



A Touch of Medieval: Narrative, Magic and Computer Technology in Massively Multiplayer Computer Role-Playing Games

Eddo Stern

University of Southern California

University of California at San Diego

1348 McDuff st Los Angeles, CA 90026, USA

+001 213 482 9107

eddo@c-level.cc

Abstract

The paper provides an in depth examination of the narrative structure of Massively Multiplayer Online Computer Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). The analysis is focused on the narrative complexities created by the relationships between computer technology, the medieval fantasy that is central to the genre, and the emergent nature of the online player society. The paper is divided into four major sections: the first examines the question of neomedievalism (as pronounced in the 1970's by Umberto Eco) and its relationship to technology and magic. The second section recounts the historical development of the MMORPG genre. The third section examines the narrative form unique to fantasy genre computer games that arises when the cogent narratives of the fantasy genre are mixed with the equally fantastic narratives of high tech computer culture. The fourth section examines a specific set of game "artifacts" that make the specific narrative diegesis of MMORPGs.

Keywords

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, MMORPG, Everquest, Ultima Online, Asheron's Call, Fantasy, Computer Game Genre, Magic, Online Games, Role Playing Games, Narratology

MAGIC & TECHNOLOGY

Neomedievalism

I recently visited the *39th Annual Renaissance Pleasure Faire* in San Bernardino California while shooting scenes for a documentary film. The creatively anachronistic *Renfaire* crowd is comprised of a colorful band of jolly Anglophiles, mediaevalists, woodworkers, elves, druids and wizards selling handmade crafts, performing jousts, drinking mead and offering an all out sun-beaten Californian version of new-age virtual reality. On a stroll down *Lord Mayor's walk* on my way to *Maybower Commons*, a middle-aged barbarian standing behind the counter at the *Shepherd's Pye* caught my eye. I stopped in for some ale and mutton and struck up a conversation with the bearded Mr. Moody. I was curious to learn what makes him, on this Sunday morning in August 2001, don a suit of leather armour, sip pynts of ale and cook up a mess of medieval pot pyes. Mr. Moody aptly replied that for him this sort of getaway is a much needed reprise from his daily drudgery of debugging assembly code, which he's practiced for nearly twenty years in the cleanroom of a nearby computer chip laboratory. I suspected that Mr. Moody's motivations for timesliping from 21st century California to take refuge in 12th century Medeva were not uncommon among the inhabitants here at the faire.

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In his 1973 essay, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* [4], Umberto Eco discusses the phenomena of neomedievalism. Eco looks to pop-culture and observes the "avalanche of pseudo medieval-pulp in paperbacks, midway between Nazi Nostalgia and Occultism". He notes that many structures that define the western world such as modern languages, merchant cities, and capitalistic economies find their roots in the Middle Ages. At the risk of falling prey to Eco's cynicism, I will choose to follow his ironically offered advice whereby "If one can not trust *literature*, one can at least trust pop culture". Pop-culture is at question here and the "pseudo-medieval pulp" hasn't ceased to froth in the past thirty years. In fact these days, the phenomenon is rampantly on the rise, and the new concoction includes intriguing new ingredients. "*Now, Gandalf, Merlin, and Prospero, I have some exciting news for you boys. From this moment on, you will have to get used to sharing your towers and castles. Please meet the P4, the VooDoo III, and the T1*". The beige age of swords and circuitry is upon us!

The Internet-mediated arenas for the hugely popular gaming environments known as "Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games" (MMORPGs), *Ultima Online's* "Britania," *Everquest's* "Norrath" and *Asheron's Call's* "Derreth" are prime loci of our new 21st century's version of neomedievalism. The range of historical and cultural influences on the fantasy game mise-en-scene includes a wild amalgam of Celtic, Gothic, Medieval and Renaissance combined with a deep commitment to a Wagnerian, Tolkienesque, Camelotian, and *D&D*'ish verisimilitude. The three mentioned industry-leading game worlds are practically identical; all are set in a pseudo-historical magical medieval realm, offering players a

familiar selection of characters, settings, and motivations. And one must ask if this monotone ubiquity is a result of market research about the current game-player's zeitgeist, or of the corporate copycatting so pervasive in the game industry where each successful game spawns dozens and sometimes hundreds of clones.

Why has neomedievalism resurfaced now at the apex of the "digital revolution"? The answers to this question can be traced to a philosophical and historical genealogy of the connections between magic and technology and to a certain crisis in the relationship between America's role as media superpower and the relationship Americans have to their national history.

As the great Superpower matures, its citizens must find a historical narrative that makes them "proud to be (an) American" and validate the glory of their culture. American history, if bound geographically, would quickly lead through the 18th and 15th century colonialist adventures to a disconnected and un-inscribed Native American past that has been easily disclaimed as not befitting Superpower number one. A much more acceptable lineage for the 21st Century's Christian Caucasian Empire would be that of Majestic Europe; colonialist headquarters, home of kings and queens, kettle of Christianity, with all its architectural grandeur, source of great Art, and English Literature, and the self proclaimed cauldron of culture and site of the enlightenment and scientific revolution. It is within this early mix of power, religion, science and art, that many early narratives of magic and technology were brewed.

The Bonds of Magic and Technology

Historically, magic and technology possess a complex bond; and ever since the Middle Ages, the discourse of magic emanating primarily from the pagan remnants of the Roman Empire and that of the new scientific reason have battled for sovereignty over the human soul's epistemological allegiance.¹ The science and magic of farming calendars, home remedies, astronomical maps and Alchemical concoctions are only a few examples of pre-occupations that originated in the context of magical belief systems and were gradually transitioned to fall under a scientific rubric during the Middle Ages [6,8].

More recently, in California of the 1960's and 1970's, the early seeds were planted that defined the explosion of personal computers and the Internet into mainstream pop culture. An anecdotal tale of one of the first computer games written establishes an early connection between the 60's and 70's cultures of romantic escapist fantasy and the then nascent computer culture. As the story goes [9], the early version of the famous computer game *Adventure* was first written for the PDP-10 computer in 1972 by William Crowther during his research stint at the US Department Of Defense's ARPANET project. It is perhaps here that the connection between *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* and computer culture was first established. Crowther recounts his then recent encounter with *D&D*, as the inspiration for *Adventure*, and incidentally inaugurated the definitive genre of computer adventure games. Today, we stereotypically associate socially awkward "geeks" with fantasy games like

the pen and paper *Dungeons & Dragons* and the popular card game *Magic*. These same “geeks” in their pop-cultural perception often share a passion for computers, science and engineering. Speculation here may suggest a psychological correlation between adolescence, social awkwardness, escapist fantasy, and a dubiously close bond with a non-human entity that forms this archetypal personality.

One could say that technology operates to *realize* what was previously in the hypothetical realm of magic. There is definitely some connection in the way both magic and technology create a sense of wonder as they seem to expand upon the notions of what is or has been feasible in the realm or the real. The assessment that they are part of one and the same wonder is quite pervasive; just remember Sir Arthur C. Clarke’s famous quote that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” However the positioning of magic and technology as opposites is even more common. The official web site for the new magical/technological MMORPG *Arcanum* explains the relationship: “Magic and technology are opposites. Magic bends physical law to the will of the mage. Technology depends on physical law. And, in the fantasy world of *Arcanum* the use of technology reinforces physical law, countering the effect of magic.” [1] What is clear is that the desire for magic and magic-related fantasies frequently surfaces in arenas of the contemporary world purportedly based on scientific and rational principles. In his book *TechGnosis*, Erik Davis has provided ample evidence of this as he explores the new-age culture of techno-mysticism tracking many of the cybercultural impulses to mesh the digital with the magical.

What follows in this essay is an examination of the emerging narrative twists and turns that result when computer technology is mingled with the vicissitudes of magical medieval fantasy. I will briefly introduce MMORPG genre, where most of the action I have examined takes place. I will then propose what I see as the central underlying narrative paradox of medium and message in fantasy computer games by delving into the clockwork of the industry leading game *Everquest* to examine a collection of narrative artifacts (gathered through many months of addiction²) where narrative, technology and metaphor collide.

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MMORPGS – A HISTORY

My own experience playing MMORPGs began in 1997 playing *Ultima Online* (UO). In late 1998 I signed up for the *Everquest* (EQ) beta test. Since then I’ve played EQ, UO and *Asheron’s Call* (AC) extensively.

The technical evolution of MMORPGs goes back to the pen and paper *Dungeons & Dragons* games of the early 70’s. Transferred to the computer environment, they evolved into the text-based adventures like *Adventure* and *Zork*, and on to early graphical adventure games from the 1980’s like *Bard’s Tale*, *Wizardry*, *Might and Magic*, and *Kings Quest*. These, in turn, provided the staging point for more complex realtime scrolling graphical 2D isometric (fixed perspective) games like the *Ultima* and *Baldur’s Gate* series. While

the single player role-playing games were developing more complex engines and graphical capabilities, social networked text based gaming environments known as *Multi-User Dungeons* (MUDs) were developing into 2D graphical network games (or Graphical MUDs) like *UO*, *Lineage: the Blood Pledge* and *Diablo*. Eventually the technologies of realtime 3D graphical games and massive multiplayer networked communication were merged to make possible today's real-time 3D graphical MMORPGs such as *EQ*, *AC* and the newly released *Dark Age of Camelot* (DAoC).

3do's 1996 release of *Meridian 59* is officially the first proper 3D MMORPG to hit the scene. The game was not marketed "properly" and was soon eclipsed in public notoriety by Electronic Arts' release of *UO* which was released a year later with much publicity. *UO* was not the first MMORPG, and to this day the game relies on a dated 2D isometric game engine, but the fact that it was released by a major game company capable of providing large backend staff support with a massive marketing engine ready to harness the huge ready-made fanbase of the *Ultima* series, allowed it to occupy the vanguard of the MMORPG craze.

Games like *Meridian 59*, *UO*, *EQ* and *AC* distinguish themselves as *Massively* multi-player online games from such (non massive) multi-player online games such as *Diablo* or *Vampire: the Masquerade*, by the amount of players that can play online simultaneously sharing the same world space. The exact numbers are hard to track but officially disclosed player subscriptions from late 2001 show *UO* at around 250,000 players, *EQ* (released by Sony Interactive in 1999) somewhere between 400,000 and 700,000 and the new *Dark Age of Camelot* (DAoC -released by Mythic Entertainment in late 2001) already nearing 200,000 players. Astonishing reports regarding the numbers for *Lineage: the Blood Pledge* developed for the truly massive Korean and Japanese gaming markets, claim an astounding 2,500,000–8,000,000 monthly subscribers. Not surprisingly, Microsoft, publishers of the struggling *AC* (released 1999) will not disclose the amount of subscribers but it is estimated to be around 100,000 [10].

Today, the stakes of the MMORPG industry are extremely high. Monthly subscribers are well into the millions and a new market of network-ready console-system users are waiting to join in the action. The latest generation of consoles like Sony's Playstation 2, Microsoft's Xbox and the Nintendo GameCube are 3D optimized, Internet-ready systems. Maintaining a MMORPG is a gargantuan corporate task, demanding massive backend server support, impervious server security (as gamers often make the best hackers), a continuously upgradable game world, 24 hours, 7 days a week server access with zero downtime, and a committed work force including "online employees" who provide live in-game tech support, creative narrative twists, censorship services, dispute arbitration, and game balance research. While hundreds of titles are released every year in other game markets such as those for the first-person-shooter (FPS), sporting, or real-time-strategy (RTS) games, the massive MMORPG market is at the time of this writing dominated by three lone titles: *UO*, *EQ*, and *AC* (with *DAoC*

recently gaining ground). It is disconcerting and quite telling that the most popular and successful games running on the Internet do not embody the logic of distribution and multi-authorship, but instead that of monopoly, centralization, and command & control.

An MMORPG cannot be completed or “won,” it’s a never-ending story. Game developers have become very adept at prolonging the “moments of ecstasy” that stretch between initiation and finale. By carefully controlling character progress and consistently updating and patching the game words to include new sights, sounds and spells through a steady stream of game patches and expansion packs, narrative resolution is persistently deferred. An important shift in the role of the corporate MMORPG developer is worth noting, a shift from a production/distribution model to a service model. MMORPGs are no longer “just games,” they are a monthly service that is provided indefinitely to highly committed paying subscribers who must be kept happy to stick with their game service provider.

Although several new MMORPGs are scheduled for release in the near future, including titles like *UO 2*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *World of Warcraft*, *Dungeon Siege*, *Lord Of The Rings*, and *Shadowbane*, it seems almost inevitable, given the growing demands put on a MMORPG developer, that only the most massively multinational corporations like Microsoft, Sony and Electronic Arts will survive to the massively multiplayer market’s endgame.

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THE CENTRAL PARRADOX OF SOFTWARE AND NARRATIVE

Why MMORPGS?

MMORPGs are positioned as the ultimate “achievement” of today’s technoculture. Combining state-of-the-art 3D graphics and sound with intercontinental networked multi-user technology, they stand in as the closest thing to the 21st century cyberpunk fantasy data spaces of William Gibson’s *Matrix* [7] or Neil Stephenson’s *Metaverse* [11]. Yet, given the seemingly infinite possibilities that current computer technologies offer it is telling that they have been used to construct infinitely complex settings for pre-industrial medieval fantasy. In this conflation of alternate fantasies a strange hybrid artifact is created, as MMORPGs replicate a pre-industrial world using the most advanced post-industrial tools. Tech-savvy game-players make demands for cyber-cultural privileges such as post-human speed, permutable identities, endless virtual regeneration, tele-presence, and access to non-Cartesian space; all the while desiring the experience of a nostalgic fantasy of forgetting in a magical medieval playground. Is it possible to maintain this double fantasy without either giving up these cyber-cultural privileges or “spoiling” the immersive medieval fantasy with modern technological interference? If so, how do these divergent narrative elements manage to co-exist and what then makes up the “narrative” of such complex arenas of interaction? These I find to be the central and most

intriguing questions regarding the narrative structure of MMORPGs and other Software/Narrative hybrids.

Terminology

Before these questions are further examined through a taxonomy of narrative elements, I would like to lay out the structure and terms I will use to examine the interplay of the various elements that contribute to the encompassing narrative framework of MMORPGs. The central distinction I will make is between the diegetic and the extra-diegetic elements of the game narrative and interface.

Diegetic narrative elements

The diegetic narrative and interface elements exist within the games' pre-technological magi-medieval mise-en-scene. These elements of the narrative deny any reference to computer technology and fall in to two basic categories:

Elements of conventional narrative – narrative elements familiar from the traditional fiction media of film and literature such as characters, dialogue, and plot. These elements are often referred to as “content” in the software industry by those who deny or are unfamiliar with Marshall McLuhan's famous statement proclaiming that “The Medium is the Message”.

Metaphorically patched artifacts – technological narrative elements that are brought to fit into the diegesis by the deployment of a metaphor. Most fantasy game designers would regard visible signs of any technological underpinnings as unwanted anachronisms that would threaten the constitution of the immersive fantasy they are attempting to construct. The resulting by-products of this problem can be found in the designers' introduction of metaphors that function to assimilate unwanted technological residues into the narrative diegesis.

Extra-Diegetic narrative elements

The extra-diegetic narrative elements are narrative anomalies that remain unexplained. These artifacts fall into three basic categories:

Sanctioned artifacts – unexplained narrative anomalies that belong to the initial game design, but do not make logical sense within a rendition of a “plausible Fantasy”.

Technological artifacts – unexpected narrative elements that affect game play that are a result of technological side-effects.

Gameplayer artifacts – elements of gameplay that are a result of unanticipated and unsanctioned player participation.

A note on “Artifacts”

I am borrowing the term artifact from computer science where the term is used in reference to undesired cosmetic disturbances such as jagged edges or

dirty patches in an image file (common in compressed digital video or jpeg images for example), excess noise or hiss in a sound stream, or unpredictable ASCII characters in a text file. Artifacts differ from bugs, which are usually caused by programming mistakes; artifacts don't prevent functionality per se, but cause an unperfected aesthetic disturbance.

TAXONOMY OF NARRATIVE ELEMENTS

Elements of conventional narrative

Backstory

The user manuals of many computer games provide their readers with what is known as a *backstory*. It is often based on a kind of Sci-Fi and Fantasy archetype:

In the year 3512 a US Marine spaceship crashed into the fiery planet of Quazzaxt, the entire crew of the Panacia 4000 was killed on impact except for one sole survivor... You are Sgt Gully Maxtor, and your mission is to discover the mystery of the Panacia 4000 crash... You wake up in a prison aboard a garbage barge...

Or

A long long time ago in the ancient land of Genereth, the evil warlord Zanereth ruled with an Iron fist... After a deadly feud with his brother Fondor, Zanereth banished all the elves and dwarves from his kingdom... You are Bondor, heir to Fondor and you find yourself the new young ruler of Genereth's neighboring Kingdom of Mondor... You must avenge the death of your father and bring the evil Zanereth to Justice...

The intended function of the *backstory* in the diegesis of a computer game is to provide a contextual framework for the game narrative that is soon to unfold in real-time. The relationship between the *backstory* and those other elements that make up the game narrative during gameplay might be compared to the relationship, found in Porn films, between the negligible narrative plotline, and the *de-facto* primary narrative elements which function to elicit the visceral pleasures of sexual desire.

Seemingly simple twitch games like *Space Invaders* or *Asteroids* do not rely on a *backstory* to construct a narrative framework. All we have in the way of a contextualizing narrative in such games must be derived from simple metaphoric relationships; “*space aliens are attacking you and you are (in) a spaceship and need to kill them*” or “*you are (in) a spaceship stranded in an asteroid belt and you need to destroy the asteroids so your ship can survive*”. A game like *Tetris* is even sparser in terms of conventional narrative hooks; simply locating a central metaphor becomes difficult and the vacuum created by the lack of conventional narrative is filled by a phenomenological account which could sound like “*you are sitting in front of your computer manipulating colorful falling blocks trying to arrange complete horizontal rows so the blocks don't pile up to the top of the screen causing your game of Tetris to end*.”²³

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Most recent commercial computer games insist on including a *backstory* usually in the form of a printed story in the manual or as a 3D animated digital video clip playing off the CD. The insistence on *backstory* has less to do with artistic vision and more with the prominence of genre⁴ minded consumers. Perhaps it is also spurred by the need of the gaming industry to form itself in Hollywood's image and conform to its convention of narrative plotlines. It's quite clear that for most players, considering the *backstory* of *Doom*, *Duke Nukem*, or *Quake* is akin to remembering the characters' names in *Deep Throat* or *My Horney Valentine*. Even though games like *EQ* and *UO* provide elaborate and complex *backstories*, the significance of these stories in the context of gameplay is minuscule. I'll testify from my own experience of playing *EQ* that until very recently I hadn't glanced at the *backstory* even though I had been playing for several years. The inherent interplayer narrative dynamics of MMORPGs are so complex and compelling that engaging the *backstory* becomes redundant,⁵ this is a great testament to the failure of a conventional narrative approach with regards to software/narrative hybrids. The *backstory* functions as excess skin, completely redundant, and deemed to be shed.

Non Player Characters

If you've seen David Cronenberg's 1999 film *eXistenZ* you may recall the odd behavior exhibited by certain automaton-like characters. These characters would enter into monologue loops repeating the same sentences over and over waiting for very specific phrases to be uttered in their vicinity. When the "correct" phrase would be uttered these characters would suddenly exit their looped monologue and reveal valuable information. These *eXistenZ* characters are parodies of computer generated characters which have been performing in computer games for decades with their autistic conversational algorithms. In multi-player computer games such computer-generated characters are called Non Player Characters (NPCs), distinguished from player characters (PCs) who are controlled by live human players.

The difficulty met when designing "sensitive" computer characters stems from a central problem in computer science regarding the processing of natural language. Advanced artificial intelligence researchers struggle to address such processes and many approaches using neural networks, fuzzy logic and reinforcement learning have been developed to make inroads on the gaps between how humans and machines think. So it is not surprising that programming believable AI for NPCs still remains a challenge for game designers. NPCs always stick out as peculiar technological anomalies focusing attention more on their technical shortcomings than on their "character". NPCs often find themselves a ripe topic for ridicule and mockery.⁶ In fact, most game players do not accept these characters' role as performing any emotional function in the narrative. NPCs function primarily as information

containers that need to be opened or as locks that need to be picked with the proper linguistic key to reveal useful information or to provide prosaic rewards such as game money, magic items or skill upgrades.

All said, game developers seem to misinterpret the de-facto narrative function of NPCs and as in the case of the *backstory*; NPCs often possess highly detailed histories and share their fabricated emotions towards PCs and other NPCs alike. It is very telling to watch young game players interact with NPCs, as they automatically press the “*Of course I do,*” “*I agree, Sire*” or “*please tell me more*” buttons to quickly ascend to the conclusion of the “conversation” when the NPCs will offer a reward or clue.

In MMORPGs the NPCs perform the solemn role as narrators of the *backstory*. Much abused, ridiculed and most often ignored by PCs, it's the NPCs who put the *quest* in EQ, as they support the heavy load of maintaining the hundreds of intertwined plotlines that function to keep the *Fantasy* intact.

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Metaphorically patched artifacts

Magic Tunnels

When logging into AC one encounters a message reading “*Entering world as [you chosen character name here].*” This message is immediately followed by a fantasmagorically-animated viewpoint speeding through a spiraling blue tunnel sucking the viewer into the virtual game-space. At times this journey can take quite a long time, sometimes lasting over two minutes on a slow net connection. The long loading time needed to establish the initial contact with the server and download the current state data of the environment (coordinates and information about all the monsters, NPCs and other players in the game) can be discouraging.

Most computer users are well aware of the varied metaphoric animations devised to keep us cool while waiting for our “slow” computers to complete their tasks. Whether copying files, downloading or uploading data to or from the Internet or waiting for program data to load into RAM, all computer users are all too familiar with the ubiquitous loading bar. Besides the standard bar animation, other examples come to mind of more specifically diegetic loading bar metaphors such the FTP program *Fetch*'s cute running dog and pie chart animations, or the Windows OS' “flying files” animation. Some examples from game loading bars include a cartridge filling up with bullets in *Soldier of Fortune*, and a magic potion bottle slowly filling up with green liquid in *Prince of Persia*. But AC's fullscreen animated 3D tunnel animation wins the loading bar crown, both for visual scale and complexity and most importantly for depth of metaphor. The time needed to “enter the world” of AC is disguised by a visual “metaphoric patch” of 3D time-tunneled transcendent birth. The animation ostensibly symbolizing the magical shift in reality vaulting us deep into that clichéd 3D space that exists somewhere

inside of our computers where one day we may meet our lost friends from *TRON*, *Lawnmower Man*, *Johnny Neomonic* or the *Maratrix*, or perhaps an animated 3D Dragon, who knows.

Saving and Camping

When it comes to our computers, we have all come to expect the option to stop what we are working on, save it to disk, and then return to continue working where we left off at a convenient time. We all expect the *save/load* options when we write with a word processor as we expect to pause and resume our CD players and VCRs.

Both *UO* and *EQ* have decided to incorporate the “Right to Save” in the diegesis of their narratives through the (non-magical) metaphor of “camping”. When you are ready to save your game in *UO* you must gather the appropriate materials to camp (firewood, tent etc...) then find an appropriate place to set up camp and only then may you start camping and eventually log off the server successfully. If you fail to log off in this manner and simply disconnect your computer from the network you will be punished. Breaking connection to the game at critical points of danger is a common crime in online gaming and the punishment procured in *EQ* and *UO* causes your character to lie prone to looters and predators for several minutes while you are no longer connected to the game server. The highly competitive online RTS or real time strategy game *Starcraft*, punishes such cyber-escapes to the safe harbor of the real by simply listing the number of “disconnects” in your character profile. The stigmatization is acute and the tally of disconnects, be they intentional or accidental, functions like a publicized police record.

EQ offers an excellent example of a *metaphorically patched* narrative artifact in the way it handles the logoff/save-game process. Saving character data to a remote server takes time – processor time. A screen message reading “now saving character data to remote server. Please wait” would be quite truthful but would offer an interruption to the game’s narrative diegesis. Instead, a series of messages beginning a 30 second countdown read: “*preparing your camp. 30 seconds remaining*” then “*25 seconds remaining*” and so on until the logoff process is complete. Processing delay time has been masked or patched by a narrative element suggesting time taken to prepare a camp. In *EQ* a game session can easily last twenty hours straight with occasional sessions lasting up to several days spent waiting in one place for certain creatures to *spawn* or pass through an area. *Spawning* is a process of “refilling” the game world with monsters that have been killed. Different monsters and computer characters have different “spawn cycles” lasting anywhere from two minutes after their death to twelve hours(!) after death for rare characters. The thirty seconds interval needed to logoff and save *EQ* is a curiously short time frame from an *EQ* narrative point of view but is perceived as being extremely slow and frustrating in a technological cybercultural context. So much so, that a narrated metaphorized countdown is necessary to ease the anxiety of waiting in the transitional moments from slow game time to fast computer time as soon as the diegetic switch is flipped off.

MMORPG worlds are persistent, vastly expanding, and densely detailed. Thus a gameplayer is presented with a triple gift of infinity: infinite expanse, infinite detail and infinite time resulting in infinite possibility. The question of traversing infinite space is a question of time and speed. In our strict medieval context, finding speedy transportation is a curious problem. Having a high level master character ride a horse for three or more hours to arrive at a nearby city would not be tolerated by game players.⁷ So the solution we find in *UO*, *EQ* and *AC* is that of the ubiquitous *magic portal*.⁸

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This shimmering magical gateway allows the condensation of a sprawling Cartesian virtual space into a compact non-Cartesian data space; it allows the player to break the constraints of virtual materiality and instantaneously “teleport” their avatar to a distant location. Portals either exist as permanent magical fixtures at specific locations or are created by magic-using characters. Magic portals serve as “metaphoric patches” allowing non-linear navigation that takes advantage of instantaneous Random Access Data Retrieval, a “right” many post-industrial consumers demand being accustomed to navigating freely through their CDs, DVDs, Databases, Internet sites, Hypertexts and Television channels.

A clear division of power exists between those players who can provide their own means of teleportation and those who can not. This distribution of power varies from game to game. In *Diablo*, for instance, all players, magic using or not, can cast a “town portal” spell which allows them to instantaneously return “home” to the safehaven of the basecamp. In *EQ* the ability to use teleportation to move around the gamespace is stratified along a magic-using/non-magic-using hierarchy, a stratification of power we will find again and again consistent with the equation: magic = technology = power. One of the best examples of this metaphoric equation of magic, technology and power can be found in the common nomenclature where a system administrator of a MUD or MOO is known as a *Wizard*, holding *Wizard* privileges with abilities to control and access.⁹ Players who can't use magic can't “gate” (the term used for teleportation in *EQ*) and as a consequence, they are left either to suffer long dull minutes or even hours of running to their desired location, or to beg for the generosity of a high level magic user who can cast a group teleport spell. In many cases these “primitives” will have to pay hard platinum (game money) for teleportation services. The importance of speed as a means of traversing game space and avoiding the “narrative lulls” which occur during lengthy travel or “meditation” to recover magical manna, is evidenced by the unparalleled utility and popularity of spells and items that speed things up. The *Spirit of the Wolf* spell, which triples foot speed, and the manna recovery acceleration spell *Clarity* are examples of magical spells whose value for the player transcends their diegetic function in the game (say escaping or running down slow monsters), as they reduce “downtime” and become tools for the gameplayer that operate on the very mechanics of the game. Controlling the narrative flow not unlike the way

a faster processor or more RAM would enhance the performance of time consuming processes such as video or graphics rendering.

Technological Artifacts

The World is Down

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A MMORPG's narrative never concludes, but periodically, about once a month, updates to the game worlds are made. These updates may include bug fixes, adjustments to game balance, improvements to game mechanics or the addition of new features and levels. When a game is updated, or *patched* as this process is often referred to, the game servers must be shut down and the once persistent world is placed "on hold". During this "downtime" which can last from 10 minutes to 8 hours, *Norrath*, *Derreth* or *Britannia* will cease to exist. There is nothing more damaging to the suspension of disbelief than this universal disappearing act.

Game "downtime" is slightly akin to a sports "TV timeout" where the real physical game is stopped in the stadium to allow for commercial breaks for the TV audience watching a live telecast. But Television viewers are well conditioned to commercial breaks, "to be continued" markers, and serialized or episodic narratives. But a game server going down is more like losing your cable connection or your phone line. I have "borrowed" cable in my house, and every so often the screen goes blue and I am struck with a wave of panic. It is not so much the interruption of my particular narrative but the interruption of *control* over the interruptions is what becomes jarring in the context of cybercultural privilege. When I go to a movie or watch a TV show with commercial breaks, I suspend my narrative authority, I let my guard down and allow someone else to be in charge of narrative time. In the world of persistent computer games the expectation is that control over this narrative time will always remain in the player's hands, and it is the repealing of this privilege that is most jarring.

Geometry Traps and other bugs

"*Help I'm trapped in the geometry*," hearing such a call for help in the middle of a gaming session was not entirely unusual in my early days of playing *EQ*. Getting trapped in the geometry is a technical side effect that can be caused by imperfect collision detection algorithms coupled with imprecise 3D model architecture. A "geometry trap" is not unlike the familiar cone-shaped animal traps where the prey can easily enter the trap but cannot exit. Most of the geometry imperfections have by now been fixed but on occasion I've found myself stuck on the inside of a large boulder unable to leave. At which point my only resort is to request an official "Game Master" rescue, curiously a magic using character can use the "Teleport" or "Gate" spells to quickly escape from this inadvertent yet crippling trap.

Another similar bug is known as a "*hole in the geometry*". In these cases there may be a slight gap in the geometry of the ground surface. Most 3D

game engines apply a “world gravity force” on all (land based) moving objects to prevent them from floating, forcing them in a sense to stick to the ground as they move around over hilly uneven terrain. When one stumbles upon a hole in the geometry, the universal gravitational force will suck the character below the geometry, setting off a vacuous free fall into the dark unrendered limbo that lays below the world’s the surface. The world of *EQ* may be round but I can tell you from first hand experience, it’s quite hollow indeed!

I was lucky enough to snap a screenshot of my *EQ* character Blindrunner as she vanishes entirely from the geometry. This happened on the unfortunate occasion when I tried playing on a public computer that did not contain the new *Ruins of Kunark* expansion pack geometry information, hoping to resume at the point I had left off at home. When I unwittingly moved my character into the expansion *Kunark* zone (*EQ* is divided into small areas known as zones) on this new machine, the screen went abstract expressionist, and my character data was lost! Note the random post apocalyptic graphic artifact and the caption read in the voice of the suddenly anthropomorphized game engine, which read “*I can’t find a player named Blindrunner!!*”. Fortunately, death is not the end in *EQ* and although I did die, my character was teleported to another spot in the world, where she was fortunately “found” later that evening when I returned to play on my home computer.

Much less dramatic than these geometry traps but extremely common in *EQ* are the sites of characters and monsters being embedded in the geometry, causing only visual artifacts which do not affect the functionality of the gameplay but do become narrative curiosities in themselves. Over my many months of gameplay I’ve come across some amusing geometric anomalies and managed to snap several screenshots of these to build quite a personal collection.

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Player Artifacts

Language

EQ is often described by *Verant* as a graphical MOO. A strong emphasis is placed on the chat window on the bottom of the screen. Unlike *UO* where the text that characters use to communicate is displayed as a floating text bubble above the characters ‘heads, In *EQ* all user interface *and* inter-player communication takes place in the text box.

One of the most interesting problems involving the use of language in *EQ* raises from the conflation of conversational language with the command line interface in the same text box. Language functions dually to interface with the game mechanics (extra-diegeticaly) and to communicate between players and NPCs (diegeticaly). Let’s look closely at several linguistic artifacts in this *EQ* conversation snippet:

Blindrunner says: “*Hail Sir Delasa, how may I behold the path that leadeth to High hold Pass?*”

Delasa responds: *“Follow the canyon north and then turn right at LOC -3456.34, -110.05 keep running east and you will come upon a Clocktower, HHP is right past that tower. By the way I wouldn’t recommend going there now its 11am on Sunday morning in the East Coast and the lag is intense. If you’re running anything slower than a Pentium 400 forget about it, in any case if you going up there I would pick up at least another Tank and probably a Nuker, EK is mighty dangerous in the dark try to get through it before nightfall,. Safe journey and Godspeed, Blindrunner”*

This conversation fragment reveals some of the complexity that language takes on in a game like *EQ*. The initial question posed by Blindrunner uses the “role playing” code of language, she is using the in-game convention of Olde English worded carefully to maintain a consistency with her notion of the narrative diegesis of the game world. Delasa’s response is more complex. Cutting straight to the point to avoid excess description of the exact spot where a right turn is made, he uses the terms “LOC -3456.34, -110.05”, these are map coordinates that any player can access by typing /LOC in the command line. Although using commands such as /LOC is not considered cheating, I have had conversations in-game where I’ve used LOC coordinates and players would respond with feigned confusion, claiming they have no idea what I am babbling about. Such narrative moments possess an ironic beauty as players struggle to assert their divergent worldviews, defining the scope of *their* fantasy and marking the boundaries of *their* diegesis. These exchanges may resemble those between a devout Creationist and a secular Paleontologist, as their divergent epistemologies are contested, neither will concede a “leap of faith” nor in turn a “leap of logic”.

The next curious term Delasa uses is “HHP”. “HHP” is the common acronym for High Hold Pass, a commonly traveled mountain crossroads in *EQ*. The use of acronyms in *EQ* is very common and functions in various ways to affect narrative. Acronyms are a tool of action and a function of speed and pragmatism. Although their use in fiction often serves an aesthetic function of asserting a linguistic style, in chat based games their primary reason-d’être is efficiency of communication. The games’ action moves fast, and those who want to keep up, must adapt and shape their language to match the speed of the action. Additionally, The use of acronyms in *EQ* and other linguistic communities is a sign of deep linguistic immersion, as actors in the community become more experienced with their context and more deeply immersed in its specific use of language. Familiar from the experience of reading Anthony Burgess’s “*A Clockwork Orange*”[2] and many Sci-Fi and Cyberpunk novels, initiation into a vernacular is a narrative device very commonly used in Science-Fiction novels to heighten a sense of immersion. As the reader progresses through the narrative, the struggle of learning the vernacular functions as an initiation into the world of the characters in the story. This process is very acute in Burgess, while the reader gradually struggles to learn the language/slang of the “droogs,” he/she experiences a symbolic initiation into their clan.

The next fragment of Delasa’s response reads: *“now its 11am on Sunday morning in the East Coast and the lag is intense. If you’re running anything slower than a Pentium 400 forget about it”*. Delasa’s response is blending technical and

social observations relating to matters of the “real world,” by addressing real spaces, timezones and technologies. These linguistic spillages between the virtual and physical world are very common in games like *EQ*. Negotiating these two frames of reference is a skill that quickly becomes second nature to game players, and casual seamless transitions are natural elements of in-game communication.

The developers of *EQ* are not unaware of the fact that players will need to use technical and other extra-diegetic terms when communicating with each other. The chat function provides a special “Out of Character” mode, intended specifically for these interactions. When using the “Out Of Character” chat mode, the chat text turns a bright green and is displayed with the “out of Character” Qualifier as in “*Blindrunner says out of character “I don’t like switching modes like this all the time”*”.

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The next elements of interest in Delasa’s response are his use of the terms “Tank” and “Nuker”. These terms borrowed from a technological/military context refer in turn to a warrior and a wizard. The substitution of the term “Tank” for warrior is so common in the *EQ* vernacular that I can scarcely recall *ever* hearing a warrior called anything but a “Tank”. The invasion of techno-militaristic terms into the fantasy diegesis is familiar from player’s often choosing character names borrowed from pop culture and break the illusion of a deep fantasy. One very important difference exists between “infractions” in character naming and in game conversation. Whereas the mayhem created by players’ breaking of the naming convention rules is easily tracked by the *EQ* staff and the perpetrators can be singled out and punished,¹⁰ linguistic infractions made on the public vernacular are a result of a communal impetus and cannot be tracked to any individual culprit. Moreover, not only will nobody be punished for these aberrations, but any attempt by the *EQ* staff towards censorship in the public sphere would create such a severe backlash from the player community that it would prove a fateful choice from a public relations and marketing standpoint. As can be seen by these examples of some of the linguistic complexities involved in these games, the arena of language in the corporate run heterotopias of MMORPGs remains the most polemically dynamic. This linguistic space is the one arena left in the gameworld where the community of players as a whole hold the empirically uncontested authority both as authors and as eager consumers who must remain satisfied.

Hacks and Cheats

The stakes involved in protecting MMORPGs from hackers are extremely high. If a player hacks a single person game that he or she may be playing at home, the game may only be “ruined” for that player who has chosen to “ruin” the game for him or herself. In contrast, when an online game player manages to hack the game the affect is quickly spread to all the other players involved. In the case of MMORPGs millions may be affected as these social

games are based on a very careful game balance where players take years to advance to high levels and are entwined in complex social relationships that rely heavily on notoriety and experience.

EQ is supposed to be unhackable. Yet the net finds several rather interesting software packages available for free download or sale that alter the gameplaying experience. The first of these unsolicited *EQ* “add-ons” to appear on the scene was *EQ Macros*. *EQ Macros* is an *EQ* version of the older *UO Macros* created for *UO*. Initially the purpose of this software was to allow players of *UO* to program their characters to perform repetitive tasks automatically. Both *UO* and *EQ* use a skill system where a specific skill will increase in direct proportion to the number of times it is used. Say for example, if I wanted to improve my skill with a bow and arrow I would shoot at a creature or target two dozen times and my skill would then increase from a rating of 1 to a rating of 2 making it slightly easier for me to hit my target with a bow and arrow. Additionally as a character gets better with a certain skill that skill then requires more attempts to increase. Players can often be seen “practicing” their fishing, backing or swordfighting skills by standing in one place for hours or even days performing the same repetitive task! Aside from the potential for affecting carpal tunnel syndrome or other physical or mental complications, the boredom and drudgery are ridiculous. And yet this is not at all an unusual practice as players often prioritize the narrative of personal improvement and mastery over the in-game quests which some see as being just as boring and repetitive as shooting an arrow at a tree for three weeks. So, to improve rapidly without personal risk, simply download and install *UO Macros* or *EQ Macros*, maneuver your character to the end of a lake, equip her with a fishing pole, run the macro software, go to work for eight hours. When you return from work, Viola! Your character is now a master fisherman able to catch and sell fish with ease, using the quick profits to purchase that new shinning armor or magical wand you always dreamed of. Some players who were unsatisfied with the options of the *macroing* software have designed their own mechanical robots to perform specific key presses and reproduce mouse movements.

When *UO* was originally released the game developers did nothing to discourage software packages like *UO macros*. In fact they established business partnerships with 3rd party developers. Their logic was that hackers will do this sort of thing anyhow, and if you can't beat them you might as well join them. Or maybe their plan had been more crafty than that all along. After many months of sanctioned software partnerships these relationships were suddenly severed; having learned the tricks of the trade the developers were now equipped to program in-game provisions that counteracted software tricks like *Macroing* and packet sniffing.¹¹ *EQ*, released two years on the heels of *UO*, takes a more direct approach and forbids all players from using 3rd party software. Every time a player connects to the *EQ* servers they are required to “accept” a license agreement stating that they will jeopardize the status of their account if they break any of the many rules of conduct.

A more serious hacker-generated add-on for *EQ* is *Show EQ*. *Show EQ* is a software engine that collects all the data sent from the *EQ* server and displays it through a completely reworked interface resembling a futuristic military control panel. Additionally it creates a dynamically changing vector based map of the entire *EQ* world from a bird's eye perspective, offering additional features such as range finder, compass, GPS, and custom filters and color codes to track specific creatures in the game.

I find the *Macroing* and *Show EQ* phenomena to be the most wonderful examples of the kind of mutated hybrid fantasy that emerges when the capabilities of high tech computer technology, a web savvy audience raised on open source ingenuity conflates with a complex corporately controlled narrative framework and turns into a techo playground for subversive action. When relating to *Verant*, the company that develops and maintains *EQ*, the language used by many higher level players conveys a sense of paranoia and revolt. The narrative becomes about beating the system, taking it to the man, all the while cautious that big brother is always watching. Many tech savvy MMORPG players easily exchange the initial context of the medieval *fantasy* game narrative along with its potential rewards, with a David vs. Goliath, hacker versus corporation narrative of personal control and liberation. I propose that for those tech savvy players a complex of forced inferiority, frustration and paranoia results from the confining limits of the first person perspective that MMORPGs privilege. Seen in the wider context of other software/narratives such as Internet browsers and GUI operating systems that allow more visual control over digital space, or text based operating systems such as Linux, Unix or DOS that allow knowledgeable users access to all files on their system, the "end-user" mode of first person 3D perspective coupled with limited access to files, positions the players of MMORPGs at the bottom of the command and control hierarchy of the system.¹² Take for example games belonging to the popular genre of Realtime Strategy Simulation (RTS) games, such as *StarCraft*, *Age of Empires*, *Sim City*, *Command & Conquer*(!) or the *Sims* where the player is awarded a "god's eye" perspective and a god's status. These games usually involve control of dozens or sometimes hundreds of semi autonomous minions, and the player is free to roam and examine every corner of the game space. *Show EQ* is astounding as a testament to the phenomenological notion that vision is liberating and immersion oppressive. *Show EQ* liberates the player from the role of player-puppet to that of director, from minion to towering clairvoyant magician, from grounded grunt to airborne general. As it transforms the narrative of *EQ* into a database collected and processed into categories of friend/foe, attainable/unattainable, valuable/disposable, all metaphoric references are removed from the narrative and what remains is a clear narrative of control over variables, numbers and perhaps most significantly, of the corporate rationing of power.

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CONCLUSION

I hope that the methods and structure that I've introduced to examine the first wave of fantasy MMORPG software/narrative hybrids will prove useful both as a first hand record of these moments in pop media history, and as tools offered to further examine the evolution of MMORPGs and the embroiled narrative of Magical Fantasy and Technology.

Much like the plotlines of MMORPGs, the story told here is a tale with no end. I recently installed and began to play the new MMORPG *Dark Age of Camelot*, and there are already new stories to tell, and new artifacts to collect. New layers of metaphoric patches have been introduced, several technological artifacts have been removed and new ones taken hold, anti-hacking security has been heightened as new hacks are being devised, and new linguistic forms are born.¹³

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NOTES

- 1 The Church later pragmatically generated its own incarnations of "holy" magic when monotheistic reason didn't work to convert the magically inclined pagans. This is not entirely unlike the marketing strategy of parallel marketing that promoted Coca-Cola and Pepsi Co. to market their bottled waters Aquafina and Dasani to those last few uncooperative consumers still resisting the red, white and blue gods of sugar and caffeine.
- 2 Everquest players often refer to the game by its all too telling nickname *EverCrack*. The reference here, just to be clear, is to the drug.
- 3 After writing this hypothetical backstory for *Tetris* I came upon Lev Manovich's uncannily similar description of his algorithm of Tetris (The Language of New Media, pp220).
- 4 Distinguishing genres in reference to computer games requires a splitting into medium-genre and message-genre, so we need to cast games as belonging to the Science Fiction / First Person Shooter(SF/FPS) genre or the Military / Real time Strategy (MIL/RTS) genre. But MMORPGs have traditionally belonged to the /Fantasy variety, and only very recently, more than three years after MMORPGs emerged do we see the/Mil and /Sci-Fi incarnations of *World War 2 Online* and *Anarchy Online*.
- 5 *Asheron's Call* stands out here in that a clear and strong emphasis is made to create an epic over arching narrative that affects all players in the game and fits in synchronically with the backstory. *Ultima Online*, *EQ* and *Diablo* all seem frozen in time with regards to the "grand narrative" of their respective backstories.
- 6 Consider the "All your base are belong to us" web phenomena, which stemmed from the mockery of a grammatically challenged NPC as much as from an Anglocentric juvenile reverie.
- 7 Even though high level characters will often wait in one spot for days to acquire a rare magical item dropped by a rare spawned creature
- 8 Non linear access to data is the foundation upon which hypertext and Internet navigation are built and curiously the term "Portal" has found a home in the current Internet Vernacular. In this context the term Portal is used in reference to any Internet gateway; A portal may be a search engine homepage like google.com or Yahoo.com, an ISP custom browser/portal like AOL, Earthlink, or MSN, or even a keyboard Portal at the

hardware level like the “home page” and “Internet” buttons found on my Compaq PC keyboard.

- 9 Read, Write and Execute privileges, are known as 777 privs in Unix and Linux jargon.
- 10 The punishment for these sorts of crimes is the permanent banning of the player's EQ account.
- 11 Packet sniffing is a hacker tactic used to survey and decipher the raw encoded network data stream (like listening to a modem line's sound and deciphering the messages in that manner).
- 12 A larger discussion than the scope of this article permits may venture further to speculate on the seemingly contradictory network of relationships that visually impaired command line operating systems like Linux and DOS may have both to an open source movement and a monopolizing corporation. Command line control offers exact control over the environment for those tech savvy enough to master the commands, whereas a windows OS is much more liberating for those less tech savvy users. This is a complicated question that could be investigated in depth.
- 13 I've noticed that most of the in game vernacular has been appropriated directly from EQ,

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