interface, the language, the geographical space of Norrath and surrounding planets and the rules of the world as an actual game, both socially and structurally.

I also take with me the experience of becoming part of a social network which goes beyond the individual character and also includes sharing a communal experience of *EverQuest* as a prop and tool with which the EQ players have had both successful and unsuccessful experiences (for instance illogical funny bugs or frustrating collapses of quests due to incompatible items, aspects of experience which are omitted here from lack of space). The general experience of the "Everquestness", the "worldness" of this particular game world, includes all these experiences too; the malfunctionings of the world as a computer-mediated prop and the shared experience of toying

with the prop, for instance in the playful oscillation between doing things which has one meaning in the world (such as “sitting on” a character as in the example above) and another meaning from the point of view of the outside user of the world (in the same example, the symbolic act of “appropriating” another player’s wife). It would appear that in a Massive Multiplayer World like *EverQuest*, there is a close correlation between the game’s learning curve, inclusion in the speech community, and the playful attitude to the world as fiction, the occasional experience of rare events and the construction of story.

The sums of all these experiences, both as character(s) and player, is what constitutes the experience of the worldness of *EverQuest*, and the attempt to describe the process of how this worldness comes into being is the first step in formulating a virtual world poetics.

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¹ Figures presented at a lecture by Thomas Jacobsson, IO Interactive, Copenhagen, February 7th, 2003.

² This definition is lifted from Webster's Online Dictionary, 2002.

³ This observation was also made by Susana Tosca in her paper on the EverQuest speech community [23]

⁴ This observation is, to a certain degree, only relevant for the play on the non-dedicated role-playing servers (of which there is only a few available for EQ players). Players on the role-playing servers have informed me that here role-playing is enforced and that you are strictly encouraged to demarcate when you are speaking respectively in- and out-of-character.

⁵ In the examples presented, I have changed the names of the characters involved to preserve their anonymity.