Abstract of Ph.D. thesis

Towards a Poetics of Virtual Worlds
- Multi-User Textuality and the Emergence of Story

submitted by
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This thesis, as one of the very first monographies in this area, introduces and examines persistent online worlds (game worlds, social worlds, commercial chat worlds and educational worlds) as important cultural net-based phenomena. It presents a number of concepts, definitions and analytic tools to be applied in the development of a poetics of virtual worlds, "poetics" here understood as a systematic approach to examining the rules and aesthetic functions of virtual world systems. Throughout, the main focus of the thesis is oriented towards examining of how a virtual world is to be understood as a prominent example of "multi-user textuality", textuality here defined as the production of presented events through the use of an event-generating system by multiple users at the same time. A key concept emerging from this investigation has been the concept of "worldness", which the author introduces as a way of describing the particular style, story and experience of a virtual world, as it emerges through the interaction between users and between users and the properties of the given world (or game) system. Furthermore, the concept is also introduced as a theoretical equivalent to the concepts of "literariness" as known from early structuralist literary theory. As part of the attempt to understanding the defining properties of virtual worlds, the general creation of "worldness", central objectives of the thesis have been to:

- outline a precise description of what a virtual world is (excluding other forms of imagined or simulated worlds and encompassing different "genres" of worlds) and relating these to the properties of the internet as a medium of presentation of these worlds
- to trace and describe the history of virtual worlds and the emergence of various genres of worlds
- to identify the theoretical perspectives needed to provide a complex understanding of the phenomenon
- to outline a basic analytical framework with which to approach the study of worlds in existence
- to expand the analytical and theoretical understanding of virtual worlds as phenomena through empirical case studies in a number of worlds

The historical part of the thesis traces the origin of virtual worlds back to the first multi-player game known, created as early as 1962, and points to 1979, when the first MUD (Multi User Dungeon) was launched, as a seminal year in the development of virtual world software and genres. It relates virtual worlds to three specific properties of the internet as medium, namely dispersed multiplicity; infinite scope and "factionality" (the conscious play on the indiscernibility between what is fact and what is fiction online). The theoretical part generally draws on insights from online community studies, computer game studies (Ludology), performance studies and cybertext theory, arguing that a variety of perspectives are needed to understand the phenomena fully. This literature is throughout the thesis related to empirical research into a number of role-playing games and virtual worlds, primarily the game worlds *Modus Operandi* and *EverQuest* and the *House of Mystery* murder mystery impro game, designed and staged by the author in the virtual world *StoryMOO.*

Finally, the analytical parts of the thesis (primarily chapters 7 and 10) are, on one hand, based on a theoretical discussion of the unique features of multi-user texts and the challenges they pose to the system designers and on the other hand, on the various modes of interaction identifiable by the

analysts studying the worlds after they have been created. Specifically the analytic framework is based on a detailed analysis of specific "events" in the world as they are generated through various *levels and forms of interaction* and through the combinations of forms of interaction and event-generating *agents* and finally, of the analysis of the emergence of tellable events (dramatic, rare and unusual events) which are, ultimately, the result of the experience of *interaction-in-time.*

Though the thesis presents case studies of events in only a limited number of virtual worlds, findings so far indicate that in designing for virtual worlds, one needs to take into account the conflict between the individual's desire to explore the geographical space of the world and the need to make players gather in one place in order to create interesting social interaction and produce interesting events. In addition, one needs to find a balance between controlled events (driven by the system or game developers) and the "digressive" events arising from spontaneous improvisation and play between players. In analysing, and perhaps also designing a virtual world, the analytical framework based on the interaction forms and agents and the experience of interaction-in-time as it is described by players *outside* of the world or experienced by the analyst herself as player *in* the world, seem to provide results which can be used in a further analysis of the world or in the process of future development of the world. Hence, the long-term analysis of the virtual world *EverQuest*, a period of study throughout which the author played the character Milagros on two different servers, seem to indicate that several stages of experience and world appropriation are identifiable. These levels of experiences involve both the experience of the world as game system, as social world and as a specific piece of software or "tool" for play, which the players directly confront both inside and outside the world. It is the conglomerate of all these experiences, which creates the specific feeling of, in this case, the worldness of *EverQuest*, "EverQuestness".