

“It’s such a wonderful world to inhabit”

Spatiality, Worldness and the Fantasy Genre

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Abstract

The fantasy genre has proven to be extremely durable in creating blockbuster successes spanning mutable media platforms, such as books, film, television series, tabletop, and especially massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Currently 85% of all MMORPGs are situated in clearly defined fantasy universes (Van Geel, 2012). In other words: The fantasy genre seems to lend itself perfectly to the creation and distribution of vast, game-centric worlds in a way no other genres can. Why is that? This article explores the close connection between the fantasy genre and computer games, arguing that the fantasy genre’s specific ‘mode of function’ is the utilization of space and spatiality thus creating specific kinds of spatial experiences for its users, be that readers, viewers, or gamers. Based on empirical data from focus group interviews with *World of Warcraft*-gamers, the article develops the concept of worldness as a means for opening up for 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 media platforms and aims to grasp a specific fantasy experience of being in the world.

Keywords Fantasy genre, computer games, spatiality, worldness, player experience.

Introduction

Successful computer games have shown to be unique in not just attracting players but also keeping them engaged over long periods of time. This is especially true when it comes to MMORPGs, where player engagement is expressed through various metaphors such as “moving into” and “losing oneself in” a virtual online world. Such metaphors are contributing to an understanding of computer games as a powerful affective medium and players as solely interesting in a media specific perspective, in-game. But if we zoom out and adopt a wide-angle genre optics, we see connections to other types of media also. I conducted three focus group interviews with twelve different European players of *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. I was originally interested in the players experiences of and engagement in *WoW* as a fantasy genre game, but during the interviews, it became increasingly clear that their interest in the fantasy genre in no way was limited to the game itself: All informants had a thorough knowledge of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy either through Tolkien’s books, Jackson’s films, or both; they were interested in and sought the fantasy genre in books and films; they all had a gaming history involving old fantasy situated games, most of them had experience with tabletop games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*; they participated in Renaissance Fairs, Medieval re-enactments, and live action role playing (larp)¹ (Toft-Nielsen, 2012). The fantasy genre clearly formed a wider genre field of interest they all participate in and engage with through a wide array of different media. In the following, I focus on the transmedial qualities inherent in the fantasy genre, specifically in relation to space and spatiality and draw on *WoW* players’ reception of the game world in order to better elucidate the complex interactions between the fantasy genre, its media specific actualization in a MMORPG and the players’ experiences in engaging with this.

Investigating player experiences

World of Warcraft thrusts you into a central role of an ever-changing story. You and your friends will be active

participants in events that are steeped in the rich lore of this fantasy universe. (Blizzard, 2012)

WoW is the largest Western MMORPG with over eight million paying players and belongs to a type of game that primarily is defined by its persistent game world: A virtual meeting place where thousands of players interact with another and with the game mechanics in a world that is “on” at all times. The actions and events in the game continue in a cumulative way, allowing players to develop a character and influence the online game space. Even though this game space is constituted by rules, structure, or systems, the *raison d’être* of games lies in our enjoyment in playing them, mastering them, and experiencing them. But investigating player experience is not an easy task, which the game studies literature clearly shows. Player experience has been gauged in terms of different *motivations* for playing (Bartle, 1996; Yee, 2006), *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Chen, 2007), *presence* (Lombard, 1997), *enjoyment* (Klimmt, 2003), and plain *fun* (Koster, 2005). One central aspect in regard to player experience is the enjoyment of engaging with and being drawn into a virtual (game) world, which is often referred to as *immersion* (Calleja, 2011; Murray, 1997). Ermi and Mäyrä studied immersion in computer games and proposed a model describing how it is experienced while people are playing. More concretely, they understand immersion in terms 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). The imaginative immersion will in the following serve as a stepping-stone for investigating the transmedial experiential potentials of the fantasy genre.

Fantasy and its mode of function

Fantasy is a notoriously elusive genre to define, and the term has been applied to basically any form of literature deviating from a realistic mode of representation, such as myths, legends, fairy tales, utopian allegories, science fiction, horror, and magical realism. Throughout genre history, fantasy has been theorized as both a

modality (Jackson, 1988), an impulse (Hume, 1984), formulaic fiction (Clute and Grant, 1997), and a trans-generic quality (Rabkin, 1976). Such an essentialist genre approach to fantasy, through a taxonomic definition, is problematic. But instead of asking what fantasy is, it is more fruitful to ask what fantasy does, that is, the *function* of the genre (Miller, 1984; Neale, 1980).

In 1893, the Scottish author George MacDonald wrote an introductory essay to an American version of his fairy tales, formulating what was to become one of the most fundamental principles of fantasy – the fabrication of a made-up world with its own system of internally consistent laws: “The natural world has its laws, and no man must interfere with them in the way of presentment any more than in the way of use; but they nevertheless may suggest laws of another kind, and man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws” (Boyer and Zahorski, 1984, p. 15). The Oxford philologist J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) also owed much of its appeal to its logical rigor and empirical detail. Its maps, glossaries, chronologies, and other scholarly elements fostered an analytical mindset as well as a sense of wonder. His essay “On Fairy-Stories” is a manifesto for the modern practice of creating and inhabiting fantasy worlds. Fantasy is a rational activity, Tolkien insisted; “it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make” (Tolkien and Tolkien, 1983, p. 144). In the essay, Tolkien explicitly criticized Coleridge’s well-known formulation of how fantasy is apprehended as “the willing suspension of disbelief.” Coleridge’s view reflects the early nineteenth-century ambivalence about the powers and the pleasures of the imagination. He did not perceive that an individual could wholeheartedly believe in a fantasy world while at the same time being aware that it was fictional, a view that Tolkien deemed an inadequate description of a reader’s deep emotional and intellectual investment in worlds of fantasy. Building on both Coleridge and MacDonald, Tolkien refined and combined their ideas, applying them to the building of imaginary worlds. Tolkien insists that an imaginary world – what he calls the Secondary World – should be presented as true and exist in its own terms:

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. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. (Tolkien and Tolkien, 1983, p. 132)

Sub-creation is Tolkien’s term for the building of an imaginary world through the use and recombining of existing concepts and ideas, so that they fit together in a coherent way, which ultimately makes us believe in the world being build.² Tolkien was not concerned with suspension of disbelief, but rather with active belief in a secondary world as if it was real, belief in the completeness and consistency of a given world, through the “inner consistency of reality.” This permits an emotional immersion in, and rational reflection on an imaginary world, a self-coherent and fully realized fantasy world that delights without deluding. Tolkien’s essay is an argument for a *poetics of space*, of creating a believable fantasy world. Such fully realized fantasy worlds can be viewed as a series of imaginative landscapes, spatially connected. Fantasy worlds, regardless of medium, can be mapped out. This spatial, geographical, consistent, and rule-bound nature of fantasy worlds are key features when the genre becomes playable and interactive in computer games.

Spatiality and world-building in computer games

Space has been a central issue for the study of digital media since the introduction of cyberspace (Benedikt, 1992) and Multi-User Dungeons (Anders, 1999). Murray argues that spatiality is one of the core features of digital media (Murray, 1997) and Aarseth points to space when defining computer games: “Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation” (Aarseth, 2001, p. 154). Fantasy creates worlds that can be explored by its users and this creates a strong interface between the genre of fantasy and the medium of computer games. Jenkins has argued that computer games, through “environmental storytelling,” can be understood as spatial stories, which unfold as the player moves through the game world (Jenkins, 2004). The central importance of both spatiality and the construction of a world are defining features in both the fantasy

genre and computer games. In an MMORPG like *WoW*, this world-building has a double function as both a frame and a space.

WoW’s success as a fantasy situated computer game does not originate from a literary ur-text whose narrative plot is played out (such as *The Lord of the Rings*), but rather a specific game world, which has been 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 commonly-branded *storyworld* with a number of different media-specific points of entry (Jenkins, 2007), which has resulted in a fully described, detailed, and coherent universe with wars and conflicts. As it were 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, rule-bound 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. The world-building of the fantasy genre has a double binding in both space and rules, which makes this genre perfectly suited for creating a playable world. The specific experience this affords the users of a given fantasy universe, I call *worldness*. Where world-building is concerned with the ontology of a fantasy world, worldness is a phenomenological and experiential quality of the former.

Worldness and the fantasy genre matrix

Within computer game studies, worldness is one of the most central and at the same time most elusive qualities of virtual worlds:

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)

Worldness has commonly been theorized as a specific *textual* quality of virtual worlds (Krzywinska, 2008; Klastrup, 2009; Pearce, 2009), as “a number of distinguishing features of its universe” (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004, p. 1), but that runs the risk of mistaking it for elements of world-building. Instead I understand it as a quality of the users’ reception of the world, of being in the world, as an *experiential* quality. The experience of worldness is dependent on many aspects, of which I highlight two: The first one is the way the inner consistency of reality of a given world is constructed, that is the use and recombination of existing genre concepts and ideas in the world-building. Here game designers become sub-creators in charge of producing a consistent secondary world, a game world, players inhabit, as a kind of “coconspiracy between designers and players” (Pearce, 2009, p. 20). The second aspect of worldness concerns the individual player’s expectations and previous experiences: These expectations draw on the complete mental image and knowledge of a given world we as users have – our ‘repertoire’ of the world. Repertoire is here understood as “the familiar territory within the text” (Iser, 1987, p. 6) – like genres help shape our understanding of a specific text by transcending the individual text to a larger and boarder interpretative framework. This larger framework, which shapes our experience of worldness, forms what I call the *fantasy genre matrix*. The term ‘matrix’ means both ‘mold’ and ‘uterus’ and is used to illustrate a dynamic, interpretative framework, in which our knowledge of, commitment to, and understanding of past fantasy universes and texts operate as interpretative patterns in our meeting with new fantasy texts – not just as mental, cognitive schemas but one that also entails a sensory and emotional dimension. The fantasy genre matrix is a way of framing the different experiences the fantasy genre can offer its users, across different media, creating “a complex of interrelated meanings which its readers tend to interpret as a discrete, unified whole” (Couldry, 2000, pp. 70-71). In the following, we focus our attention on how *WoW*-players articulate their engagement in the game and in the overall fantasy genre *through* different aspects of worldness.

Worldness articulated

The following empirical data is from three focus group interviews with a total of 12 *WoW*-players, six men and six women, age 21 to 40 years, from different European countries (Denmark, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden). They all played on the same European server, in the same guild, and all were experienced players, participating in basically the same in-game activities. Since my project was exploratory, focus groups were chosen, as this form of interview is open for the informants own experiences and understandings (Halkier, 2008).

One of the first questions I asked was how important the fantasy genre is when choosing a book, a film or a computer game. 32-year-old Lykke answered: “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.” Both women are highlighting the spatial dimension (world, landscapes) as key in their experience of the genre. 30-year-old Martin supports their observations: “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 here echoes Tolkien’s notion of sub-creation; the cosmological anchoring of the universe, where every element fits within a larger mythological frame. 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 illustrates that worldness for him is pure game mechanics, hack’n’slash.³ Game theorist Jesper Juul has argued that games consist 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 (Juul, 2005). Where Martin engages the game as a world, as spatiality, Thomas is purely interested in the game as game mechanics, as rules – both of which are constitutive aspects of the fantasy genre.

The different media involved in a given experience also informs worldness. Mathias and Samuel, both 25, discuss the remediation of

already established fantasy worlds. They know *WoW* through the three RTS games, cartoons, board games, and novels, and these different media offer a particular kind of experience, as Samuel tells us in special regard to the novels: “[T]hey give you a nice background on... yeah like the quests in-game [...] Yeah if you know he’s whole background and stuff, its... yeah quite cool.” This importance of a *storyworld* anchoring the gaming experience is an example of what Jenkins calls an “evocative narrative” 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). It is important to note that the experience of worldness is not necessarily limited to the specific universe or the specific fantasy franchise, but can operate at a genetic level – as a fantasy genre matrix: “[T]ake the whole Ulduar team in the north. It’s full of references to Norse mythology, like Freya and Mimeron,” 34-year-old Dennis explains. Mathias likes to discover the different intertextual references to other fantasy franchises embedded in *WoW*, whereby the game as a fantasy text is interweaved with other fantasy worlds, fantasy tropes, and symbols. This creates a depth engagement with the game and the world of the game, which extends beyond the game itself, as well as enriching the experience of playing the game. The total experience of worldness is forming an *experiential emergence*, a surplus value to the particular world, by anchoring it in the wider and surrounding fantasy genre matrix. Martin described how a reference in *WoW* to a game he formerly played could re-activate the experience he formerly had with that game and that feeling would feed back into the current experience. This leads us to the finale example, which is worldness as kind of a personal and unique “lived space” (Lefebvre, 2005) for Mathias, based on emotions and memories:

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 we see here is a transformation of the very game as space to the game as *place*. While space is an abstract collection of points separated by certain distances, place is a concrete and unique environment, with which people develop emotional bonds; while space is an empty container for discrete objects, infinite, and timeless, place is a network of interrelated things, finite, and shaped by history. In short, while space is a mathematical concept, place is a social concept (Tuan, 1997). The game space here becomes a place, personal and emotional and filled with memories. The emotional dimension is an important part of the fantasy genre matrix and can help us understand why this matrix can span so many single franchises: Because it draws on and works through our gaming memories and the previous engagement we have with the fantasy genre.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the close relationship between the genre of fantasy and the medium of computer games and the effect of this in regards to the player’s experience of engaging with playable fantasy worlds. Fantasy and computer games share functional elements: the main function of fantasy is the utilization of space and spatiality through world-building, whereby the success of the genre lies in the sub-creation of a world, where laws are established and followed throughout. This in turn has the ability to create a fantasy world, we as users, as players 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. The detailed, rule-based and internally consistent nature of fantasy makes for formidable playable worlds, due to the fact that the inner workings of fantasy are imbedded, quantified, and explicated thorough the game code. It makes for a fully-fledged world we can experience from within, through performance and agency, which makes for a particular kind of user experiences, when engaging with such fantasy worlds. In discussing the concept of worldness, I suggest we think of it in a new way. Whereas the con-

cept traditionally has been understood as text, structure, or consistency of rules, I conceptualize it as an experiential quality of engaging with and inhabiting a virtual world regardless of medium. I have shown how players articulate worldness as mythology, setting, generic intertext, and emotional gaming memories, and how they experience it across different media and across single franchises, anchoring the single fantasy world in a much larger and surrounding fantasy genre matrix it intersects with. 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 game worlds, and how these connects to other worlds in a wide array of media. All these different elements, emotions, and understandings inform each other and intersect to form a complete experience of worldness, a wonderful world to inhabit and to revisit.

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Notes

- 1 Larp (live action role-playing) is a role-playing game where the participants physically act out the actions of their characters, often in costumes within a fictional setting represented by the real world.
- 2 Subcreation is the ability to create a world within a creation: Since human beings are created in the image of God, they also have the desire to create, and this kind of creation Tolkien named “subcreation.” Subcreation is opposed to *ex nihilo* (from nothing) creation that only God is capable of, thereby limiting human creation to the pre-existing concepts found in God’s creation.

- 3 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 in pen & paper RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons*.