

A virtual world aesthetics: theorising multi-user textuality

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This is an expanded version of the paper presented at the Internet Research 3.0: NET / WORK / THEORY conference in Maastricht, October 2002. It outlines several of the perspectives on virtual worlds I deal with in more depth in my forthcoming Ph.D. thesis on "The Emergence of story in virtual worlds: towards a theory of multi-user textuality".

Introduction

Within digital aesthetics, there have been much writing on the concepts of hypertext and cybertext (see f.i Electronic Book Review or "Cybertext Yearbook 2001"). Though Aarseth in his seminal book Cybertext (Aarseth, 1997) devotes a chapter to multi-user environments, in general little have been said on the relationship between multiple users and the process of text production and reception in digital environments - an exception is Beth Kolko in her article "Worlds from words" (Kolko, 1995). I believe, we specifically need to understand the way in which multi-user "texts" differ from single-user texts and one of my general research questions have been: how can literary theory deal with those kinds of texts (in the broad sense) which is the result of multiple distributed users interacting via a network within the framework of a fictional world such as a MUD or Massive Multiplayer Game? The concept of multi-user textuality, which I use to describe these specific forms of text, is one that is not yet well-established in the vocabulary of digital aesthetics, but which could be considered an expansion of the concept of digital textuality. We are looking at a form of text, whose materiality is digital, and computer-based. But in addition, the multi-user text owes its existence to the possibility of connecting one's computer to a network - and in the sense I

more narrowly think of it, to the possibility of being online. It is through the network of computers which define it and the users who traverse it, that the multi-user text becomes an actual possibility. The multi-user text is the expression of a collaborative act of writing and creating experience, in a shared community of writer-readers.

Perspectives on the virtual world

However, understanding the multi-user text in a specific environment such as that of the virtual world, requires us to take a closer look at the many forces at work in producing the virtual world experience. What does the experience of “worldness” more precisely consist of? And what is the “virtuality” of it? These are questions which are difficult to address in brief, but which in this context will only be touched lightly upon.

The virtual world as a textuality can on one hand be considered as a *tool* or instrument: that is, as a “virtual” text, it is a tool with which to produce something that functions as a “real” world. Like the virtual memory of the computer, which still very much functions as memory though it is not stored anywhere, it *functions* as world though it has no material anchoring in reality, nor any actual physical existence. It still has materiality as code though, a code which is in fact stored on a physical harddrive, and this code allows the creation of a world which people can actually log into and out of it.

On the other hand, the virtual world is exactly a *world* or simulated physical environment, and as such it has several different functions, which works together in making us make sense of it. Hence, the world functions both as an interpretative framework, a prop, a simulation and as a lived narrative:

In the function of *interpretative framework*, the world is that something we as users have a shared knowledge of, for instance as the backstory of the world or its “cosmology”, i.e. the history of its creation, its evolution, religion, the knowledge of the various races and classes which inhabits it and so forth. In EverQuest, the world I have been studying, this could be expressed as the overall feeling of “EverQuest-ness”, which on an overall level also indirectly refers to commonly understood, yet implicit notions of what one can do and cannot do within the world, which creatures to find or not find in a fantasy world like this, what events are likely (dragons might appear) or not (it is not likely that a spaceship will land in Norrath any day soon).

On a similar abstract level, the world also functions *as a shared “prop”* – which I here use in my interpretation of the concept as presented by Kendall Walton in his book on *Mimesis as Make-believe*. Kendall’s argument is that all works of representational art can be seen as objects (imaginary or real) which we use to project or feign a world. When engaging with this object or “prop”, we perform or pretend that we, pretending to be someone else, are in a real world with real objects, and what we do have a real effect in this world. As such, this experience of world, as I understand it, is closely related to the experience of playing, and of making-believe, whereas the more strict gaming aspects of the world is linked with other aspects of the world experience.

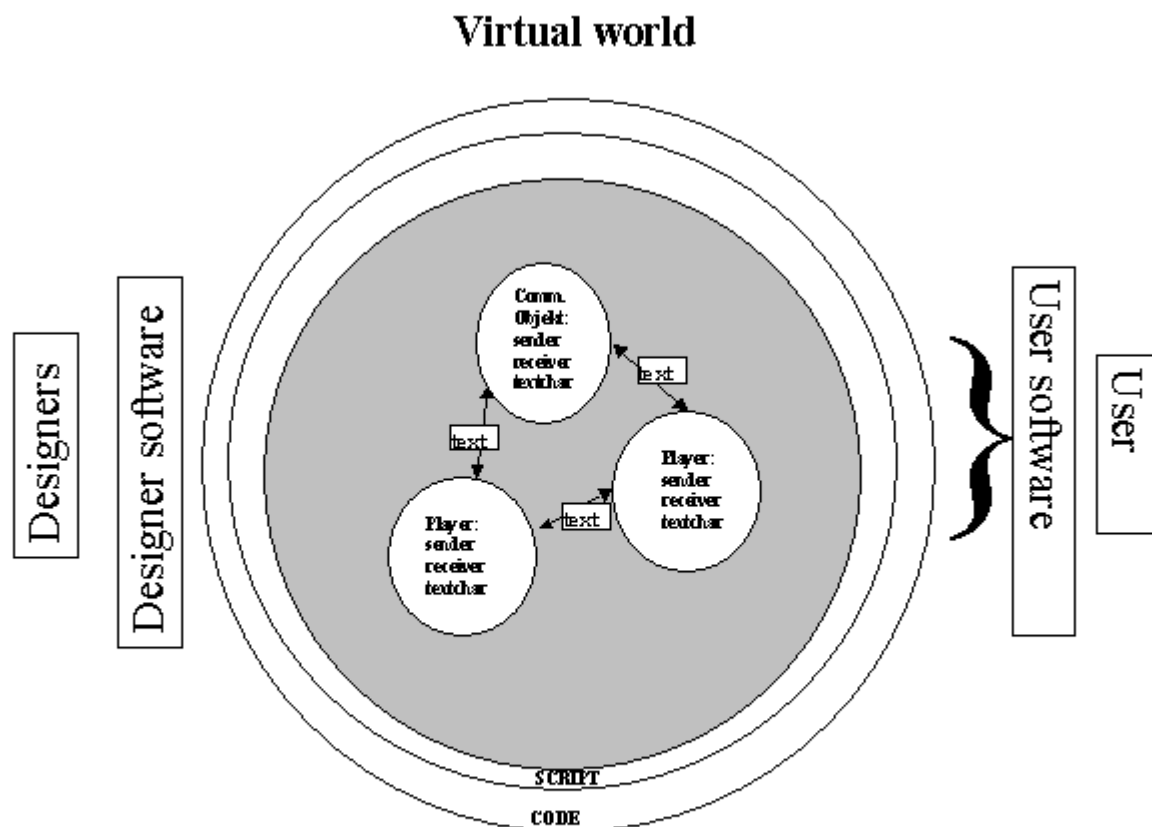
The gaming experience of the world is closely connected with the experience of the world *as a simulation*: that is, the experience of the world as real-time imitation of a world physics with the conceptually restricted behaviour implemented in the simulation - the rules of which you have to follow and figure out in order to successfully navigate within and interact with the world. Provided that figuring out the rules of the game and competently mastering them is an essential part of what gaming is, “playing against” or “playing with” the world rules is essentially a game world activity.

Finally, the last major function of the world is that of the experience of the-world-in-time *as a lived narrative*: in other words, that aspect of being in the world which is related to the experience of time, history and community development within the world. Having lived in the world for so long that you have had significant experiences or experienced significant changes you want to share with other players also familiar with the world, your own story of “the world as lived”, can, retrospectively, become a compelling narrative. It is the last two aspects of world-experience, that of the world as a game and as potential narrative, I have primarily been focusing on in my investigations of the ways, the world makes sense, the way it becomes “textualised”.

Textuality and text production in a virtual world

What do we really understand by textuality? Can the concept of text be stretched so far as to cover an entire virtual world? Yes, since textuality can be described as the act of considering the place of reader and text in the process of reading. The text contains signs that a reader, in the process of reading, decodes and interprets, be it graphical, auditive or verbal signs. The text does not necessarily need to be written text, but can be all forms of cultural artefacts with a signifying function. Hence, multi-user textuality is a way of looking at a "text" which happens to include several users within itself and a way of trying to understand the processes of communication and

signification at play in this form of text. Thus, multi-user textuality requires of us to rethink once more, the relationship between writer, text and reader. In the multi-user text, every user acts as a writer, sender and sign within the text almost simultaneously. This can be depicted in this way (Klastrup, 2001):



The process of text production in a virtual world

When we analyse the "final" text (for instance the log, we can read after a virtual world session), it is the result of interactions both with static objects in the world (objects or non playing characters) and more dynamic "objects": events and sentences generated by users. Let us as an example consider the room description: in a virtual world, the room-descriptions have one essential function (apart from the general setting of the scene and atmosphere, a function they also have in traditional fiction): they are meant to encourage users to interact both with the room and each other. The concrete objects in a room (say, a bedroom with a travel case which contains a sabre) can be the point of departure for numerous conversations ("hey, have you seen that cool sabre?"), for fights

("It is my sabre!"), for amorous encounters ("Darling, forget about that sabre, come sit on the bed with me") or the beginning or the completion of a quest which will earn your character experience and glory (the sabre turns out to be a magic quest item). This would apply to both written descriptions of a room or the graphical representation of it. Espen Aarseth's concepts of textons and scriptons could perhaps be used to describe this functionality as they are concepts which outlines an important distinction between the text producing machinery and the actual textual output (Aarseth, 1997). However, I would like to expand Aarseth's terminology, by making here a tripartite distinction between the permanent text producing objects, the impermanent text producing objects and the impermanent text output object, the "event" as read by an out-of-world user reading the screen. The text producing objects can be the rooms, designed objects and possibilities of interaction that comes with a virtual world or a specific setting; however it is not until the user (an impermanent object) interact with these and combine them with their own freely chosen communication, movement and "posing" or emoting that the actual text event is produced. Thus, writing or rather, designing, interesting experiences in virtual world, might be thought of as producing and timing an event for which a set number of stable objects "to speak with" are provided; these combined with the unpredictable users makes it possible, in principle, to produce a potentially infinite and unique number of text events.

Tellable Events, actions and agents

But what is an interesting experience? I would like to think of it as something that has narrative value. However, whereas it might be difficult to speak meaningfully about "the narrative" in a Massive Multiplayer World or to devise a closely knit plots to be followed and performed by the several players (which may always act in unpredictable ways which disagrees with the intention of the "plotter"); one could imagine ways in which to encourage players to perform certain actions, which would in retrospect, definitely be what Marie-Laure Ryan (Ryan, 1991) defines as "tellable" (i.e. story material) because of the tension or drama they give rise to. Hence, tellable events, according to Ryan, are those events which are unusual and unexpected; which present a conflict and at least (hopefully) an attempt to solve it. Preferably they are polyvalent (they have effects on various levels, subplots, or people). Popular tellable themes are unsuccessful actions, broken promises, violated interdictions, mistaken interpretations and double as well as single deceptions - known from any number of popular film or books.

EverQuest, one of the worlds I have been studying, is a world whose history so far has no end, and in which it is difficult to think about narratives taking place, that is narrative understood in the strict sense as a series of causally related events with a beginning and end to them,. Not only is it impossible to predict what the many human players will do: mostly many events are trivial (like killing smaller mobiles, talking to NPCs, or moving around to retrieve a certain item). However, some events in the world are "rare spawns" (they do not happen frequently, and you have to wait for them to happen) and hence could be thought of having "tellable" value.

But essentially, what is it exactly that is tellable? It is events, something that happens. "One day we were walking in the woods, then a griffin suddenly attacked us from above and me and my group killed it". And thinking about different forms of events and how to combine them might be one way to approach an textually-oriented analysis of a virtual world. As starting point, I suggest one works with these very basic events - or (inter)action forms, as I have also labelled them:

- **Manipulation**, which is the form of interaction, which consists of moving and combining objects.
- **Social interaction**, which is the form of interaction, which consists of communication and play with non-verbal and verbal cues and languages, i.e. both linguistic, and paralinguistic interaction
- **Information retrieval**, which is the form of interaction which consists of providing information, obtaining or storing it
- **Navigation**, which is the form of interaction that consists of moving through the world by moving your avatar (your "physical" representation in the world) from place to place in the world.

These actions might all respectively involve different forms of agents (see also Jensen, 2001, for a somewhat similar categorisation), some of which are more static than others:

- **Players** (the human users - dynamic objects)
- **NPCs or "informative" objects** (the non-human players or information holders - these might be both static or dynamic objects depending on whether the world is one in which the player gets to program objects or not)
- **Objects** (objects which can be manipulated and moved, these might also be static or dynamic like the other form of objects above)
- **World Rules** (the "voice" of the programme which determines the limit of action of the human player, i.e. the game rules which determines the consequences of a player's actions and potentially initiates events as reaction to these. These rules are generally static, but might occasionally be changed if they make the world malfunction)

Now, tellable events in a virtual world can then be evaluated as events, which might involve several or all action forms or agents: Events which only consist of one action form involving only one agent (one man killing one monster) intuitively appears to be rather uninteresting, whereas complex events in *EverQuest* could be those which present directed and more unusual experiences like longer quests, which often involve elements of both manipulating, navigating, socially interacting and coping with the world rules. The more complex the chain of events, the bigger chance that unexpected turns of events will also take place, including the possibilities of deceptions, potential conflicts (with opposing classes, NPCs, other players' interests) and following, the emergence of something "tellable". It is worth noting, that the tellability most likely has greatest value within a community of users of the world, since they are the ones which are able to distinguish between trivial and unusual events. Hence, it seems that tellability is also closely related to an experience of sharing and being part of a community of equally interactive peers: a tellable event seems to be one which has "paratextual" value, that is, one which has the potential of becoming part of the texts which surround a specific world.

These tellable events can also be characterised as polyvalent in that they may positively affect several aspects of your character, for instance the present level of the character, its social status (its "bragging rights potential", guild standing and so forth) and the general history of the character's "life in the world". A first conclusion is then, that a virtual world aesthetics will need to take into account the relationship between the different forms of interaction and story production or rather; the production of tellable events within a framework of more or less directed interaction with social impact related to community of the world. Analysing the different functions of the world, the multiple forms of agents and actions, and the relation between static and dynamic objects in the world, might be one place to start. Certainly, studying a world like *EverQuest* from this perspective has proved to be fruitful.

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