

MMOGs and the Future of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Massively multi-player role-playing have created shadow societies that are simultaneously a mirror and a caricature of our own societies. In this respect, they are comparable to the social commentary traditionally provided by literature and film. Over the last 100 years, however, our world has been transformed by new technologies and the myriad ways we have found to use them. Despite these new developments, media generally still rely on linear narrative, a form that seems increasingly inadequate to represent contemporary life. Could it be possible, then, that the MMOG, with its many intertwined and discontinuous narrative strands, is more appropriate to map the changes in global society? This paper tries to answer this question by building on the concept of realism, which plays such an important part both in the discourse of modernism and the popular discourse around digital games, and which will serve as a *leitmotif* in this media-historical analysis.

Author Keywords

MMOGs, utopia, realism, literature, textual analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 40 years, the computer game has evolved from humble beginnings in American research laboratories to a multi-billion dollar business that threatens to dwarf Hollywood. One game genre in particular has become so sophisticated since its inception that it warrants special attention: the massively multiplayer online game, or MMOG. While competitive online games like *Counter-Strike* and *Battlefield 1942* rank among the most popular and lucrative franchises, role-playing games like *EverQuest* and *Star Wars Galaxies* are especially interesting from a cultural perspective because they have created vast shadow societies that are simultaneously a mirror of as well as a commentary on our own societies.

In this respect, they are comparable to the social commentary traditionally provided by literature and film. This understanding of the role of cultural texts can be traced back to the realist novel of the 19th century, which tried to represent, and often resolve, the social conflicts that arose from industrialization, urbanization and political and cultural change in general. To many, literary realism may seem to be a thing of the past, but one could also argue that

realist fiction has never gone out of style – although the style itself might have changed. After all, even the post-post-modernist novels of the early 21st century, such as Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, must inevitably be seen in the tradition of realist writing.

Over the last 100 years, however, our world has been transformed by new technologies and the myriad ways we have found to use them. Film, newspapers, radio, television, the internet and mobile phones have become an integral part of society and our everyday lives. While post-modernist literature can be seen as a reaction to this mediatization, literature is also challenged by these new technologies. Film and television have complemented, and, in some cases taken over, the traditional functions of literature: education, escapism and entertainment as well as commentary, criticism and the creation of social utopias.

But despite new developments such as reality television, these cultural forms still rely heavily on linear narrative, a form that seems increasingly inadequate to represent contemporary life. Could it be possible, then, that the MMOG, with its many intertwined and discontinuous narrative strands, is more appropriate to map the changes in global society than either literature or film? Recent social developments such as the so-called tribalization of post-industrial societies were paralleled, if not foreshadowed, by events in games like *Ultima Online* and *Asheron's Call*. And the 'spill-over' of MMOG's virtual economies into the real world seems to herald the arrival of the age of virtual capitalism.

In other words: The future of literature seems to lie in Cyberspace. MMOGs can be seen as vast texts woven from thousands, if not millions of individual narratives. They not only intersect with a large number of pre-existing texts but also serve as mechanisms for the creation of new texts. These texts are not necessarily narrative – they may be descriptive, performative, and even poetic. In this respect, MMOGs can be regarded as a meta-genre that transgresses the boundaries of traditional genres. However, this is in and of itself not a new phenomenon: it is merely a re-appropriation of the revolutionary manoeuvre that made the novel the dominant genre of the 19th and 20th centuries, that is, the incorporation of other genres.

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The following argument will therefore make a case for a textual approach to MMOGs, without privileging individual textual genres and strategies. This will allow us to regard these games as ludic structures that incorporate novelistic traits, thus continuing a tradition more than two centuries old. As such, MMOGs are in perpetual tension between the modern and the post-modern, between the real and the imaginary, and between regulation and the dispensation of rules. Theories of the novel, as formulated by Bakhtin, Genette, Barthes and McHale, will help us come to terms with these tensions, and explore the parallels between these highly social games and society at large.

2. THE TEXTUALITY OF MMOGS

In the following section, I will discuss whether we can regard MMOGs as texts, and if so, what this implies for their study. The question of textuality is closely related to the question of intratextuality and intertextuality, which will be considered separately, in order to gain a more differentiated understanding of the textuality of MMOGs. While textuality in and of itself is not an indicator of literariness – a recipe for onion soup is a text, but it is not a piece of literature – it is a precondition for textual analysis, which is the method that will be used in the following sections. Therefore, we cannot proceed before we have answered the question whether MMOGs are texts, and how they resemble, and differ from other texts.

TEXTUALITY

The study of cultural objects as texts has a tradition that goes back at least to the 1960s. Roland Barthes' book *Mythologies* [6] became an important milestone in the development of what is now called cultural studies by applying the method of textual analysis to phenomena as diverse as the beefsteak, the Eiffel Tower and professional wrestling. Barthes' method proliferated in the following decades, and therefore, it is hardly surprising that the method of textual analysis was applied to digital games once they became a part of mainstream culture.

One of the first studies of this kind was Mary Ann Buckles' PhD thesis "Interactive Fiction: The Storygame 'Adventure'" [8], followed by Neil Randall's "Determining Literariness in Interactive Fiction" [20] and Richard Ziegfeld's "Interactive Fiction: A New Literary Genre" [25]. In the 1990s, this trend continued with the publication of three influential books: Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* [16], Janet H. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* [19] and Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* [1].

Aarseth discusses the adventure game as a subset of *cybertext*, or *ergodic literature*, a category that he defines as a kind of text that requires "non-trivial effort ... to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1). In regard to digital adventure games, this seems immediately obvious: in order to progress in the game, the player must solve puzzles or overcome enemies, which requires 'non-trivial effort' on her part.

While this model of ergodic reading works quite well with single-player games, it seems of limited use in the analysis of multi-player games. The interplay of different players within the context of a multi-player game cannot be conceptualized as a textual machine that is manipulated by its users, because in a multi-player setting, the individual players react not only to the output of the game itself, but also to the input of other users.

INTRATEXTUALITY

In the last decades of the 20th century, the author and writing have become contested concepts. In 1977, Roland Barthes declared "The Death of the Author" [5], declaring that "it is language which speaks, not the author" (143). And Michel Foucault [10] drove another nail in the coffin, by pointing out that "these aspect of an individual, which we designate as an author [...], are projections [...] of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice" (127). By reducing the author to a mere function of the text, Foucault draws attention to the contingency of writing. In the last instance, he argues, writing is nothing more than an accidental intersection of cultural discourses at a given moment in time.

This seems startlingly similar to the anarchic activity of collaborative annotation and erasure typical of forms of writing on the web, and of the way MMOGs interweave the narratives of thousands of players. This perspective allows us to see multi-player games as mechanisms that allow for the players' semiotic output to cross-fertilize, thus creating an ephemeral or persistent text. This resonates strongly with the etymological root of the word text, the Latin verb *texere*, 'to weave'. Multi-player games are like looms that allow the players to interweave their individual texts. Thus, the textuality of multi-player games emerges as inextricably connected to their intratextuality.

INTERTEXTUALITY

Digital games do not only have an intertextual dimension, but an intertextual dimension as well. This is true for single-player games as well as multi-player games, but it is especially pronounced in the latter, where the interweaving of the different players' texts allows for their contamination with the different intertexts players bring to the game. The simplest form of intertextuality in digital games is direct reference, for example in licensed games such as *Star Wars Galaxies* or *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*. Some games quote directly from other media: in *Deus Ex*, for instance, the player frequently comes across excerpts from books by G. K. Chesterton and Sun Tzu, among others. More indirect forms of intertextuality are achieved by certain stylistic devices, such as *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*'s allusions to the 1980s television crime series *Miami Vice*.

More interesting, however, is the intertextual dimension the player brings to the game herself. A player that has seen the *Indiana Jones* movies, is bound to remember these experiences while playing *Tomb Raider*, although there is

no explicit reference to these films. Whether or not a player will understand *Rez* as an implementation of Wassily Kandinski's theory of synaesthesia depends as much on her prior knowledge as subjective perception. However, if a player is reminded of something else she has seen, read or heard it is hard to disprove that it is actually referred by the text, be it consciously or unconsciously.

In most multi-player games, and especially in persistent massively multiplayer online games, players have various means to make these intertextual links explicit. A simple way to achieve this is to give one's character a name that evokes a certain intertext, as exemplified by the numerous barbarians in *EverQuest* called Conan(n). A quick search for *Halo 2* gamer tags on bungie.net returns positive results for Gandalf, Merlin, Mr Spock, Han Solo, Harry Potter, Yossarian, Ishmael and Mephistopheles. By virtue of the fact that these tags are being used not just in *Halo 2* players can easily weave an intricate intertextual web between different games.

Furthermore, inhabitants of virtual online worlds enjoy almost unlimited freedom of speech. References to various intertexts are frequent, although they are frowned upon by role-playing purists. In some cases, this freedom of speech is used creatively, as in The Collected Poems of Wei-No, a self confessed "Asheron's Call addict." A poem from this collection entitled "The Wind Whispers through the Hole in My Abdomen" [sic] reads:

Soft Spring breezes
Moist with life
Rich and fertile
Whispering softly
Through what's left of my gut
After I thought
it would be cool
to explore the tower
that contained
a Lich.

While the literary merit of this work is debatable, it seems obvious that the author employs stylistic devices commonly found in the Japanese haiku, including the required kigo ('season word'), spring. It cannot be determined whether this poem was ever actually uttered in the world of Asheron's Call, so it might actually constitute a paratext, rather than an intertext. However, it is not always possible to differentiate between intertexts and paratexts, especially if one uses a quite liberal interpretation of the concept of intertextuality, as seems adequate for the sprawling virtual worlds of MMOGs in which the textual outputs of numerous players are constantly cross-pollinating and generating new intertextual interlinkages.

MMOGS AS LITERATURE

"The end of literature is at hand." Thus begins the first chapter of J Hillis Miller's book *On Literature* [18], in which he discusses the deceptively simple question "What is literature?" According to Miller, there are two meanings of the word literature: in the first, more specific sense it

means a certain form of writing that "cannot be detached from its Roman-Christian-European roots" (1), while in the second sense, "literature is a universal aptitude for words or other signs to be taken as literature" (13). Literariness, in other words, is a function of language. Earlier on, I mentioned a recipe for onion soup as an example of a non-literary text. But in a certain context, the same recipe can be a form of literature.

Consider, for example, the beginning of the Mountain Goats song "Seeing Daylight": "Two cans clear chicken broth/Two white onions/One bulb garlic/Boil, boil/Boil, boil." What has happened here? By some sleight of hand, the simple instructions to make onion soup have been transformed into the beginning of a poem. The trick, or in Miller's words, the "secular magic" (21) of this transformation lies in the removal of the referents from the signifiers used. The word 'onions' in the song does not refer to real onions, but creates them, as it were, out of thin air. "Words used as signifiers without referents generate with amazing ease people with subjectivities, things, places, actions, all the paraphernalia of poems, plays, and novels with which adept readers are familiar" (17).

Miller calls the world thus created a "hyper-reality" (18), but that does not mean that literature does not have an effect on the real world. Literature can change the reader's perception of the world, and she might then act according to this changed perception: "Literature is a use of words that makes things happen by way of its readers" (20). But literature does not only use words to achieve this effect: The blackened pages in Laurence Stern's *Tristram Shandy* contain not a single word, but no edition is complete without them. Similarly, typography, layout, illustrations, diagrams and other non-linguistic signs have been employed by various authors to achieve literary effects, and the advent of hypertext has further eroded the differences between textual and visual media.

Therefore, I suggest reformulating Miller's definition of literature for our purposes: Literature, then, is a use of *non-referential signs* that makes things happen by way of its readers. MMOGs seem to fall within this definition: an orc in *EverQuest* does not resemble any creature found in the real world, it is created by the use of various types of signs; but an encounter with an orc in *EverQuest* may change a player's view of the real world, in which some people, unfortunately, behave like orcs. This, however, still leaves one question unanswered: what kind of literature are MMOGs?

Narrative Literature

The question whether digital games can tell stories has been a contentious issue in the field of game studies for quite some time now. While academics from the disciplines of literary studies, film and media studies often see digital games as a new form of narrative, others argue that games should be primarily seen as formal, rule-based structures, whose narrative aspects are marginal at best. Indeed, there

are many games that do not seem to have much narrative content such as *Space Invaders* or *Burnout 3*. Other games, however, specifically adventure and role-playing games do possess a narrative component that cannot be disregarded in the analysis of these games.

One of the strongest indicators for the narrativity of these games is that they can be retold in narrative form. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, for example, is the story of a soldier in the Republic fleet who becomes a Jedi and fights the evil Sith lord Malak. Within this narrative framework each player has a certain amount of freedom to act according to personal preferences, but these actions will not change the general direction of the plot, as evidenced by the walkthroughs available for the game.

In MMOGs, however, things are not quite that easy. For one thing, MMOGs cannot be retold in their entirety, due to their sheer scale. Historiographic accounts of virtual worlds are usually confined to the prehistory of a particular game, such as "The History of Norrath" on the *EverQuest Stratics* website, or they focus on the history of one particular clan or guild. But this is a mere practicality next to the fact that the events in MMOGs are simply too disorganized to be described in narratological terminology. What MMOGs lack is a plot. While individual quests may be plotted by the games' providers, they remain episodes of narrative direction within a largely contingent universe.

In this respect, MMOGs are like the real world. The events in our lives do not follow a plotline, but are subject to accident, happenstance and luck. However, this does not mean that they are utterly devoid of sense. One can make sense of one's life by framing it as a narrative, by becoming one's own biographer, as it were. The same is true for MMOGs, but there is one crucial difference: in MMOGs, failure, even death, is hardly ever final. Characters can be resurrected, or created anew, and while the loss of a high-level character in a 'permadeath' world may be painful, it is not, as the saying goes, the end of the world.

If anything, this makes MMOGs even less similar to traditional narratives. Narratives inevitably involve temporal progression, and they invariably end, which makes them an ideal medium to speculate about the nature of time and human mortality. Some narratives, like Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, or Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading* or *Invitation of a Beheading* make this aspect explicit, but this does not mean it is not present in others: "It is my simple conviction," says Peter Brooks in "Reading for the Plot", "that narrative has something to do with time-boundedness, and that plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality" [7].

Can a world that does not know death in its conventional sense be thought of as a narrative universe, then? Despite all evidence to the contrary, I think it can. Every player experiences her way through an MMOG as a narrative, and the countless pieces of fan fiction based on virtual worlds are a strong indication that this is the case. They may not be conventional narratives, but they nevertheless possess

certain traits that are similar to the narratives we are familiar with, such as character development, conflict and resolution, crises and epiphanies. Taken individually, these narratives may seem to lack the depth of great literary works, but in their totality they form great narratives of social development.

Social Realism in MMOGs

One of the first academics to take on the prickly issue of realism in games is Alexander Galloway in his article *Social Realism in Gaming* [11]. The fact that this issue has only come under scholarly scrutiny so recently is surprising insofar as realism is such an important concept in the popular gaming discourse; as evidenced by the innumerable discussions of polygon counts, pixel shaders and 'realistic' lighting. But, as Galloway usefully points out, "*realistic-ness and realism are most certainly not the same thing*. If they were the same, realism in gaming would just be a process of counting the polygons and tracing the correspondences."

This conveniently allows us to sidestep the question of representational realistic-ness, and focus on the realism of MMOGs. Building on the work of André Bazin, Galloway defines realism as "a technique to approximate the basic phenomenological qualities of the real world," which means "real life in all its dirty details, hopeful desires and abysmal defeats." He goes on to say that "[b]ecause of this, realism often arrives in the guise of social critique," citing the example of Vittoria De Sica's neo-realist masterpiece *The Bicycle Thief*: "[I]t is the story of the unemployed father that ultimately constitutes the realist core of De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*, not its degraded style."

The literary realism of the 19th century can be understood as a social commentary on and a critique of the radical changes Western societies underwent during the transformation to the industrial age. Balzac, Tolstoy, Dickens and Henry James provided the necessary context for the secularization, urbanization and industrialization of society. In America, particularly, realism was an important force in the attempt to forge a nation from the various nationalities, ethnicities and creeds that had immigrated to "The Land of the Free" during the 19th century, and would continue to do so during the 20th.

Therefore, realism – and particularly the realist novel, the *gesellschaftsroman* – is firmly wedded to the sphere of the social, describing and redefining the relationship between the private individual and the public sphere. The realist novel thus provided a model that allowed the reader to determine her own place within society: "its greatness and practical usefulness lay in its unremitting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it" [24].

In order to assess the realism of MMOGs, then, we must examine their relationship to society more closely. Are

MMOGs purely spaces of escape, or do they constitute a sphere for the construction and assessment of social utopias? Could the way virtual societies are structured even be seen as a commentary or a criticism of real societies? If this is indeed the case, MMOGs could turn out to be more than just games, they could become models for the society of the 21st century, just as the novel pre-modelled the society of the 20th century.

4. MMOGS AND SOCIETY

MMOGs are immigration societies – as long as you pay your subscription fee and play by the rules, you can cross the border to the virtual world, and no questions asked. You can leave your old self behind, like the immigrants to the New World who left their old national identities behind and became American citizens – or so the story goes. The reality is somewhat different: immigrants to new worlds rarely leave their identities behind entirely; they arrive laden with expectations, and if these do not match the expectations of the other members of society, this quickly becomes a source of conflict. This is not necessarily a bad thing: it is through conflict, as Jürgen Habermas has argued in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* [12], that a public sphere is created and maintained.

Anarchy Online

But social conflict can also be destructive: for example, the conflict between North and South led to the American Civil War, and the conflict between the warring factions of the Weimar republic gave rise to fascism. In this respect, MMOGs are not so different from real societies: a certain amount of conflict is required to ensure a satisfying experience for everyone, but once it spirals out of control, the results can be devastating. An example for this is provided by the conflict between cheaters and rule-abiding players in *Diablo*:

Then the cheaters came. As a social construct, despite being virtual, the online world of *Diablo* was just as susceptible to cheaters as the real world. Imagine yourself as a player, having spent countless hours laboriously developing your character to a very high level, possessing powerful equipment. Then one day, you encounter a ridiculously high level character, possessing unimaginably powerful equipment, asking questions like 'How do I attack a monster?' Such obviously new players had found ways of illegitimately altering their characters. Using a technique called 'duping', they could duplicate any item they owned, or even fabricate them out of thin air. [15]

As a result, *Diablo* changed dramatically: "Cheating had turned a game that 'offered over 100 hours of gameplay into a mere 5-minute wonder' [Greenhill 1997]. It became such a problem that many people either outright refused to play it online, or would only play on a LAN with trusted friends" (4). And this is not a singular incident. Player-killing, cheating and griefing plague many MMOGs, severely limiting the enjoyment of the players that fall victim to these practices. Interestingly, it is a novel, Mark Costello's *Big If* [9], that describes the impact of PvP conflict most poignantly.

In his novel, Costello creates a fictional MMOG, *BigIf*, that serves as a model of American society. In terms reminiscent of a virtual Staten Island Costello describes how the immigrants to this new world have to pass "through the logon buffer" and select "a version of themselves from careening menus" before they arrive at the "universal starting point, a deep smoking crater formerly known as downtown Albuquerque." The object of the game is to "travel safely west [...] from Albuquerque [...], and emerge alive on the sparkling gigabyte Pacific" (153).

But "[i]f the object of the game was to get to Los Angeles with wisdom, the key to playing was surviving and the key to this was money." The result of this is "that most players forgot about the wisdom pilgrimage and settled into one of the squatter camps along the way, selling simple, useful items to the new players streaming from the crater every day" (157). And this is where the trouble starts. In order to secure their own survival, players turn to scavenging and killing other, less experienced players:

The pickers waited by the crater, following the newbies, who sometimes asked the poignant question Why R U following me? – the text floating in a box above their heads as the robbers struck [...]. Robbers sometimes killed each other over these choice victims. Pickers fought pickers for the spoils and other robbers waited, killing pickers as other pickers waited for the spoils of the spoils, and some of these were robbed. (158)

Big If is a scathing critique of capitalist society. In a world where nearly everything is branded, where monsters carry "a pair of Sony PC speakers, a Cub Cadet four-wheel-drive snowblower, a Minolta office copier, a Yamaha Disklavier GranTouch piano, and a Sealy Posturepedic mattress" (155), players revert to a proto-social state in which only the strong survive: *homo homini lupus est*. Or, as the *Anarchy Online* website puts it: "Rubi-Ka is filled with conflict, controversy and conspiracy. First time colonists are best advised to make themselves aware of the planet's heritage lest they fall foul of the factional and political forces that exert themselves on Rubi-Ka."

MMOGs and the Dialogic Imagination

Incidentally, the scenario described by Costello is not so different from virtual worlds like *EverQuest*, in which everything – weapons, buildings, landscapes, even characters and their utterances – bear an invisible tag that reads 'Property of Sony Computer Entertainment'. *Habeas corpus*, one of the main pillars of democracy, does not apply in *EverQuest*, as players who tried to sell their characters on eBay quickly learned. In April 2000, Sony banned the sale of *EverQuest* characters, claiming that the "auctions promote cheating and create animosity among players" [21]. The *EverQuest* End User License Agreement (EULA) states in no unclear terms that

[w]e and our suppliers shall retain all rights, title and interest, including, without limitation, ownership of all intellectual property rights relating to or residing in the CD-ROM, the Software and the Game, all copies thereof, and all game character data in connection therewith. You acknowledge and agree that you have not and will not acquire or obtain any intellectual property or other rights,

including any right of exploitation, of any kind in or to the CD-ROM, the Software or the Game, including, without limitation, in any character(s), item(s), coin(s) or other material or property, and that all such property, material and items are exclusively owned by us. [22]

As Sal Humphreys [13] has pointed out, this commodification of MMOG culture is "not just about the virtual sword" (1). Building on earlier work by T. L. Taylor [23] on the negotiation of corporate ownership in virtual worlds, she explores how the integration of players into the production cycle of MMOGs raises new challenges for a copyright model that is based on "a linear production model and individual authorship" (2). Humphreys recognizes the integral role players have in the production of MMOGs:

Player activity is productive in a number of ways. The basic ergodic nature of the game text requires player input in order to advance the game. In emergent games like EverQuest this can be a creative process which leads to unexpected or unpredictable outcomes [...]. Players are also a source of feedback and suggestions; act as quasi bug-testers; are active on game bulletin boards; interact with developers vital to the developer in their ongoing production and design of the game; create websites with information and guides to the games, which also generate discussion and feedback. Finally there are the social and community investment of players that build important structural features such as the social networks found in guilds, and the long-term friendships and team-like relationships that lead to player retention in the game. (2-3)

She goes on to say that "[p]layer activities are being commodified by the publishers and structured into their business models" (3). The problem with that is that "[o]wnership rights in an MMOG largely ignore the real structure of production and 'authorship' [...]. Thus I[n]tellectual P[ro]perty is claimed by S[ony] O[n]line E[n]tertainment as if it had developed and published a finished product, rather than a textual environment where development is ongoing and the result of collaborative inputs of many authors, both paid and unpaid" (4). Importantly, Humphreys points out that "the social, emotional and cultural aspects of production [are] generated collectively by players and developers in a dialogic process that is constantly in flux" (4, emphasis removed).

The concept of dialogism, as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin [4] is where the sphere of the social intersects with the sphere of literature. According to Bakhtin, the novel is characterized by heteroglossia, a vibrant mix of "territorial dialects, social and professional dialects and jargons, literary language, generic languages within literary language, epochs in language, and so forth" (52). All these different voices are in dialogue with one another: the novel speaks not with one authorial voice, but in many tongues, each with its own character, opinions, and cultural heritage:

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity. [3: 272]

This heteroglossia serves as the "background necessary for [author's] own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they 'do not sound'" (278). The parallels between this conceptualization of the novel and social development are obvious: every society contains within itself a multitude of voices, but in order to speak with one voice, each of these different voices must be integrated into a unified whole: *e pluribus unum*. Dialogism is a democratic process which constantly works against the centripetal force of unitary language, which is associated with absolutism, centralization and homogeneity. The problem of ownership in virtual worlds can thus be seen to arise out of the conflict between dialogic production and monologic control of the results of this production.

Citizenship in MMOGs

MMOGs thus have the potential to be dialogic, but their dialogism is repressed by the publishers' insistence to appropriate players' voices as their own. Problematically, this "gives the publisher the right to shape the social relations of the users, to summarily terminate accounts (and thus relationships), without structures of accountability for their decisions" [13]. Despite the fact that MMOGs are authored collaboratively, the publishers retain the god-like power of authorship by virtue of intellectual property rights modelled on the concept of a romantic author that holds absolute control over her creation: "It is a law which focuses heavily on tangible (even if virtual) objects, and dismisses the intangible socially produced networks despite their obvious productive and economic characteristics" (7).

MMOGs constitute virtual civil societies whose citizens by and large contribute to the well-being and enjoyment of all. However, they are denied most basic citizenship rights on the grounds of regulations that conflate civil law with property law. This could be regarded as trivial were it not for the close resemblance of this manoeuvre with neo-liberal strategies of infusing society with the rules of the marketplace. In other words: what is going on in MMOGs parallels closely the transformation of Western societies in the late 20th and early 21st century. The privatization of public services such as communication, energy and healthcare is characterized by the same displacement of civil rights with property rights that is typical of MMOGs.

Under laws such as the *Patriot Act* (2001), citizens of Western societies are disenfranchised of their civil liberties, and the ownership of their own utterances. The public sphere is eroded by the consolidation of media ownership, and in the name of security, our everyday activities become subject to increasingly heavy regulation and surveillance. All of this is mirrored in MMOGs: Humphreys cites an example from Taylor [23], in which Sony terminated "the account of a player who put fan fiction they found objectionable on his own website. They evoked copyright law to compel him to remove the material" (9). In December 2003, Peter Ludlow's *The Sims Online* account

was terminated, after he had run a story on prostitution in the game on his blog, *The Alphaville Herald*.

The realism of MMOGs is unmatched in any other medium. While literature, film and other art forms are still struggling to come to terms with the profound social changes of the last decades, virtual worlds provide a commentary and critique of these transformations in a way that evokes Miller's definition of literature, i.e. not by asserting their authority, but by making things happen by way of their players. Interestingly, this counter-discourse has emerged in the thoroughly commercialized settings of these virtual worlds themselves, demonstrating the strength of dialogism against unitary language.

That does not mean, however, that MMOGs have yet exploited their potential – they are still far from it. "True great realism," says Georg Lukács [17], "depicts man and society as complete entities" (137). The virtual societies of MMOGs, and their participants are still far from being complete: the power structures within MMOGs prevent players from becoming truly social beings, and this in turn prevents these societies from becoming true alternatives to the social structures of the real world. Societies are always virtual constructs, and in this respect the social spaces of MMOGs are no less real than the societies we live in. Once this is recognized by their players, MMOGs can become spaces of social experimentation that serve as valuable a purpose as novels did before them.

"The binary opposition between fact and fiction is no longer relevant," claims Paul de Man, "in any differential system, it is the assertion of the space *between* the entities that matters" [quoted in 14]. MMOGs, like literature, exist in that liminal realm between social fact and social fiction, and this is where their great strength lies. Commenting on J. G. Ballard's introduction to his novel *Crash* (1973), in which he compares the role of an author to that of a scientist who "devise[s] various hypotheses and test[s] them against reality," Barry Atkins [2] asserts that "game-fictions [are] all about the testing of 'hypotheses', 'options', and 'imaginative alternatives', all about offering the 'contents' and not the authored and fixed 'meaning' of a single imaginative possibility" (144).

He goes on to say that "the game-fiction [...] has not made the kind of radical departure from nineteenth-century realism that Ballard sees as necessary for the writer of literary fiction. Game-fiction texts [...] contain their own 'morality', allow us access to that 'ample time and space' that had been the domain of a Dickens, a Thackeray or an Austen" (144). If the realist novel was the social simulation engine of the 19th century, in which "the characters [...], once conceived in the vision of their creator, live an independent life of their own" [17], the MMOG has taken over that function for society, and it is in this sense that we can speak of MMOGs as the future of literature.

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