
WoW Is the New MUD

Social Gaming From Text to Video

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With the immense popularity of massively multiplayer games such as World of Warcraft (WoW), other media as well as game research have discovered gaming as a topic of discussion and study. These discussions, however, tend to ignore the history of both games and of game studies. This article addresses the connections between one of the old and, today, obscure forms of using computers for multiplayer gaming—the text-based Multi-User Dungeon (MUD)—and the current, highly visible and massively used graphic interface game World of Warcraft. These connections range from player style through game-play options to social interaction and player-controlled social modifiers within both types of games. The comparison is based on play, observation, and interviews with players in MUDs and in WoW.

Keywords: *MMORPG; MUD; game studies; role-playing games*

In February 2006 I wrote a post on the discussion board of the World of Warcraft (WoW) guild one of my characters is part of. I explained that I am a researcher and told something about my former work on text-based role-playing games—MUDs. It is part of my methodology not to conceal my research as I find that being open about the research process solves more problems than it creates. The next morning I got a private message, asking if the words *Dragon Realms* and *Aarinfel* meant anything to me. It turned out that in 2006 I had ended up in the same faction on the same server and in the same guild as a guild mate from a MUD that closed down in 1999. I have to admit I was surprised but not stunned.¹ I had already registered similarities between the two games and been thinking about this article for a while. The coincidence only confirmed what I already suspected: WoW and MUDs fill much the same niche in the gaming world and have much the same functions.

At first glance, the games have very little in common. A MUD—multiple user dungeon/dimension—is a text-based game or just social space expressed through writing. Line upon line of more or less quickly scrolling text is the interface between the player and the game, and the player plays the game using the keyboard and writing commands to the game. When playing a modern computer game with a video-heavy interface, the text is reduced to a small box somewhere around the edges of the screen, carefully positioned so it will not obscure the view of the animated game images. There is very little in this first impression that connects WoW and MUDs. After a few sessions of gameplay, a MUDder (MUD player) will however start to

recognize certain similarities. These exist on several areas: Game structure, story and fiction, character development, questing, and social interaction are some of them. I will address these areas and compare the highly commercial World of Warcraft by Blizzard to Dragon Realms (DR) and Aarinfel (Aa), two noncommercial MUDs I played between 1997 and 2001.

What Are MUDs and What Is WoW?

MUDs are early online multiuser games. They are text based, meaning they have no graphics; everything is described in words. These words describe a geographical space that you explore through the metaphors of movement—up, down, north, south, east, west—and your representation or avatar is described through words and numbers, visible to you at certain commands. The input is typed; you cannot use a mouse in most MUDs. In recent years there have been some interface modifications done that permit a certain amount of graphics to a MUD (Holmevik & Haynes, 1997), but the rule is that the input and output is all in writing, sometimes with different colors. Some of these MUDs are mainly social spaces with very little that looks like gaming going on: chat, not competition or other strategies of scoring and marking achievement. Others are fiercely competitive and allow for both players-versus-environment (PvE) or player-versus-player (PvP) gaming styles. Mostly these MUDs are noncommercial, they are run by a few administrative staff who are also players, and they are developed and changed through collective effort. The player base is relatively small; 200 players are considered a solid player population that ensures constant around-the-clock adventure and company.

WoW is a commercial, graphically sophisticated game simulating a three-dimensional world. The way to traverse it is a simulation of physical movement, and the avatar you control is the likeness of a humanoid body. The interface is a combination of graphic, accessed through the mouse, and typed, accessed through typing long strings of commands or by using shortcuts readymade by the game developers or written specially for and by you. It allows for many different play styles, both a more social version and a more competitive version, and also accommodates these through different servers, dedicated to either role-play (RP), PvP, or PvE. In this way, Blizzard tries to offer a wide range of player types access and delight in their games.

Games in Current Culture

Online computer games in 2006 have a very different position in culture from what they had in 1997, when I approached my first MUD. From being an obscure activity for geeks, they are now mainstream commercial entertainment. Dragon

Realms could have up to 200 players on an exceptionally good day; World of Warcraft had approximately 5 million players in December 2005 (Blizzard, 2005). The economy of game development competes with the film and music industry, and the medium is moving at full speed toward the mainstream of popular culture. The parent generation of today's children has their own computer gaming experiences, even if those were rare occurrences with arcade games. Personal computers even in workspaces come outfitted with some simple standard games, mainly solitaires, and the users are no longer total strangers to the concept of computer gaming the way their parent generation was.

The new media panic discussions, which surface at the launch of all media innovations, have not died down yet (2006), but they are weakened. Henry Jenkins (2004) debunked eight myths of video games, and although his article did not instantly render the myths impotent, the overview is a good list of what people believe about video games in particular and any new media in general. The eight myths Jenkins addressed are:

1. The availability of video games has led to an epidemic of youth violence.
2. Scientific evidence links violent game play with youth aggression.
3. Children are the primary market for video games.
4. Almost no girls play computer games.
5. Because games are used to train soldiers to kill, they have the same impact on the kids who play them.
6. Video games are not a meaningful form of expression.
7. Video game play is socially isolating.
8. Video game play is desensitizing.

Most of these arguments have been repeated for every new medium. In a large work on film and television, Norwegian scholars presented letters from around 1911 that have clear parallels to the present arguments, one of these describing the danger for eye damage from visiting the movies (Dahl et al., 1996). What did they worry about at the time? How film would cause intellectual degeneration, low female morals, and in general a confused state of mind in the unlearned masses who happened to enjoy such new and popular media. The need for a professor to debunk very similar myths about computer games expresses two important things: Games are treated the same as other, now mainstream media were when they were new. But games are also past the first stigmata of "popular," as they have been discovered, accepted, and are defended by members of academia (writing in academic journals published by reputable publishers).

This means that the potential players of a game such as World of Warcraft are a much larger and diverse segment of the population than the players of MUDs. MUD users were much more heterogeneous, mainly represented by the early users of computers from the period when the 'net was dominated by young White males. The population of current computer/video games is reported to be quite different from

the earlier male-dominated space, with 45/55 female/male ratio and ages ranging from 10 to 50+ (ESA, 2006), numbers not deviating too far from the conclusion of a report on U.K. gamers from BBC (Pratchett, 2005):

- 59% of 6- to 65-year-olds in the United Kingdom are gamers: this is equivalent to 26.5 million people;
- 48% of the United Kingdom aged 6 to 65 plays games at least once a week (21.6 million people);
- 100% of 6- to 10-year-olds consider themselves to be gamers;
- a quarter of U.K. game players are aged 36 to 50;
- 18% (or 1.7 million gamers) are aged between 51 and 65;
- the average age of U.K. gamer is approximately 28;
- 45% of all gamers are female.

From being a hobby for programmers at MIT in 1961-1962 (Kent, 2001), creating computer games today is a job for graphic designers, composers, scriptwriters, animation artists, game designers, and in many cases living actors. The audiovisual aspect of creating games as well as playing creates a multimedial business surrounding each game. The text-based games were mainly dependent on programmers and a few busy writers. Simple and unimpressive, the fiction of the game was maintained by a few lines describing each “room.” A room description could for instance be: “This is the town square. A large fountain stands in the middle. Exit: north, east, south, west.”

There were very few special skills needed to create these sparse descriptions of the gamescape. But where early programmers might have focused on the utility of the rooms through describing exits and important functional objects often related to quests or useable for the players in some manner, the aesthetic was not ignored. In *Dragon Realms*, “builders” had a special status, and their job was to create compelling descriptions of the gamescapes to maintain a suspension of disbelief needed to experience the game as a place rather than a piece of software. Their job was basically the same as that of the composers, graphic artists, and animation artists: to create the illusion of an environment integrated with yet beyond the user interface that lets the player interact with the game platform.

One thing is quite immediately recognizable from the MUDs to *WoW*, and this is the relationship to a fictional genre and the construction of a fictional context for the gameplay. A large number of the MUDs relate to what is known as “high fantasy,” and the *Warcraft* series of games is a series firmly planted in this genre. High fantasy allows magic and different supernatural powers. It also conveniently explains such things as resurrection, instant travel, instant communication without technology (whispers can be heard independent of game geography), why certain quests can be repeated inevitably, and the high density of heroes. Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw’s original MUD1 is also known as *British Legends*, which are a common source for high fantasy inspiration—the legends that is. And if you enter MUD1

today you may find this room: "You are lost in a Misty Graveyard. A headstone to the east bears the inscription, 'OK, so maybe the dragon was a bit of a handful . . .'" This hints at a gothic/fantastic world and one where there are dragons. WoW has plenty of the same, misty graveyards populated with undead, dragons, mysterious paths, and even some of the more technological solutions. Where MUD1 has railroads, WoW has gnome underground inventions like the Deeprun Tram, a railway between two cities.²

Both of these relate to a literature starting with the gothic romances of the Victorian age and the monster of Dr. Frankenstein, heavily informed by J. R. R. Tolkien and also inspired by science fiction. It is a literature that permits a uniquely playful approach: Rules can be created independent of the physical rules of the universe, and although the universe of both the game and the fantastic literature needs to obey its own rules, it does not have to bend to common conventions. Where technically minded science fiction demands sophisticated knowledge of what may become possible through known technology (e.g., landing on Mars [Robinson, 1992] or creating and entering cyberspace [Gibson, 1993]), the fantastic permits the creator to not just break known rules but also to create new ones, changing any number of known and accepted parameters.

The relation to high fantasy does not count for all games as games to my knowledge draw their fictitious material from every aspect of human experience. But by choosing a high-fantasy setting, Blizzard avoids the controversy that for instance DMA and Rock Star Games has entered into through games such as Grand Theft Auto (GTA), where the setting is the shady side of an American city, and the game entails fictional interaction with the criminal elements of this city. Although we can argue that the GTA context is as unreal to most of the players as is high fantasy, the mafia/underworld setting with recognizable and available weapons, cars, opponents, and victims of GTA is obviously a lot more controversial than the orcs, elves, swords, wands, and maces of WoW. This means that when we consider the common fictional contexts of games, one reason for the common occurrence of high fantasy may simply be that nobody is likely to complain about the abuse and wholesale slaughter of trolls in WoW in the way that the Sex Workers Outreach Program USA (SWOP-USA, 2006) complained about the portrayal and treatment of prostitutes in GTA:

The game Grand Theft Auto demonstrates attitudes and behaviors that reflect broader social attitudes toward prostitutes, who are made vulnerable because of their criminal status. Our outrage and disgust at the depictions of prostitutes in games such as GTA renew our call for absolute de-criminalization and repeal of all laws that outlaw the exchange of sex for money in order to end the violence directed at people believed to be prostitutes.

The game platform does not discriminate: The player can get the same benefits for any feat, the fictional universe is what decides if the player is to be rewarded for

killing trolls, cheating prostitutes, or matching a perfect golf swing. Still, we can assume that the fictional universe influences the behavior of the players and how they create their own stories within the game.

Playing MUDs

A new MUD user is asked to create a character by choosing a name, a password, and certain parameters. The different parameters are set by the game designers, and you choose things like race, class, and gender and manipulate certain statistics. This is popularly known as “rolling” a character, and the process is an automated version of what players of pen-and-paper role-play games do. The *roll* points back to the roll of dice to determine the abilities of the character in pen-and-paper games or live-action role-play games, genres played without computers. In some computer games, rolling is still significant as the character may have different strengths and weaknesses depending on the digitally randomized numbers that appear in the character statistics. For some games, such as WoW, *rolling* merely refers to the process of creation as there is no real randomness to the act.

After creation you find yourself in a starter area. The traditional DIKU-MUD starting area will let you start out in an arena where your character can defeat slugs, snails, and mice—perhaps the occasional bunny—to gather enough experience points to gain a new level. During this process there will be the occasional drop of better equipment from the available monsters: increasingly better equipment as the character gains levels. It also lends a certain humor to the start-up as you can find your character bested by a mouse or a harmless practice dummy.

Death leads to resurrection and subsequent corpse-runs to regain the equipment or even the entire body. It is not uncommon to ask for help from fellow players to find your corpse as part of the culture of assisting and working in groups to solve tasks too tough for the individual players.

Communication in-game between players happens in writing through several different channels: say, yell, tell, whisper, world channel, guild channels, and other channels defined by the Game Masters or developers. Say is heard/read in the same area/room as the character speaking, and the other channels have different range. There is also a system for players to send each other “letters,” digitalized simulations of snail mail.

Most gaming MUDs also have storage, a bank where the possible amount of stored items expands as the character gains levels. There are inventories and bags that can be kept in the inventories to expand the storage potential. The characters have a certain amount of slots in the inventory and also a certain amount of slots for equipment that the character can wear. This equipment is visible at certain commands. What distinguishes the character the most is the individual description the player makes to give others an idea about an outer “skin” for the character.

Any WoW player would immediately recognize the previous description as something that can be done in WoW, common features of most role-play games. There are however a few things related to the creation and playing of the character that cannot be repeated in Kalimdor or The Eastern Kingdoms. A MUD character can in most platforms have a written description. Such a description can for instance be: “Spiky hair surrounds a round, moonlike face. Two black eyes and a ruby red mouth stand out against the milky pale skin. The short and chubby body is draped in silky, black material.” This allows the player to give a unique, personal touch to the appearance of the character. In WoW the players have certain options, but Blizzard will be hard put to make as many different graphic options as the total open approach of the blank textbox permits.

Both MUD players and WoW players like to show off their equipment. Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore (2006) argued that characters with “epic” equipment like to stand idle in highly trafficked spaces to be admired for their equipment. On the European role-play server Argent Dawn, some of the players of The Onyx Ascendancy, one of the RP focused guilds, replied to my question about this with their interpretation of this behavior. They claimed that the real show-off opportunity was clothing chosen for good looks, not armor. In their opinion, “farmed epics” are bad taste in cities. Epic gear is battle gear, and if you are going to battle or just came from battle that’s what you wear while standing in front of the bank or auction house waiting to begin or closing things up before logging off. Good taste and show-off items in their opinion is clothing that makes the character look better than otherwise but has no practical use other than to be admired.³ Admiration is important, but they expressed admiration for style, taste, and that extra little effort rather than for items that are not all that rare to experienced players. This is the kind of inventiveness that was also appreciated in the MUDs I played and studied (Mortensen, 2003).

Dragon Realms (DR) and Aarinfel (Aa) permitted items to be renamed. Because the appearance of an item was a text line, a player could compose a new text to make a weapon or a piece of armor appear differently. Only administrators with certain authority could do this, and to restrict the practice and demand on these select administrators, the players would have to pay for renames in FPs, favor points. Favor points were earned for good role-play and were distributed by other players through recommendations (Mortensen, 2003). In DR and Aa there was not a lot of gear to choose from; at a certain level there were a couple of good weapons of each type and nothing more. This meant that all players at the same level would be wearing the same gear, and there was little status to be had from acquiring particular items. The prestige was in the elegantly named item: “a sharp dagger” could be changed into “a crystal epee” and “a horned helmet” into “a grinning dragon’s head” depending on the player’s style.

The FP system does not exist in WoW, and the self-styled renames are not available to regular players. With the larger player base and more intricate issue of graphic design, custom design of armor is pretty much unthinkable in WoW. What

does exist is a player-run, player-created system for distributing the epics players have to really work for, the DKP or Dragon Kill Point system (Wikipedia, 2006). This is very different from the FP system in that it does not involve role-play, but at the same time it is a player-administrated reward system that rewards the kind of behavior players want to encourage.

The DKP system rewards attendance and participation in raids for complex, hard-to-master areas in WoW. These raids are from 20 to 40 persons as opposed to the regular 5-person groups, and all players need to cooperate as a unit, filling the different tasks for which their character is most suited. To encourage participation, reliability, and group cooperation, the raid groups need a system for rewards. This system also functions as a system for splitting up the loot: You earn points by participating in a raid and doing your part of the work, you spend points by bidding on the loot that is dropped by the monsters overcome by the raid group. This way, a diligent player has more of a chance at winning a good piece of equipment than a more casual player, and although not always considered fair, the system attempts to reward those who are willing and eager to play by the rules of the other players, and it acts as a social stabilizer. This happens through the way it ensures regular participation by the same group of people in the same kind of tasks, it allows for certain expectations that will be met, and it creates teams in an environment where the potential for being lost and unconnected is very large. This is a way to control and modify the behavior of the players toward each other, and so the DKP system has some of the same flavor as the FP system, although the systems have different goals and encourage or suppress different aspects of human behavior.

Playing WoW

Playing WoW is an overwhelming experience. Where playing MUDs means you have to learn to type really fast, to play WoW you need to be able to move your character around quickly, gauge the distance to nearby dangers, and read and reply to written messages from other players while using several features of your keyboard and your mouse/joystick or whatever input device is your favorite. It encourages and demands multitasking to be played skillfully and well.

It will however soon become evident that it is possible to filter the different experiences out, and the gaming experience can be limited to the level of game intensity you desire. For some, playing WoW is a fully social experience. They adhere to the patterns established by Richard Bartle (1996) with his four much cited and discussed player types and are pure socializers. These players will often gain levels slowly and be more concerned with hanging out, chatting, using the game as a social space rather than a competitive or explorative space. For them, the abilities, armor, and skill of their character are unimportant; what they focus on is to be able to hang out with their friends.

The other three typologies are killers, explorers, and achievers, and Blizzard has even gone so far as to particularly accommodate one of these groups: the killers. With dedicated PvP servers, the killers have whole virtual worlds open to their special version of the game. This consists of testing their skill consistently against other players, not through more subtle means such as showing off role-play skill or elegant gear but directly through player-versus-player combat. On PvP servers players are always vulnerable to attack, and the number of player kills is carefully tracked and displayed on the connected Web sites through the honor system. This suits the killer typology very well as the main pleasure of their gaming is to best others. It is also an example of game development looking at earlier experiences from games like MUDs but also Ultima Online and EverQuest: games where some who fit the killer typology may also have been mistaken for griefers—people who play mainly to ruin the fun of others. As they prey on other players such as the less directly violent or competitive socializers, they do appear to be malicious rather than friendly, and the solution EverQuest and later Blizzard have chosen with dedicated PvP servers is as much to accommodate those with a desire for challenge as to protect those who do not seek this type of thrill.

This is a major difference from the MUDs and one that is brought about from the magnitude of the player mass. With 200 gamers, a MUD can generate enough company for its participants that they have somebody to play with most of the time. With 5 million gamers, Blizzard can start to split their player mass into smaller groups and specialize in a way MUDs never could. They have PvP servers, RP servers, and “normal” servers. The distinction is functional for certain ways of playing online games, at least for RP and PvP. *Normal* in this context means that there are no specific rules for what kind of play the players can be expected to engage in. PvP means, as earlier mentioned, that the players are there mainly to combat other players, not to play against the environment (PvE—battling computer-generated monsters also known as NPCs, nonplayer characters). RP means that you can expect the other players to act as if their characters are real to this universe.

Role-play was the distinctive feature of the games Dragon Realms and Aarinfel. Aa was even more RP intensive than DR and was created by a group who left DR to create a game with a higher intensity of RP. This kind of player-driven creativity was the basic structure for game development in MUDs; a group of players would decide that they could make a better game than the current and break out and make one that was configured along the lines of what they considered a good game. The standards of good role-play in Aa was heavily informed by the standards of good role-play in tabletop games and, not the least, in live action role-play games (LARP), where very little is spared to make the illusion of fantasy a reality. This meant that the characters as much as possible acted as if there were no players controlling them, they were not part of a game, and they had no idea about things like levels, hit points, statistics, or other mundane-world references. The characters would not have to leave to have dinner with the family, they had to retreat in the service of the master; they had

no homework but meditation in preparation to kill the dragon. And they had their own independent lives, a background, a history, loves, hates, and other experiences that made out their role-played lives. But after the character has said its goodbyes and retreated, there would more often than not be a message over the global OOC (out of character) channel saying: “Thanks for the fun all, but I have got to go do dishes or I will be slain ruthlessly by the mother-dragon.”

In WoW we find similar rules for role-play. On the role-play servers there are some common rules for what to discuss in which channels. Say, the channel that appears to those close enough to a character to be within reasonable listening distance, is always supposed to be in character, IC.⁴ Many of the global channels—trade, looking for groups, local defense—are considered OOC. An interesting contention is always going on about the general channel—many use that for RP, broadcasting their drama to all. Others use it to make IC comments, or lead long discussions over just about anything, or just to rant. Often one of these groups tries to shut the other down and claim the channel for whatever is their particular interest.

There are some social actions that imitate standard actions: /greet, /goodbye, /hug, /kiss, /smile, /frown, /slap, /spit, and /dance are some of these. The same actions and many many more (where is the /noogie command when you need it?) were available in MUDs to indicate the emotional state of the character. This is why they were called *emotes*. You can however, as in MUDs, also use more elaborate emotes: “/em reaches up to wipe sweat from her eyes, leaving blood from her gauntlet smeared over her forehead.” This would be a typical, elaborate emote from a role-player in a MUD—or in WoW—after a battle. The /em part is then translated by the game to being an emote, which means that the sentence will start with the character’s name: “Agirra reaches up to wipe sweat from her eyes, leaving blood from her gauntlet smeared over her forehead.”

These self-created emotes are highly individual, and so there are few visual aids to them in WoW. Depending on punctuation, there are however a few gestures. In orcs, a period leads to a gesture of closure, a small movement of hands, opening and closing them. An exclamation mark leads to a lifting of arms and hands in a large gesture, whereas a question mark leads to a smaller gesture again, but this time with a little outward circle to the hands, subtly different from the common statement, connoting the lilt of the voice as it rises toward the end of the sentence when asking a question (Figure 1).

A good emote is one that has been created by the player, not a standard expression. In WoW the standardized ones are a bit more acceptable than they were in the MUDs, as they come with animation. For instance, /grieve will show the character crying. They are however more frequently used for ironic, humorous effect than for role-play. When I was applying to be accepted into The Onyx Ascendancy (TOA) I was heavily advised to use emotes to display my role-play abilities: The self-created, text-based emotes are still the most respected tool of role-play despite the sophistication of the graphic universe.

Figure 1

Agirra Demonstrates How the Character Indicates a Sentence with a Question Mark at the End Through Hand Movements



Source: World of Warcraft® provided courtesy of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.

Role-play servers also often have several ways of approaching the storyline. In *Aa* they tried to solve the issue of repeated quest actions—why can you kill the same mob over and over again, for instance—through making it impossible to repeat quests. *WoW* does the same thing; once you have finished a quest you are flagged and cannot do it again unless the quest specifically allows for that. But this still does not explain why after you have killed a dragon you can help your friends kill the same dragon over and over again. Why is the dragon always there? Who are you constantly killing?

On *Argent Dawn*, *The Onyx Ascendancy* killed a faction leader of the Alliance after many failed attempts. It was a 40-man raid expertly smuggled into the area. The leader was killed, and the group got out safely. This faction leader (*Staghelm* in *Teldrassil*) is an NPC, and it was back in place only minutes after *TOA* had pulled off the assassination. How to explain that the carefully and successfully executed killing had absolutely no impact on the game universe? *TOA* created its own little

story to explain this. In their version of the history of what happens on World of Warcraft, Staghelm is now an imposter, a fake planted by TOA to undermine the Alliance from the inside (Mortensen, 2005). The action was a plan to assassinate the real Staghelm and give the TOA mole a chance to slip in and take over. This has however not gone without discussion. Some found it ludicrous and impossible; some asked if there would be a long line of fake Staghelms now because other guilds might do the same—in general people wanted to know how come one guild felt they had the right to rewrite the game story. TOA answered that they are only rewriting their story, anybody else was free to do their versions.⁵

RP-wise this is a familiar argument. This is the argument that drove at least one player away from DR—he wanted to rewrite the fictitious frame of the world, but his role-play had no impact (Mortensen, 2003). The administrators and creators were more easily available there, so he was less free to create his own little interpretation of the events, although he also had more reason to expect to influence the game as there were other players who did. A computer game is a much more static world than a tabletop game or a LARP. Once something is coded, changing it demands a lot more work than saying “OK, that’s a great idea, we go with that from here on, just remember to write it on a piece of paper so we remember what we agreed on.” And if you have to recode the game with every little story written by players, it would create a fluidity that is not desirable in a game. All parameters constantly changing means maximum insecurity, the exact opposite of the balance between tension and mastery that constitutes one theory of pleasurable play (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This way, an environment that is structured to accommodate role-play is hard to align with an environment that accommodates the kind of play against rules and the game world that constitutes the main gaming events in online worlds. In role-play, rules will have to be broken and can even be changed by the play, in more structured agon-type games. This conflict is very close to one described by Roger Caillois (2001):

In play and games, *agôn* and *alea* are regulated. Without rules, there can be no competitions or games of chance. At the other extreme, *mimicry* and *ilinx* equally presume a world without rules in which the player constantly improvises, trusting in a guiding fantasy or a supreme inspiration, neither of which is subject to regulation. (p. 75)

Hence, role-play in online worlds demands compromise, whether the world is tiny, with only a few active players who mainly have builder privileges or huge, made up of millions of users, most of whom don’t care whether Staghelm really died and was replaced or not. But WoW does develop as a world, sometimes even after player input. The most recent change was to develop a new instance (limited play area with particularly tough NPCs and certain quests) that could be opened early if

the players on the server devoted a lot of time and energy to supply “resources” for the defending armies. Although the instance would open sooner or later anyway in all servers, this gave the players a way to influence their game space and feel they had achieved something by accessing the instance early on their server. In MUDs, the potential for influence is much higher as a well-played assassination can lead to the corpse being discovered and disposed of the next day and a new faction leader be built and put in place soon after. With only one game world to look after, the influence of the administrators is much larger, and small-scale changes can be done quickly. But in both cases, these altercations need to be significant events, planned changes that are integrated into the storyline of the role-play world as well as the game fiction and carefully implemented to avoid breaking quest chains or to adhere to the current logic of the known fantastic universe.

The Game Structure

Game-based MUDs such as the DIKU-MUDs and WoW (together with a large percentage of the other computer games out there, particularly of the adventure or role-play type) adhere to a system for calculating the outcome of battles or other contest-flavored conflicts that was not developed for computers but for manual calculation using dice.

This means that even the combat situations in WoW, graphically very differently represented, are familiar. Although the graphic interface is a significant development from the text-based interface, the mechanics of what happens then is not. In a MUD, I can type *cast frostshock skullsplitter* (or most likely *ca fr skull*), and I attack the chosen target in the way I wish. In WoW I hit tab until I see the chosen target represented on top, then I hit the icon for frostshock or I hit a number corresponding to the icon, and I start casting the spell. What happens next is that I am told how much damage I do. In a MUD I am told “Your frostshock does 511 damage on Skullsplitter.” In WoW I am told the exact same thing, and I can also have the option of seeing white and yellow numbers running out of the head of the monster I am fighting.⁶ In both situations I can monitor my own health and that of my target, checking to see if I have more health left than the enemy or if the enemy is likely to kill me. If I am healing others, I can target fellow players in the same way to check if they need me to heal them. Although the user interface is different, the mechanics of the game platform is clearly recognizable.

Other very recognizable issues are death, equipment, quests, and trade. The discussions from the MUDs of the 1990s are resurfacing with the graphic games—or perhaps they never went away. The matters of equipment, trade, and quests are discussed elsewhere (Castranova, 2001; Walker, 2006), but we’ll dwell for a moment on the matter of character death, particularly permanent death.

The problem with death is: How do we deal with the death of the character? If death means the character is gone and you have to create a new one and start from scratch (known as permanent death), this means the stakes are just too high. It leaves no room for error, and the tension of the game kills the enjoyment for casual gamers. Less than casual gamers seek this kind of tension, and they keep the desire for permanent death alive. When your skill level is too high for the game you play, you need to make it more complicated. One player I talked to had stopped playing WoW after almost a year because the only things he found to be a challenge in the game were the large, complex dungeons that demand 20 to 40 players cooperating in a large group known as a raid. These raids are very time-consuming both in terms of preparation and in the actual playing.

In any raid like that, your character will however die quite a bit. Death as it is practiced both in MUDs and in WoW is a contemporary setback, a pause to make certain events undesirable and to create a certain amount of tension as you want to avoid it, but it is not permanent. By going through a certain set of actions you can regain your former status. In WoW you resurrect wearing your old equipment only with some damage taken to its durability. In a MUD you will often appear in a local designated spot (temple, graveyard) naked, and you have to run and find your corpse to regain your equipment. In some MUDs like DR, you would also lose a significant amount of experience points, making it much harder to reach the next level. And this is the paradox that baffles role-players (how to role-play multiple deaths and resurrections?) and other gamers alike—you keep dying but you never die.

This issue is perhaps best solved by the role-players as the role-play solution often is to create rules if the game does not supply them. And so a role-player can for instance say that if he or she dies while in character, the character stays dead and must be deleted (if they are for instance killed by the alliance/enemies while on a role-played mission into enemy territory). Or the role-player can create an explanation: saying they were not really dead but just very badly hurt and needed some time to recover, claiming the Gods refuse to take them from this miserable existence as they still have a mission or explaining it as the matter of joining mind and body through forcing the energies of life back into the body, rather similar to the miraculous rescues in emergency rooms.

This way the player takes control over certain aspects of the game and creates his or her own little game within the game or interpretation of the game. By doing this, the players create microgames or even microuniverses within the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), where the rules are just a little bit different from what the game developers had planned for. MUDs are microgames compared to a MMORPG, and the MUD player's way of creating a microgame would often be through actually building a whole new game where the rules would be those of the differently minded from the original MUD. Aarinfel was that kind of MUD, and it broke out of Dragon Realms, bringing the bored, the curious, and the discontent over to a slightly different role-play MUD.

Individual Creativity

Both WoW and MUDs show a kind of gamer creativity. A major difference is however in how WoW allows it, whereas MUDs depend on it. The gamer creativity when it comes to coding for WoW is mainly expressed through modifications of the user interface (UI-mods or just mods). There are several available programs that adjust the interface and makes it easier to deal with than what WoW originally planned. Some of these have to a certain degree been integrated in the game, such as the quick loot buttons that allow for a player to pick up available items very quickly and without targeting it by hand or modifications to the raid administration window that makes the groups available for scrutiny directly on the game window without opening the raid group window. But these are all modifications that change the players' interface with the game; it does not (or is not supposed to) interfere with the game.

MUDs were and are made by creative players. New administrators, builders, and developers are recruited from among the player base or from friends of the current developers, friends who dabble in the same as the players and the developers. If the players are not happy with the game as it is played, they develop a new one, and so MUDs are not only run but also renewed and rebuilt by players rather than influenced through long chains of player feedback.

Isn't a Game Just a Game?

The examples I have given of MUDs and WoW can most likely be said about MUDs and most online multiuser games. MUD1 was in many ways the mother of all multiuser games, and that was already just a modification and bastardization of other game genres. What makes WoW different from so many other newer games is that it is so common, so widely spread, and so available. It is a 'net phenomenon that draws all kinds of gamers into it. It is also a game that does not seek to be "pure" in the fashion of first-person shooters, role-play, adventure, action, or any other genre. It is eclectic and opens up for a very diverse set of use—not the least of these the same kind of use as the MUDs are put to.

Possibly the title of this article could have been "WoW Is the New Counter-Strike," but I suspect the protests to that would have been much louder than to this article. Counter-Strike is purely an action game and consistent enough in the way it is played that there can be international competitions at a very high level and it is possible to name a winner. If there are ever to be WoW competitions, they would have to severely limit the play to be only about a small part of what the game contains, for instance the speed of instance runs—which team can get through Molten Core in the shortest amount of time. This would be possible to measure, but all the rest of what is considered WoW play would not be used and expressed, and a very

large part of the attraction of WoW to the casual, civilian player would have to be excluded. WoW is not a winnable game, and neither are MUDs. There can be degrees of mastery of parts of the game, but the measuring sticks for the different parts of the game are not even comparable.

The most important part of this exercise is however not to prove whether WoW really originally is a MUD or not. What I have hoped to show here is that the current, very sophisticated games did not come out of nowhere. They already have a history and have been developing for several decades. They did not suddenly spring to life like Athena out of the forehead of some brilliant Zeus of game creation. They grew, like all other life, out of the mud.

Notes

1. Not long after, I received an e-mail from a former administrator of one of the games I had played at the turn of the millennium. He invited me to drop by the American World of Warcraft (WoW) server where he and most of the rest of the original admin team are playing. Although there is probably a majority of players from the original MUDs who do not play WoW, there are too many who do to ignore the position of WoW as the new common gaming ground.

2. The railroad is a point of crossing between worlds in fantastic literature, most recently known from Rowling's Harry Potter books where a train carries the children away from the mundane world to the school of wizardry. But the railroad was one of the means of passing from Narnia to our world used by C. S. Lewis and is a common means of fantastic transportation.

3. The Onyx Ascendency, Guild Channel, Argent Dawn Server, March 2006, general response in conversation.

4. *IC* is also the abbreviation for in combat, a use that is confusing on role-play servers but not elsewhere. It has been enforced by the distinction WoW makes between what you can do when you are in combat—attacked or attacking—or what you can do when out of combat—OOC.

5. This discussion happened on the European World of Warcraft discussion boards for Argent Dawn, but these are unreliable sources, and it was impossible to find the thread again a few months later.

6. Note that *frostshock* and *skullsplitter* are terms used in WoW, and to use them in a MUD today would most likely be a copyright infringement. Substitute with your favorite spell and monster names, or just X and Y, to understand the general purpose of the argument.

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