Why walk when you can teleport?
Themes of travel in online roleplaying games

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Abstract

Travel constitutes a significant activity in the majority of Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs), whether players are pursuing quests, trading, adventuring or simply exploring. Yet not all journeys are equal, and the roles of, and responses to, various journeys demonstrate a number of interesting interpretations of travel. From one perspective, journeys in games are simply consumers of time: notably, *World of Warcraft* obtained the nickname "World of Walking" due to player perceptions that there was too much travel involved. Yet it is intriguing that some players voluntarily undertake extensive journeys, which are often difficult (in gameplay terms) and time-consuming, when more convenient routes are available. This article seeks to consider the many roles of travel in MMORPGs, and to reflect on ideas of the journey as, among other things, labour (*travail*), a rite of passage, and a means of saying goodbye.

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Although the players themselves remain firmly in their seats, travel, and the journeys that are made, are significant activities within Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs). Aspects of game-driven play which incorporate travel, such as quest-

ing and trading, are supplemented by player-driven journeys, to explore perhaps, or to visit a favourite location. Scholars have noted that 3D environments (which MMORPGs typically are) place an emphasis on movement through the world, prompting more travel than in 2D environments (Book, 2003, p. 4). Yet in the variety of journeys, and in the discourses that surround them, we can see that the players of these games interpret and make meaning from travel in a number of different and sometimes contradictory ways. Travel in MMORPGs serves a number of purposes, therefore, and this article will investigate and consider different kinds of travel, attempting to understand what, for players, travel means.

A study of these interpretations and meanings contributes to a number of discussions and developments. Firstly, the investigation informs (and is informed by) debates about social roles in games and about the relationship (or lack thereof) between games and narrative structures. Secondly, a clearer understanding of player activities in game spaces provides information useful to game providers in creating fulfilling environments for their players and in accommodating a variety of approaches to play. Finally, and in more general terms, examining online games adds to the corpus of information about online spaces which, while increasingly widely studied, are still relatively poorly understood, particularly in the context of the relationship between online and offline behaviour.

The academic debates which contextualise this work focus on attempts to understand the practices of gamers, and the extent to which games can be thought of as texts containing narrative structures. Both areas of inquiry feature strong analytical structures, which are valuable tools when they are allowed to inform, but not to construct, our research. When considering the ways in which players approach games, there is a tendency to create typologies; Richard Bartle's seminal 1996 work on player types (refined in 2003) and Nick Yee's model of player motivations (2006) are undoubtedly the most significant. Typologies of gamers are, however, "young" enough to be necessarily incomplete, and Yee has drawn attention to the lack of empirical evidence supporting Bartle's analysis (2007). In terms of narrative, although a lengthy and often antagonistic debate has taken place within and around game studies about the relationship between games and narrative (see, for example, Eskelinen, 2001; Jenkins 2004), this can be broadly set aside (Frasca, 2003).

It has been the site of a great deal of misunderstanding, but has at its heart the common principle that, while games are not stories, notions of narrative (alongside other analytical approaches) can help us to make sense of them. For the purposes of this study, a useful intervention is that of Celia Pearce (2004), who offers a consideration of narrative in a play-centric context. Pearce defines a number of narrative elements which can be found in games; of particular value in understanding game journeys are experiential (the emergent narrative of the play experience), augmentary (backstory and contextual information) and metastory (narrative overlay) elements (Pearce, 2004, p. 145).

Here, then, I set out not to produce another typology, nor to undertake a narrative analysis, but rather to explore the journeys that players make in games as cultural practices, in their own terms. Taking elements from both narrative and typological approaches, I will produce a cultural analysis which might help to refine future work.

We move on, then, to the journeys themselves. When considering the various forms of travel which players undertake, we might make an immediate distinction between two general types: travel driven by the game, and travel driven by the player. Although the outcomes of these forms of travel can ultimately be the same – arrival in the same location, even after travel by the same route and in the same manner – the sense of purpose is significant. In the majority of MMORPGs, game-driven travel is constructed through a mechanism of game objectives. Typically, these are quests, where a character is required to travel either incidentally (to another town to collect a package, for example) or as a more fundamental part of the quest experience (they might have to escort an injured soldier to safety). In addition, many games offer achievements (rewards obtained for completing longer-term, non-quest objectives) and these are sometimes travel-related (to visit every cave system in the game, say). Finally, travel occurs as an aspect of situation: location is important in certain games for particular reasons (e.g. security, access to facilities), prompting travel to these locations from elsewhere.

The notion of a quest as a motivation for travel, and as a way to give travel meaning, is firmly rooted in narrative traditions. Some writers refer to the archetypal heroic quest of Odysseus (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 133), and as the vast majority of these games employ common tropes of fantasy literature (around 85% of MMORPGs are

fantasy games: Van Geel, 2012), we might also note the prevalence of quest narratives there, with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* being perhaps the best-known of many examples. More broadly, Campbell noted the importance of the monomyth or heroic journey to the structure of myths (2008). Academics in game studies have worked to define quests, suggesting, for example, that they require the player to "move through a landscape in order to fulfil a goal while mastering a series of challenges" (Aarseth, 2004, p. 368). For game players, however, quests are understood in a dual mode: "in both narrative and other, more functional and experiential, terms" (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 133). While quests provide an augmentary or metastory narrative which sets the triggered activity in terms of the game's story-world (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 127), the majority of players engage with the majority of quests, and the journeys they prompt, as a piece of game function which sets clear and simplistic objectives. Indeed, the idea of the heroic journey is so well understood by game players that transitional and expositional sequences can be removed (Jenkins, 2006, p. 120), turning the quest into a shortcut to game activity. For the majority, therefore, quests function in a manner similar to achievements, and both of those are not far from the simple functionality of shopping and banking – the end result (the purchase, the reward) is the objective, and the cultural experience is ignored.

Where the quest, achievement or simple location is the driver, therefore, travel is to a large extent meaningless in these spaces: travel extends the time of the quest, achievement or location activity, but is not integral to it, and the fact that a player may be pushed to explore the game world becomes incidental. This is reflected in player discourse around travel and quests, with *World of Warcraft* for example mocked as a "travel simulator" (e.g. Newlin, 2009) or as "World of Walking" (Rohnalt, 2011). Travel is perceived as work which must be completed in order to obtain a reward, *travail* in the truest sense. We might then think of achievements which celebrate this kind of travel, among other things, as celebrations of the mundane; much like the "gamification" (Castronova, 2011) of life implied in applications like *foursquare*, in which you can unlock badges "for the things you do in the real world" (Foursquare, 2011), achievements "gamify" games, making play activities out of incidental labour. That many of these activities are also repetitious (quests that are repeatable or achievements which scale: kill 10 cultists; kill 100 cultists;

etc.) supports notions of these activities, and the connected journeys, as in pursuit of a work ethic or corporate ideology (Rettberg, 2008). In another locale, we might see such a journey as a commute.

Evidently, the designers of such games understand that travel, beyond first instance exploration, becomes onerous (and it is perhaps intended as such). The worlds in which these games are set are "scaled" such that they are functionally very small. Indeed, players remark on the oddities of world sizes, and extensive discussions take place which attempt to provide accurate measurements of the effective size of these spaces, from the tiny Telara (the world of Rift; 4.6 miles long and 5.5 miles wide) to larger spaces such as Norrath (*EverQuest*), which at launch was claimed to cover 350 square miles (Maverick, 2011). In addition, travel speed is relatively swift: most players make their characters run everywhere, and it is possible to cross the entirety of even a mid-sized game world in under an hour of continuous travel. Even so, as characters increase in power (and often, also, as games increase in age), the "blockage" of travel is lifted, and a variety of ways to make journeys shorter become available: mass transit systems, personal transport devices (e.g. mounts), the ability to fly, or the ability to teleport. As one commentator notes, in the context of tourism in *Second Life,* "one distinct advantage of the tourist experience in virtual worlds is that instead of being required to walk to the next sight, one can simply click a link and 'teleport' there" (Book, 2003, p. 15). Travel is tedious and a time sink, and long-time players (i.e. established customers) need not trouble themselves with it.

With this instrumental notion of travel in mind, it is therefore striking that a substantial number of players appear to choose to travel for reasons other than those driven by the game. Moreover, many of these players choose to travel slowly, or in a manner which does away with the conveniences accorded to those who adopt more conventional approaches. In general, inconvenient forms of travel offer no tangible gameplay benefit and, in fact, may expose a character to additional risk – travel on foot through a forest full of monsters is rather more dangerous than simply teleporting between cities. So although travel to complete game objectives may ultimately be either onerous or meaningless, these voluntary journeys seem to offer players a way to make meaning of, and through, online travel.

In some regard, the idea that travel becomes easier as one gains power, and as the game ages, indicates that specific journeys, and travel more generally, constitute some form of "rite of passage" for an MMORPG player. The process of levelling a character (increasing their power by gaining experience in battle, etc.) replicates the experience of growing up; as level/age rises, access to increasingly powerful and effective forms of transport becomes available. This raises two important considerations: firstly, that increasing power, and increasing access to transport and to choices of transport, constitutes an increase in independence (and MMORPGs are traditionally relatively dependent games, in that much of the game content requires access to groups of allies); and secondly, that the ability to make a choice about transport gives you the opportunity to use transport as a statement, to choose the harder path.

It is in terms of these considerations that the deliberate undertaking of "perilous" journeys must be set. Before they reach the break points in progression that grant access to high speed or instant travel, players will have passed slowly through small patches of dangerous territory on numerous occasions. Yet to deliberately undertake and successfully complete certain more substantial journeys without access to "easy" forms of transport becomes a badge of pride, and a mechanism to gain respect from other players. At a superficial level, players of high level characters will remark, in public channels, on the presence of a lower level character in a notably dangerous area of the game world. More significantly, players will discuss particular journeys that represent a more concrete and specific rite of passage than the simple "growing up" of increasing levels of power (e.g. Olivetti, 2010, comments p. 4). We might think of these activities in terms of trials or tests, and the completion of such trials provides a topic of discussion and of reminiscence. An example of a journey of this kind could be found in the game *EverQuest*, in the early months of its release. Two of the major cities in the game stood at either side of the game world's main continent, and the journey between the two was lengthy (taking approximately one hour) and very hazardous at lower level. Yet the trip was considered to be worth making, simply for the experience of so doing. Players would strip characters naked, in order to place all of their belongings in the bank as a protection from loss, before running across the world, attempting to evade lions, bears, griffons and giants. Death on the

journey was commonplace, returning the traveller to their departure point, and successful completion was felt to be a triumph (Ceeb, 1999). And although reattempting the journey a number of times might seem laborious from a distance, this was not simply *travail*. The peril, the nature of risk and trial, and the sense of achievement make this more a matter of *aventure*.

Another important aspect of such journeys is that, unlike reaching maximum level, relatively few people undertake them. Their status, and the status of those who succeed in these "adventures", indicate that we can see these kinds of travel as cultural practices, as forms of performance and of display which generate cultural capital. A more visual indication of the cultural nature of in-game travel comes from the way in which these games and their players address the notion of appearance. In more modern games, players are able not only to obtain powerful new equipment with a unique look – a staple of MMORPGs – but also to choose to hide this under a "wardrobe" set of equipment which presents a different appearance. In terms of travel, this sartorial attention has two implications. In the first, players will travel to or around cities or other areas of dense player population to display their outfits (Royce, 2011). Yet clothing features can be fairly subtle (especially in the case of small items such as gloves and boots), and a parallel but more ostentatious display comes not from the character's attire, but from the character's means of transport.

As noted above, as character power increases, so too does their access to high-speed travel, and many MMORPGs offer a variety of "mounts" or "vehicles", including some which are hard to obtain. Display of such rare acquisitions will often prompt enquiry or comment from other players, sometimes including outright jealousy. Again a claim to in-game capital, the use of the mount as a form of display calls on tropes of the car in American culture in particular, and in youth culture more generally, which have been explored by scholars (Miller, 2001; Best, 2006). The idea of "cruising" stretches into the online space from post-war America via the medium of modern youth. In some cases, parallels are explicit, with specific mentions of cruising and even the incorporation of a "hot rod" into *World of Warcraft* (Maninscratch, 2010). The fantasy (and thus generally medieval) setting of many of these games also prompts us to think of forms of regal and noble display from his-

torical contexts, conjured in art: Godiva, perhaps, or Napoleon. And certainly, these cultural connections are reflected in the philosophy underlying these games. Jeff Kaplan, the lead designer for *World of Warcraft*, talking on the subject of a new flying mount, noted: "We wanted you to be able to land in front of your friends and be able to show it off like, 'Hey, dude! Check me out. I'm on a flying mount!'" (Yu & Park, 2006, p. 2). Not only, therefore, do players travel to display themselves and their accrued in-game capital, but the idea of display as an activity in which players will participate is designed into the game.

Touring the city on a high-speed epic mount, however, is not the only way in which travel is used as communication in these spaces. A small group of characters will proceed around the cities far more slowly, moving along at walking pace, a distinct contrast to the tendency noted above for typical characters to run everywhere. Although some new players may have not yet discovered that they *can* run, by choosing to walk, players are generally identifying themselves, through their characters, as roleplayers (Manekineko, 2011, comments 7, 8, 13). Attempting to maintain a patina of "appropriate" behaviour for their avatar, role-players offer a more nuanced consideration of the character's relationship to the world. They will often walk, noting that people do not normally run everywhere (Sullivan, 2011), and they will take care to avoid collision with other characters. As roleplaying is most usually a social activity, such characters are often found in densely populated areas.

Each of these examples indicates that journeys and the activity of travel play a significant role in these spaces in contributing to, and as forms of, communication. Perilous journeys act as the subject of conversations, between other players or between peers who have undergone the same experiences. Travel for display prompts, again, inter-player communication, but as an activity it communicates in itself – prestige, wealth, in-game achievement. Equally, walking conveys a strong message to other players; in these spaces it is as unusual as running around in a real-world shop or house.

Of course, travel doesn't only have a communicative function, though, and we can clearly discern instances where travel, and often a specific journey, is not only uncommunicative but actually highly personal. In the broadest sense, this applies to the idea of exploration, where this is not driven by a desire to unlock every

achievement but rather by a desire to see the game world in full. As Bartle's typology suggests (1996), there is a qualitative difference between these two approaches to play, between what he calls the "achiever" and the "explorer". Achievements reflect a character's presence in a number of generalised locations, whereas exploration is much more about a sense of place and location, and about a personal experiential narrative of visitation. For Yee (2006), this is a distinction between achievement and immersion; between an interest in the game and an interest in the gameworld.

The notion of exploration is again underwritten by the structure of many of these games; so much so, indeed, that some scholars have expressed concern that they invoke a frontier mentality, reflecting the legacy of western imperialism and an ideology that a frontier is a boundary of exploitation (Gunkel & Gunkel, 2009). In a crude sense, then, exploration could be seen as participation in a structure in which players are encouraged to kill "the other" and steal their goods, without engagement with a notion of pre-existing culture, co-existence or sustainability. Yet in reality player exploration is must less about conquest and much more a reflection of curiosity – again, in Bartle's terminology, these are "explorers" and not "killers". For these explorers, the frontier is the boundary of what is known to them, and they capture the spirit of real-world explorers in journeying to see what is there "because it's there".

One player activity in particular truly characterises the concept of a personal journey in these game spaces, and that is travel as a form of memory: the goodbye journey. My own first encounter with this practice concerned an *EverQuest* player, heavily involved in a large player community site, who travelled the world and created a series of screenshots to memorialise the space before cancelling his subscription to the game. Sadly, this material is no longer available online, but more modern versions of this practice can be found, even continuing to use *EverQuest* as the source of the memories (e.g. Valcaron, 2010). While a number of players will build slideshows from the screenshots that they have produced during their time playing the game, an interesting activity in itself, there are apparently far fewer players who create deliberate travelogues, although the introduction of the ability to capture in-game activity as video make this simpler than it was historically. In the context of the game, this is not an activity which grants reward, advantage or opportu-

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nity, and in that respect this piece of travel is again removed from the framework of *travail*, becoming something altogether more personal. Parallels can be sought and seen in machinima productions chronicling similar last journeys in a narrative mode – *The Monk*, produced in *EverQuest 2*, is one good example (Tan, 2005).

Of course, for us to know about the existence of these more personal practices indicates that they are not wholly personal in nature. While the activity itself is not a piece of communication, the sharing of the activity – whether through a forum or blog post, *Facebook*, or a *YouTube* video – is communicative, so each of these activities provides the substance for a piece of communication. In that these are massively multiplayer games as much as they are online or roleplaying games, in many senses a communicative – a social – context is essential for activities in game to have meaning. It may well be the case that the vast majority of "goodbye" travellers keep their last journeys to themselves, but the fact that some do not indicates that the drive to share and communicate underpins much of what occurs here.

This enquiry only begins to consider how we might usefully understand the relationship between travel practices and the nature of the narratives that players construct in the game. It is not immediately clear whether these experiential narratives are personal narratives or avatar-centric narratives, for example, and thus whether the motivations that underlie travel proceed from a sense of player experience, from a respect for the coherence of the storyworld, or from a combination of the two. In particular, when players memorialise their gameworld, do they do so to remember that place, their avatar in that place, or the experience that they had playing that avatar in that place? As always, therefore, there is more work to be done here.

We must also reflect on the differences between these communicative forms of travel and the travel as work/*travail* discussed at the start of this article. Considering these practices in terms of gamer typologies, it is clear that the different kinds of travel – the different purposes – can be more easily understood in terms of these frameworks. As noted, the simple initial division into game-driven and player-driven travel in many ways reflects Bartle's achievers and explorers. Yet a reflection upon Yee's model suggests that, while recognising that a great deal of travel is motivated by achievement, many journeys are driven not only by immersion (the area of Yee's

model which incorporates discovery and exploration) but also by social factors. This offers support for Yee's proposition that player types might not be independent in the way that Bartle suggests (Yee, 2006, p. 772), and implies that player motivations are more complicated than our current typologies allow.

Evidently, although these games support notions of exploration, travel initially appears as something mundane and unnecessary, this very presentation means that journeys undertaken in spite of this banality are immediately notable – whether the walking of the role-player or the cruising of the flamboyant. Much as in other popular cultural activities, then, players of MMORPGs reappropriate travel, taking it from a work/achievement context and transforming it into an immersive and social tool. Its mundanity and vacancy of meaning allow players to reuse it to communicate with and to other players, and to make meanings anew. Much as cycling in the age of the car or keeping chickens in the age of the supermarket makes a statement of novelty in the context of the background of the world, so travel makes a statement against the background of the game world. In travel in MMORPGs, therefore, we can see a cultural activity of surprising richness.

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