

PhD project (working title):

*Experience at play – gameplay, social action and interaction in online-games.*

*This paper submission is aimed for the conference theme "Defining Computer Games"*

In my PhD-project I have two overarching points of focus: The notion of social game play in MMORPG and how this relates to and is defined by the concept of genre. I am interested in social *gameplay* in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs): What is the experience of playing a MMORPG? Why do people play these games? How do they play them? And how does this social gameplay effect and change the way we think in terms of genre in relation to computer games? The game I am focussing on is *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004).

#### Social action and interaction in computer games

It is often said, that playing a computer game with others is a social activity (fx Jessen), but multi-player games are qualitatively different in this respect, in the way that they are conditioned by the very experience of playing and interacting with other people: The social forming of communities, both in-game (guilds, parties, raids) and out-of-game (websites, discussion forums etc.), along with the fact, that pure social element of chatting is often valued just as highly as the action- and adventure part of the game. The game play in MMORPGs can thus be said to encompass two different forms of game modes: A traditional, goal oriented and serious mode, where the aim is to win – and a playful game mode, where people are seeking a social and informal way of just being together. Play theory has labelled these two game modes as respectively *telic* and *para-telic* modes (Apter).

In order to analyze the *gameplay* in massively multi-player on-line games (MMORPGs) I first need to operationalize the term. I aim to do this in two steps:

The first step is to view game play as a single large story or narration (in the narrative understanding of the term). The story takes shape and unfolds when the game is played, that is in a specific play-centric and interactive context (unlike 'traditional' narratives found in e.g. literature and films – Bordwell). MMORPGs can be said to combine a meta-story (the predesigned story world and the various plot points within it) with a story system that allows players to evolve their own narratives within the game's meta-story framework. The nature of storytelling in MMORPGs can be coined "social storytelling" or, in Celia Pearce's term "collaborative fiction". You need to play the game, immerse yourself in the game world and interact socially with other players in order for the game story to unfold. In this respect, is not so much about storytelling as it is about story-dwelling.

The second step, closely following the first, is to couple the game as an unfolding narrative with the concept of performance (Bauman). Viewing the game as *performance narrative* highlights the central characteristic, that in order for the performance to make any sense, it must be performed, be a reference to and be understood within the same social context – and an online game-session is such a social context. The concept of performance combines two central aspects of computer game play: First the player needs to immerse him / her in the game, take an active part in playing the game, in order for the game narrative to unfold. This has been termed *immersion* (Murray), *paida* (Huizinga), *flow* (Czikszenmihaly) and *gratie* (Johansen). But performance also entails that the player is able move between different levels of game play: Playing the game as a game (immersive level), navigating the game (reading the interface and understanding the game genre – game code level) and viewing the game as a social space, where one needs to constantly attune and re-attune oneself to others (social level). In this optics the levelling of a player's game character from level 1 to max level (level 80 currently in *World of Warcraft*) both functions as an explorative journey (discovering the game world – immersive level), a game technical experience (learning to navigate the interface and the character-abilities as both gains in complexity – game code level) and finally learning the rather complex social decorum of the player community, both in-game and out-of-game (the social level).

#### Genre as a point of entry to social gaming

My point of entry to understanding gaming as a social action is through the concept of genre: Both the cognitive (Grodal) and the pragmatic genre research (Miller) have shown that we think, perceive and navigate through genres. Genre knowledge establishes "horizons of expectations", strengthens social practices and establishes interpretive communities. The research done on computer gaming has (for the most part) tried to categorize the computer games by looking at the system- or game code, which has led to a rather inconsistent system of taxonomies and typologies. Central to these system- or code-centric genre taxonomies is the fact, that they quite precisely reveals what the external frames for the games are, but at the same time overlooks a central aspect of computer gaming: The game play as an aesthetic form, that the games has to be played (and played together with other in MMORPGs) to unfold and to be experienced.

The game specific genre of MMORPG – an acronym for Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Game – points to the fact, that it's a *role plying game*. And as such we can assume it shares certain characteristics with tabletop games (*Dungeons & Dragons*) and live action role-playing games (LARPs). In these different games, the player creates a character, a role through the specific game's character creation template, and acts out this role within the framework of the game. If we add to this the facts that this takes place *online* and that it's *massively multiplayer*, the game play is put in a media context (computer game played through the Internet) and it is played alongside a large number

of other players (thus separate from single-player games). The genre term of MMORPGs is solely describing on the outer framework of the game, but completely overlooks the gameplay of the game.

The nature and the scope of the role-play in MMORPGs are missed completely in this definition. The term 'role play' has no clear, consistent definition, but in relation to MMORPGs, it refers to game mechanics; levels, character classes, character skill points etc. The majority of literature dealing with role-play in computer games is either an advocate for or a defence against the immersive aspect of role play, that is role play as a person playing a character who transcends the mechanic of the game and takes on a plausible, defined reality of its own (Atkins, Dormans, Fine, Gee, King and Kryzwinska, Salen and Zimmerman). This view of role play rests on a "suspension of disbelief" in various degrees, but is nonetheless overlooking the fact, that many people, such as power gamers and casual players (Taylor) do *not* role play the game. I opt for a different understanding of role play in MMORPGs: Role play is better understood as an obligation to construct a loose framework for action, a guideline outlining where players should invest in skill sets that are used to manage responsibilities in team situations, *not* personalities.

I therefore opt to move the focal point in role play from player action to player *interaction*. This is strengthened by the fact, that social interaction contribute to a large part of player's gaming experience (Griffith, Davies & Chappell, Yee a & b, Jakobsson & Taylor). Drawing on symbolic interactionism theory (Blumer, Goffman) as a guiding conceptual approach, the aim is to create a framework for social interaction in MMORPGs that can embrace the wide array of modes of role play in social on-line worlds.

I choose this angle of approach, because I want to maintain the fact, that it's a social game with social laws and restrictions, just like in everyday life. Indeed, if a player chooses to focus solely on the game-specific part; combat, levelling, acquiring treasures and improving one's own character and thus ignoring the social part of the game, the game community will be swift to pass judgement on the player's actions. This strongly points to the fact entering a MMORPG means entering a community, where "joining" and "contributions" are key concepts and the most valuable currency in these games are reputation (Pearce). In MMORPGs the shared consensus of social norms and modes of conduct plays a large role in the game. These social norms are formed by the player communities in and around the game and are in essence communicative and social conventions. Players act in accordance to this social consensus, and the social consensus is constantly maintained (and developed) through a wide player community. The social norms are in fact an integral part of the rules of the game. They take on the authority of rules, because the players are willing to accept them as such, and this strong social aspect formulated and maintained through player practices and actions in the game,

must be taken into account when looking at a genre definition, so that the dynamic socially oriented aspect of a MMORPG is accentuated through a more accurate genre definition. So in order to circumvent the game-specific genre definition of the MMORPG – a definition that solely focuses of the outer frame of the game and not the aesthetic, in-game, social mechanics of the game as these unfolds as the game is played; I have chosen to apply a much wider and cross-medial notion of genre. I view the MMORPG as being part of a fantasy tradition. The reasons for doing this are several:

It allows for a fairly new genre (that of the MMORPG) to be placed in long historical tradition (that of the fantasy genre across different media). This allows for back-tracking of the characteristics of the MMORPG, through MUDs, single-player games, LARPs, tabletop games and the massive corpus of fantasy literature. My view of genre can be said to be cross medial, as I am interested in fantasy as a super-genre. One of the things I have found is that, many characteristics of the fantasy situated MMORPG, what we now view as genre conventions specific to the MMORPG, is developed and fleshed out through literary works of especially Tolkien. His works (fictional, meta-poetic and scientific) contains an extensive universe of mythological interweaving of numerous and varying works, his own and others, which results in a trans-medial world, much like that of a MMORPG, with many characteristics similar to that of the MMORPG.

Another reason for applying the cross-medial genre approach of fantasy, is the sheer fact of how popular the genre is: In looking at fantasy-centric stories and universes across a wide range of different media (literature, films, cartoons, tabletop games, computer games etc.), I have found that online-computer games is the medium with far the most 'users' within the fantasy genre context. Online-computer games have become the most popular medium for hosting fantasy based stories and universes. Recent figures show that a staggering 94.2% of all massively multi-player online games (MMOs) are situated in a clearly defined fantasy setting (mmogchart.com). The online-game *World of Warcraft* is exemplary in this context; It is the market leader (62.2% of all online-gamers are playing *World of Warcraft*) and the games has succeeded in drawing in a large number of gamers new to the MMORPG-genre. The game is widely viewed as a very generic MMORPG, not adding anything new to the genre but instead utilizing the conventions (of both the MMORPG- and the fantasy genre) better then any previous game has done, hence the massive number of paying and playing subscriber to the game. These figures point to the fact, that the fantasy genre is ideal as a genre backdrop, when creating an online-world.

One of the overarching questions in my dissertation will, as a result of this, be: *Why fantasy? Why is fantasy so massively represented when it comes to creating a social online-world? Which quality does the fantasy genre contain, that lends itself so well to the MMORPG genre?* By looking at how the fantasy genre is presented, manifested and

played out across different media, the aim is to trace the fantasy genre's *mode of function*, to investigate and localize the *experience potentials* of fantasy as a super genre – that is fantasy independent of the specific media, with specific focus on how the genre lends itself to social, collaborative worlds throughout different media. The idea is to let the investigations and discussions of the fantasy genre function as an outer frame for social gaming. I am hoping to be able to establish a method that can grasp what is happening in a MMORPG.

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