

Worlds at Play

Space and Player Experience in Fantasy Computer Games

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Abstract

The relationship between the fantasy genre and the medium of computer games has always been a very tight-knit one. The present article explores the close connection between fantasy and computer games through different media, arguing that the fantasy genre's specific 'mode of function' is the ability to build complete fictional worlds, whereby it creates specific experiences for its users. Based on empirical data from focus group interviews with players of the most popular Western Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) of all times, *World of Warcraft*, the article develops the concept of *worldness* as an experiential, phenomenological understanding of player experience. I discuss how this way of framing a core quality of the fantasy genre (of world-building) functions across single fictional universes and aims to grasp a specific fantasy experience of being in the world. This experience works on the level of genre, by anchoring the specific fantasy world in the larger, surrounding *fantasy genre matrix*.

Keywords: fantasy genre, MMORPG, world-building, worldness, player experience

Introduction

World of Warcraft (WoW) is the largest Western MMORPG and has been for almost a decade, with a current player base of 8 million. The game belongs to a type of games primarily defined by its persistent game world: These games are virtual meeting places where thousands of players interact with each other as they "assume the roles of heroic fantasy characters and explore a virtual world full of mystery, magic, and endless adventure" (Blizzard 2012). The game is one of the 85% of all MMORPGs set in a fantasy world (Van Geel 2012), making fantasy the predominant genre in these games by far. The world of *WoW* is "on" all the time, and the actions and events in the game continue in a cumulative way, allowing players to develop a character and influence the game space. Even though this game space is defined by rules, structure and systems, the *raison d'être* of games is rooted in our enjoyment of playing, mastering and experiencing them.

But investigating player experience is by no means an easy task, something the game studies literature can attest to. A multifaceted concept, player experience has been gauged in various ways and linked to different concepts, such as *motivations* for playing (Bartle 1996; Yee 2006), *enjoyment* (Klimmt 2003), *presence* (Lombard 1997), *flow* (Chen 2007), *gameflow* (Sweetser and Wyeth 2005), *pleasure* (Costello and Edmonds 2009), and just plain *fun* (Koster 2005). A core aspect in regard to player experience is the enjoyment of engaging with and being drawn into a game world, which is often

referred to as *immersion* (Calleja 2011; Murray 1997). Ermi and Mäyrä studied immersion in the context of digital games and proposed an experiential model of immersion consisting of three different components: *sensory immersion* (the extent to which the surface features of a game have a perceptual impact on the user), *challenge-based immersion* (the cognitive and motor aspects of the game that are needed to meet the challenges the game poses) and finally *imaginative immersion*, which is “[a] dimension of game experience in which one becomes absorbed with the stories and the world” (Ermi and Mäyrä 2005, p. 8). This imaginative immersion, with its specific focus on the game world, will serve as a lens through which to investigate the close relations between the fantasy genre and the medium of online computer games.

In the following, I investigate the relations through a shared cultural history and on the basis of common structural elements. My point of departure will be the literary roots of the fantasy genre, arguing that Tolkien is the single most important influence on present day MMORPGs. He established the genre of High Fantasy, but his ultimate worth is formulated in a poetics on how fantasy works, namely through world-building. I then relate Tolkien to the field of computer game studies, through the often overlooked but central link of table-top games, especially *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). Creating the nascent notion of the game community and bringing Tolkien’s world to computer games, I investigate how computer games as a medium function through a particular utilization of space and spatiality. This use has the ability to generate particular user experiences, namely the experience of playing and participating in the game world and how this experience intersects with the fantasy worlds of other media. I develop the concepts of *worldness* and *fantasy media matrix* as means of framing different kinds of player experiences. In the final part of the article, I draw on empirical data from focus group interviews with *WoW* players to show how experiences of worldness are articulated by actual players and how these experiences can tie in with experiences with other media, through connections to the fantasy media matrix.

The Tolkien Connection: Fantasy and World-building

Defining the fantasy genre is notoriously difficult, as many critical works on the subject can attest to. There is no critical consensus on which works to include under the genre label, and the term has been applied to almost every form of literature deviating from a realistic mode of representation, such as myths, legends, fairy tales, utopian allegories and magical realism. Such an essentialist approach to fantasy, through a taxonomic definition, is problematic. Instead of asking for a content-/form-based classification of the fantasy genre, it is more fruitful to focus on the genre’s *function and purpose* (Miller 1984). One of the most comprehensive theorists and practitioners of fantasy was J.R.R. Tolkien. In his 1938 lecture “On Fairy-Stories”, in which he is the first to claim “Fantasy” as a label for the form of literature he aspired to work with, he creates a manifesto for the modern fantasy genre:

What really happens is that the story-maker becomes a successful “sub-creator”. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”; it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside”(Tolkien and Tolkien 1983, p. 132)¹

In this passage, Tolkien speaks about the centrality of a Secondary World to a work of fantasy. The key to crafting a successful fantasy is not simply the creation of a secondary world, but the creation of a secondary world that *makes sense*. The fantasy author must establish and then follow “laws” when creating a secondary world. Such a world “does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make” (Tolkien and Tolkien 1983, p. 144).

Tolkien’s world of Middle-earth was so rigorously rational with its genealogical charts, detailed chronologies and appendices, and scholarly discussions about nomenclature, geography, history, and languages that it invited the reader to approach Middle-earth both analytically and imaginatively. This mode of world-building is realized through an encyclopedic sense of detail: If the reader wants to find out how the core narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* ends, she must consult the historiographical appendix in the last volume of the novel. The most important part here is not the story or the plotline, but the texture of the fantasy world itself.

Tolkien’s fantasy is often named “high fantasy”, whereas Robert E. Howard’s Conan stories are “low fantasy”. This distinction does not concern cultural sophistication, but the extent to which the mythos and the secondary world of the fiction are connected to our world, the primary world. High fantasy, like Tolkien’s stories, are set in an entirely fictional world, which is distinct from our primary world, whereas low fantasy concerns stories where fantasy elements bleed over and manifest themselves in the primary world. “High fantasies” are fully self-coherent and secondary worlds. What Tolkien did, through his fiction and his reflections on this, was to write the modern fantasy genre, not through a taxonomic definition but through a focus on what the genre could accomplish, its function: It could build self-consistent worlds. Fantasy worlds, in both literature and games, are a series of imaginative landscapes, spatially connected. They can, in other words, be mapped out. Maps relate a series of locations to each other, visually unifying them into a world, and provide a concrete image of the world. This spatial, geographical dimension of fantasy worlds and the self-coherent consistent nature of them are key components when the genre becomes interactive and playable.

Fantasy as Playable Worlds – from Tabletop to Desktop

From the middle of 1970s and onwards, the fantasy genre spans out through a variety of different media. The genre of computer adventure or role-playing games (RPG) is closely connected to the literary genre of fantasy, especially Tolkien – so closely in fact, that computer RPG’s have been labelled “remediated Tolkien” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, p. 94; G. King and Krzywinska 2002, p. 29). But making Tolkien stand-in for the whole genre of RPG is missing a central point in the remediation from literature to computer games. One of the most influential fantasy games of all times is the pen-and-paper role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). This game was considerably different from fantasy literature, in that the game first and foremost was a set of rules for interaction between the players and the fantasy world. It was originally created with the idea to transform the world of Tolkien into an interactive adventure, allowing the fans to experience the world from within through agency. One of the players would be responsible for the fantasy world and the characters in it (the Dungeon Master), whereas the other players would

create and role-play a single character adventuring in the game world. The game and the story took place in the imagination of the players as a “shared fantasy” (Fine 1983).

What was remediated from pen-and-paper games into computer games wasn't only the fantasy setting, content, or the rule system – it was a whole social aspect of gaming culture, the beginning of the notion of the *game community*: Websites, walkthroughs, message boards and fanzines were an extension of the game itself, making fantasy RPG's operate intertextually, as the context of the game is often much larger than the individual game (Myers 2003, p. 117). The cultural impact of *D&D* is not to be overlooked: “It is almost impossible to overstate the role of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the rise of computer gaming. [...] Scratch almost any game developer who worked from the late 1970s until today and you're likely to find a vein of role-playing experience” (King and Borland 2003, p. 4).

This vein brought Tolkien's world to computer games: Games like *PEDIT 5* and *DND* (both 1975) clearly show their cultural heritage: the first of these games was soon renamed *Orthanc* after the tower of Isengard in *Lord of the Rings*, and the latter is simply an abbreviation of ‘dungeons and dragons’. Both games attempted to bring *Dungeons & Dragons* to the computer, by using features like hit points, a level up-system, quests, monsters often set in the confined space of a dungeon. This dungeon-concept continued in games like *Dungeon* (1975), *Obliette* (1977) and *Rogue* (1980) and helped consolidate the concept of spatial exploration as a key game play component in these games. Programmer Will Crowther, an avid *Dungeons & Dragons* fan and cave explorer, wrote the game *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976), based on his own exploration of a Kentucky cave system. Later the game was re-written by Don Woods, an avid Tolkien fan, by adding fantasy elements, such as magical items, creatures, and geographical features. The game spawned many imitations, including the very Tolkienesque *Akalabeth: World of Doom* (1979), a game that used maps to conceptualize the game world for the players. The game's writer, Richard Garriot, would later extend the game world significantly in his series of *Ultima* games, a successful franchise of games, with each game in the series continually expanding the world through an overall world-building.

As the worlds of graphical adventure games were developing fast, the text adventure games became multiplayer. Both *Dungeons & Dragons* and fantasy literature were immensely popular on college campuses during the 1970s and 1980s. It was in this period and context that computer networks began to appear throughout both the United States and Europe. Both of these phenomena – fantasy and networked computing – converged in the minds of computer science students, and the result was the text-based MUD (Multi-User-Dungeon). Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw wrote, in 1978, the first MUD: A multiplayer game combining elements from *Dungeons & Dragons*, such as role-playing, action elements and the social dimension in the form of a chat room. The game was rewritten many times and it is described by Bartle as a “fantasy environment, i.e. a vaguely medieval world where magic worlds and dragons are real” (Bartle 1996). More followed and soon the conventions of the genre became codified. The MUDs spawned by pen-and-paper role-playing sustained a cult following for a decade and a half, until the mid-1990s, when they were joined by a new generation of games. The first graphical online role-playing game, *Meridian59* (1995) was, not surprisingly, set in a fantasy world. Another fantasy game, *Ultima Online* (1997) was the first game to reach 100,000 paying players, making it not just an online role-playing game – but also a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. This lineage of games has deep implications for

the contemporary MMORPGs: It connected the world-building of Tolkien, the social community aspects of pen-and-paper games and the conventions of the fantasy genre, wrapping them in a new form of game and targeting a mass audience.

Computer Games and the Utilization of Space

Space and spatiality are not just key components of the fantasy genre, they have also been a central issue for the study of computer games since the introduction of cyberspace (Benedikt 1992) and MUDs (Anders 1999). Murray has argued that spatiality is one of the core features of digital media (Murray 1997), and Aarseth accentuates space in the definition of games: “Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation” (Aarseth 2001, p. 154). Jenkins has argued that computer games, through “environmental storytelling”, can be understood as spatial stories, which are being unfolded as the player moves through the game world (Jenkins 2004). In both literature and computer games, the fantasy genre has the same *modus operandi*: The construction of a space and the narrative movement through this. In an MMORPG like *WoW*, world-building has a double function as both *a frame* and *a space*.

WoW's specific game world was established through the real-time strategy games (*Warcraft I – III*) and later both consolidated and expanded upon through a wide range of other media products such as novels, comic books, trading card games, user-driven wikis, fan fiction and the four expansions to *WoW* itself. Here the single text is replaced by a *storyworld* with a number of different media-specific points of entry (Jenkins 2007), which has resulted in a fully described, detailed and coherent world. This world is both expandable through different media and explorable by the users, which makes for a world that contains an enormous narrative potential. As with Tolkien, the world-building of *WoW* depends on the same ongoing compliance with a number of already established laws of the world. It becomes clear that these detailed, law-based, internally consistent worlds are formidable playable worlds. In computer games all these elements become quantified and explicated through the game code. Hidden underneath the interface and the aesthetics of the virtual worlds is the code, which in turn embodies the very rules and laws that are constitutive of and structure the game.

This is exactly why, in the words of Aarseth, computer games are *allegories of space*. They pretend to portray space in evermore realistic ways, but rely on their deviation from reality in order to make the illusion playable. Aarseth has compared the gameworld of *WoW* with a theme park, not unlike Disney World in both size and purpose: gated attractions connected by pathways, functional and playable, build for ease of navigation. *WoW* is a “landscape [bound] together in a seemingly seamless whole, a continuous surface that, by being continuous and labyrinthine, gives the impression of being a lot bigger than is actually is” (Aarseth 2008, p. 116).

What Aarseth is commenting on here is one form of world-building in which the utilization of both space and rules creates a consistent world. But this is quite different from the way the players *experience* the gameworld from within, when playing it and inhabiting it for extended periods of time. The specific experience that is afforded the user of a given fantasy universe is *worldness*. Where world-building is concerned with the ontology of a fantasy world, worldness is a phenomenological quality of the former and concerns the player experience.

Worldness and Player Experience

Worldness is one of the most central and at the same time one of the most elusive qualities of virtual worlds. As game researcher Celia Pearce states:

The term is used to express a sense of coherence, completeness, and consistency within the world's environment, aesthetics, and rules. To maintain a sense of worldness, a virtual world must create an aesthetic [...] a syntax, a vocabulary, and a framework that is extensible, sustainable, and robust. Every accessible location in the world must be accounted for in order to create the sense of contiguous, explorable space (Pearce 2009, p. 20)

Pearce's colleague, Tanya Krzywinska, shows how the texture and textual elements of *WoW* are essential for "world creation" and hence for the worldness of the game. She defines worldness as a consistency in regards to spatial coordinates, style, physics and past events (Krzywinska 2008, p. 127). As these references show, worldness has traditionally been theorized as a specific *textual* quality in the realization of a given fantasy world, whereas I understand it, not as text, structure or rule-system, but as a basic expression of the player's experience of engagement with the virtual world – as *experiential* quality. This experiential quality of the concept lies underneath the surface of the existing literature on the subject and will be highlighted in the following.

A core concept in Krzywinska is "thick text": A text richly populated with various allusions, correspondences, and references to the tropes and symbols of the fantasy genre or to previous realizations of a fantasy world. A thick text draws on a range of preexisting sources relevant to the invocation of a fantasy world by tapping into the player's experiences and knowledge – our genre repertoire – and uses this to infuse the gameworld with an extra layer of meaning, which the player herself is adding: "[T]he presence of multiple [...] intertexts encourages a certain type of depth engagement with the game" (Krzywinska 2008, p. 124). This depth reading of the intertexts has less to do with engagement or immersion in the fiction of the game, than it has to do with engagement in a more advanced process of reading and interpretation.

The differences between Pearce and Krzywinska notwithstanding, they both highlight a basic consistency within the world as a key component of worldness. But they also highlight how this consistency is dependent on the single player's expectations and experiences: Do the many elements of a given gameworld align with our expectations of this world? These expectations are informed by a complete mental image and knowledge of a given world we as users have, in much the same way that genres frame our understanding of media texts and transcend the individual text onto a larger and wider interpretative genre framework. Genre, as defined by Carolyn Miller, is "a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent" (Miller 1984, p. 163). Our attraction to and engagement in a given fantasy gameworld is closely connected to our knowledge and understanding of other fantasy worlds in other media. By functioning not through immanent structures but through user expectations and interpretative codes (Culler 1981), the experience shapes and is shaped by what I call the *fantasy genre matrix*.

The Fantasy Genre Matrix

Genre theorists tend to emphasize the importance of the notion of intertextuality in regard to genre, where single texts are intersected and interrupted by dense networks of intertextuality (Bakhtin, Emerson, Holquist and McGee 1986; Bennett and Woollacott 1987). This notion is extended and reinforced in the fantasy genre, where the intertextual world-building of this genre forms an enormous experiential universe, “a complex of interrelated meanings, which its readers tend to interpret as a discrete and unified whole” (Couldry 2000, pp. 70-71). This experiential universe constitutes a *fantasy genre matrix*. The concept of ‘matrix’ has a double meaning as both ‘mold’ and ‘uterus’ and illustrates in this context a dynamic and ever-changing process of interpretation and imagination, where meaning is something that is created and procedurally arises out of our knowledge of genre texts, narratives and formulas. These function as interpretative patterns or sedimentary layers, when we engage new fantasy texts – not just as mental, cognitive schemas but also as a sensory and emotional dimension. Ermi and Mäyrä remind us, in relation to the imaginative immersion, that “[p]layers do not just engage in ready-made game play, but also actively take part in the construction of these experiences: they bring their desires, anticipations and previous experiences with them and reflect the experience in that light” (Ermi and Mäyrä 2005, p. 2). The concept of the fantasy genre matrix is a framing of this generic experiential potential – a framing of the collective generic “ongoing macrotext” we as individual users are creating across different media platforms (Bacon-Smith 1991, p. 112).

The intertextual act of building and extending worlds across different media has previously been theorized as “intermediality” (Grishakova and Ryan 2010; Lehtonen 2001), “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins 2006), “transmedial interactions” (Bardzell, Wu, Bardzell, and Quagliara 2007), “layered worlds” (Bordwell 2006), or “multiple platforms” (Jeffery-Poulter 2003). These concepts are all concerned with the coordinated and overall strategy of the sender or the world-builder. The fantasy genre matrix is, in contrast to all of the above-mentioned concepts, suited to working with user experiences on the level of genre, across specific fantasy franchises and across the singular media technology. This concept resonates with Jenkins’ idea of convergence, which “occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments” (Jenkins 2006, p. 3). In the following, I will show how *WoW* gamers articulate their engagement in and experiences with the game through different aspects of worldness.

Articulating Worldness

The empirical data presented here stem from three focus group interviews with twelve *WoW* players, six men and six women, ranging from age 21 to 40 and from different European countries (Denmark, England, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden). The participants were recruited from two *WoW* guilds² from the same European PvE-server³ I was a member of for a period of several years. The participants were chosen based on a principle of maximum variation sampling, based on variables such as gender, age, education and location/geography. The focus group meetings lasted two hours and were only semi-structured by a few core research questions related to media use in general

and computer game use in particular, as I wished to facilitate discussions and negotiations among group members.

One of the first open questions I asked the participants was how important the fantasy genre is to them, when choosing a book, a film, or a computer game. To this, 32-year-old Lykke promptly answered; “Oh, it has to do with golems and such... It’s such a wonderful world to inhabit”. 21-year-old Tina backs her up by saying: “There *has* to be those creatures and those different landscapes... there just *has* to be”. What is interesting here is that both women highlight their experience of space (world, landscapes) as key to their understanding of the genre, after having tried to explain it through creatures inhabiting the world. 30-year-old Martin agrees by accentuating the coherence of the universe:

What makes it interesting is really the universe you are in... if it’s just some random universe and you just have to go out and kill monsters, it’s not interesting anymore... then there’s no adventure. [...] And the adventure is only there because the back-story, the creation of the world and everything is in place.

Martin’s polar opposite is 32-year-old Thomas: “*World of Warcraft* is... basically like pen & paper... it’s *Dungeons & Dragons*. You have a sword, there’s a mission, go kill stuff. It’s hack’n’slash, straight forward”. Thomas’ comment clearly illustrated that worldness for him is pure game mechanics. He demonstrates both a historical and a game-centric understanding of the MMORPG genre and its pen-and-paper RPG roots, centered on gameplay, hack’n’slash.⁴ Thomas’ fantasy genre matrix does not include fantasy literature or films, but is developed purely through fantasy-situated games, digital and pen-and-paper, whereas Martin’s understanding of the fantasy genre is more transmedial: He sees the game as part of a much larger fantasy genre matrix, where the texture of the world itself is crucial, whether it is literature or computer games. Game theorist Jesper Juul (2005) has argued that games consists of a level of rules and a level of fiction. The individual player can, depending on experience and preferences, choose to engage with the game as a fiction, a world or simply as a concretization of the rules of the game. Where Martin engages the game as a coherent world, Thomas is purely interested in the game as game mechanics, as rules – both of which are different constitutive aspects of the fantasy genre.

Worldness can also be articulated as the spatial aesthetics of the game, as game setting. Thomas explains how he is attracted to specific zones in the game due to their aesthetics, and Tina adds; “Yes, green and vigorous!”. 40-year-old Sharon accentuates the setting and the world as central to her experience of worldness: “I like the way it looks [...]. I don’t know anything about the lore whatsoever. I like the setting, I wouldn’t like it [if it was] set in space or something like that”. This aesthetic dimension of worldness can also be articulated negatively, in terms of demarcations, as we see in this comment by 23-year-old Nessa:

I think it is harder to connect to an environment like Outland when Burning Crusade came out and all the environments were very space age [...]. I know that I certainly enjoyed the recent expansion and the environments in that more than the Burning Crusade, because the BC was very... other-worldly [...]. You couldn’t really connect with it. Everything was so out-of-this-world strange and it didn’t really appeal to me.

With references to the spatial aesthetics of the game world (“very space age”, “other-worldly”, and “out-of-this-world”), here Nessa expresses where the fantasy genre matrix ends and science fiction begins.

Worldness has the capacity to span and connect more than a single medium. In an interview with two experienced *WoW* and *D&D* players and larpers, 25-year-old Mathias and Samuel, they started off by discussing literary fantasy but seamlessly moved on to discuss the remediation of already established fantasy universes. They know the *WoW* universe through the 3 RTS games, graphic novels, board games and especially novels:

Yeah, I'm happily surprised about most of the Warcraft-ones as well. Those writers are actually really good. And they give you a nice background on... yeah like the quests in-game [...] Yeah if you know his whole background and stuff, its... yeah quite cool

The importance of a *storyworld* anchoring the gaming experience in a wider genre grid, in a fantasy genre matrix, is an example of what Jenkins has described as “evocative narrative”, a specific feature of the narrative architecture of game space: “In the case of evoked narrative spatial design can either enhance our sense of immersion within a familiar world or communicate a fresh perspective on that world through the altering of established details” (Jenkins 2004, p. 129). This notion of evocation can be found all the way down to most detailed choices a gamer makes when creating a player character, as Samuel explains: “Its not like I made a tauren shaman because that's the strongest one, no I made a tauren shaman because I come from Mulgore and have been taught by Carin himself. [...] It's the story that counts”. Here a well-told story in the game converges with the game's mythology, player agency and the consistency of the game world and forms a total experience of worldness.

It's important to note that the experience of worldness is not necessarily limited to a specific world or a singular fantasy franchise, but can work on the level of genre, as a fantasy genre matrix. In discussing a specific area in *WoW*, 34-year-old Dennis highlights the many in-game references to Norse Mythology: “[T]ake the whole Ulduar team in the north. It's full of references to Norse mythology, like Freya and Mimeron”. Mathias is well aware of the many references in *WoW* to other playable fantasy worlds, within the fantasy genre matrix: “That zone is like taken straight out of *World of Darkness*”, and the implicit sources of inspiration *WoW* draws on: “They based the entire thing on Games Workshop in the past like *Orcs & Humans*, and they have been expanding on that and these days it can just stand on its own, and it's special”. Here, the world of *WoW* is transformed into a ‘thick text’ by interweaving intertextual references to other fantasy texts and worlds in *WoW*. When a player ‘gets’ the reference, intertextual corridors to other fantasy worlds appear. This creates a depth engagement with the game and the world of the game, which extends beyond, but at the same time informs, the game itself. This supports the total experience of worldness by creating an experiential emergence, a surplus value to the particular world, by anchoring it in the wider and surrounding fantasy genre matrix.

The fantasy genre matrix is not only concerned with cognitive processes, but also has an emotional dimension of interpretation. This dimension is expressed when the interview participants articulate the emotional impact the aesthetics of the game have on them, but it can also occur through the many intertexts in the game. Martin explains how he en-

countered a place in *WoW* that originates from one of the previous Warcraft RTS games. The encounter not only activates the recognition of the reference, but also reactivates the original experience he had when playing the earlier RTS games. This creates an engaging experience of recognition, of “having been there somehow... a historical place”. This emotional dimension of worldness encompassed in the fantasy genre matrix has the potential to enable a particular use of the game as a unique and deeply personal space:

I really like to go revisiting old places in the game. Like places that are very remote from where you normally go and you are the only one there. There is this one place, in Dun Morogh, where you can get up on top of Ironforge and there is this airfield up there! The place is just beautiful, I love the snowy landscape with the mountains and all [...] it's really amazing. It's like a small place only a small handful of people have visited and you feel kinda... special being able to go there, you know. I think I still have the screenshots on my Flickr account of that place, it's really amazing.

What is happening here is the emergence of a Lefebvrian “lived space”. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre contends that space is a dynamic participant in everyday practices, and not just a passive container but always socially produced. He describes the processes by which space is being produced as a dialectic between three forms of space: *Perceived space* (is a physical space produced by the spatial practice of everyday life, patterned by the ways that people encounter it), *Conceived space* (is representations of space, the space of scientists and planners, a space embodied by computers), and *Lived space* – a space that emerges from the struggle between perceived space and conceived space, a place populated by ‘users’ and ‘inhabitants’, whose subjective experiences produce a space redolent with meanings (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1991, p. 364). In the passage cited above, we see the transformation of conceived space into lived space – an intensified space that escapes formalism and geometricality and becomes deeply personal and emotional, filled with memories. The emotional dimension is a crucial part of the fantasy genre matrix and helps explain why this matrix can span so many different fictional worlds and specific franchises. It can do this precisely because it draws on memories and experiences from the users’ previous engagements with the genre.

Conclusions

In the present article, I have explored the close relationship between the genre of fantasy and the medium of computer games and what this means in regard to the player’s experience of engaging with playable fantasy worlds. Through the article, I argue that the link between fantasy and computer games is rooted in both cultural history and structural elements. In regard to the former, I have shown how Tolkien’s world moved almost seamlessly into a playable format through the pen-and-paper RPGs. This created a cultural and historical link between a fascination with Tolkien’s books and the social community of the pen-and-paper RPGs, which in turn connected the conventions of the fantasy genre with modern MMORPGs. But fantasy and computer games also have functional elements in common. The main function of the fantasy genre is world-building, whereby successful fantasy lies in the creation of a world in which laws are established and followed throughout the fiction, which in turn has the ability to create

a fantasy world we, as users, can enter. The spatial, geographical dimension of fantasy worlds and the self-coherent, consistent nature of them are key components when the genre becomes interactive and playable, as in computer games. The encyclopedic, law-based, and internally consistent nature of fantasy lends itself well to the creation of playable worlds, because in computer games all these elements become quantified and explicated through the game code.

In analyzing the elusive concept of worldness in relation to virtual worlds, the present article suggests that we think of it in a new way. Whereas the concept traditionally has been understood as text, structure, or consistency of game rules, I conceptualize it as an *experiential* quality of engaging with a virtual world regardless of medium. The experiential dimension of worldness and the way player experience spans multiple media through the fantasy media matrix owe much to the method used in generating the empirical data. Many insights emerged through the semi-structured focus group interviews with their open-ended questions, which allowed players to explain and discuss their different media practices, their uses and relate their experiences. The article further investigates how players in an interview context articulate worldness as mythology, setting, aesthetics, intertextual readings, and as emotional gaming memories. This way of framing a core quality of the fantasy genre (world-building) functions across single fictional universes and aims to grasp a specific fantasy experience of being in the world – an experience that works on the level of genre, by anchoring the specific fantasy world in the larger, transmedial, surrounding *fantasy genre matrix* it connects to. The concepts of *worldness* and the *fantasy genre matrix* can help us frame some of the different experiences players have, when engaging with and inhabiting vast online gameworlds and how these intersect with other worlds in a wide array of media. This framework is a tool for understanding gaming and the experience of gaming as something that expands well beyond the actual moment of gameplay.

Notes

1. “Secondary world” is Tolkien’s term for a world that is made through sub-creation, that is the building of an imaginary world through the use and recombination of existing concepts and ideas. A secondary world is therefore an imaginary world existing within but ontologically different from the Primary world, the material physical world we inhabit.
2. A guild is an in-game association of players, formed to make group activities easier and more rewarding, as well as to create a social atmosphere in which to enjoy the game. Membership in a guild offers players admission into a broader social network.
3. A PvE server (Player versus Environment) is a type of server that facilitates a style of play, where the player-controlled characters compete against the game world and its computer-controlled denizens – as opposed to Player-versus-Player servers, where players fight other players. PvE is the dominant form of MMORPG games.
4. Hack’n’slash is a mode of play that emphasizes combat and where the game play consists of killing monsters and moving through a dungeon, collecting treasures. This kind of game play has its roots on pen & paper RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons*.

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