Patch Notes: Playing the Selves in Gamespace

by Alan Filewod

1.1 Login

I am flying in bird form high over the mountains of Pandaria. Casting a firebolt spell in an underground temple. Riding a goblin car through a jungle. Waging war in a winter valley. My name is Docktorboom. It is Featherw. It is Fishbreath. It is Macbethany. I am one player and four toons. I am a druid, two mages, and a death knight. I am distributed across two worlds, three server realms, and five universes. Each of me lives in a universe where the others do not exist.

With a few input clicks, I log on and off to move all four of me to a place that each toon can access: the auction house in Orgrimmar. All four of me on the other side of the screen now stand in the same spot. As I log between toons, I see some of my selves surrounded by the same players. Featherw and Docktorboom inhabit the same in-game social world; they have never met and can never meet, but they belong to the same guild and have friends in common. Sometimes I/we see those friends in Orgrimmar, but not often. After all, as it phases across its multiple existences on hundreds of *World of Warcraft* servers, Orgrimmar has a larger population than Toronto.

1.2 All ur Internet r belong to us!

Digital gaming may not be theatre, but it is a theatricalized activity, and it has a place in the wider sphere of activities that theatre embraces, where we trace a spectrum of related activities involving participatory play, narrative simulation, enactment, and spectatorship. Organized around the optic practices of the stage, we have drama; collapsed into signifying objects, we have puppetry; extended into the social real, we have re-enactment. Digitized, we have gaming.

Twenty years ago, when *Canadian Theatre Review* published its first issue on computers and theatre (*CTR* 81, *Computing Theatre*), gaming seemed to be emerging as a cross-disciplinary hybrid form. As the field of game studies struggled to find a balance and convergence of developer and player theories, the expanding literature drew heavily on game design and technical coding, on the one hand, and social science (anthropology and economics, primarily), on the other. The relationship with theatre was hard to pin down, beyond the obvious issues of dramaturgy and genre in game design. Increased video capacity in the 1990s added another dimension of theatricality when actors began to be cast in speaking roles in narrative cut scenes (creating another income source for actors).

Eve Online's character-creation screen.
Screen image from Eve Online, *© CCP Games*

In that 1994 issue, I described gaming as dimensionally collapsed puppet play, assuming a relatively direct relationship between player and avatar, and concluded that "[t]he computer game is a two-dimensional theatre that brings the audience back into the sandbox" (26). But it never was just two dimensions, and now I have learned to think of gaming as an embodied practice in which I project my corporeality into digital space. This is the expanding "atopian" realm of what Mackenzie Wark calls "gamespace" (21). For Wark, "game" supersedes Guy Debord's "spectacle" as the cultural logic of our time: "[g]amespace wants us to believe that we are all nothing but gamers now, competing not against enemies of class or faith or nation but only against other gamers" (25). We are all gamers in gamespace, on both sides of the screen. For me, this opens a way to think about the player as both actor and spectator distributed across a multiplicity of realms.

1.3 Enter World

In 1994 my object was to understand a rapidly developing and chaotic industry just as the digital turn was starting to spawn massive online culture. The impact of the Internet and digital con-

 doi:10.3138/ctr.159.007

nectivity was just beginning to transform gaming, and developers and distributors were pumping out new titles that could span the growing fissures and multiplicities in the player market. New game platforms produced new modes of play; technological advances in graphics and processors produced new genres. In the years before corporate dominance of online play, the game world was filled with small independent companies that developed and marketed their titles. But even in 1994, that was changing; this was the year that Blizzard Entertainment released *Warcraft: Orcs vs Humans*, an RTS (real-time strategy) game using an engine very similar to Westwood's pioneering *Dune II* (1992): harvest resources, build capacity, attack your enemy. By the end of the 1990s, first-person shooters, "sandbox" simulations (such as *Civilization*), and online role-playing games (or as *Ultima* creator Richard Garriot, "Lord British," dubbed them in 1997, MMORPGs: Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) were gaining dominance. Developers began to see the potentials of cross-platform marketing. Ten years after that *CTR* issue, Blizzard marched the orcs online with *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), which has dominated the gaming market since and continues to set the benchmark for game design that satisfies a spectrum of player types.

Before *WoW* there had been other massive online games: *Ultima Online* (1997) and *EverQuest* (1999) created a player base that migrated to Azeroth when Blizzard (known as "Blizz" on the forums) opened the digital gates. They also built the foundational game social environment with the mix of player-formed guilds, factional PvP (player vs. player) combat, PvE (player vs. environment) level progression, instanced dungeons, and character-class specs that established the base party formulation of tank, melee, ranged DPS (damage per second), and healer. (Twenty years ago an article of this type would have had to explain these terms carefully; today they are the lexicon of gaming.) *EverQuest* in particular drew the attention of players and researchers, who saw something changing as the boundaries between game worlds and "real life" became increasingly tenuous.

In 2001 Edward Castronova changed the discourse (and his own career) when he self-published online an article that had been rejected by every economics journal to which he had submitted it. Castronova argued that the in-game economies of virtual worlds were economies in the real and were subject to the same economic laws. His article changed the conversation and led to his 2005 breakthrough book, *Synthetic Worlds*. Cyberspace was no longer a literary metaphor or an electronic sandbox. It was a real place where lives were lived and performed, and it multiplied toward an infinite horizon. *WoW* began as a created world that grew with the "discovery" of new lands in game expansions; player achievements increased as new content levels were introduced, and server realms expanded to accommodate a player base that grew to millions. According to Blizzard, *WoW* has a lifetime total of more than 100 million players, with a total of 500 million characters (Blizzard). Each server realm is geographically identical; Orgrimmar is always Orgrimmar, but the extent of its multiplicity varies according to the capacity of the subscriber base. In gamespace, every world is an alternate world. There are seven million portals into Azeroth today, opening into hundreds of identical instantiations in numerous languages. Gamespace is phase space, and if we don't live there, we have lives there.

1.4 Vent killed my guild

When I started playing *WoW*, I signed up for a "PvP-RP" server because open player combat promised a level of risk to complement the fantasy of role-playing a character. At that time, voice communication wasn't common in the game, and chat channels were all text. That meant that until I actually began texting with someone, I had no sense of the player behind the toon. Eventually I found my way to a guild that was committed to role-play. Members were encouraged to speak "in character" in the guild chat channels and to develop in-game personalities. Some of the players were successful at sustaining consistent fictional personae to the extent that when the guild set up a voice server using Ventrillo ("vent"), the contradiction between the character personality and the actual player was disconcerting. Relationships that had developed over time in the game world through role-play performance had to be re-established as expectations (chiefly of gender, age, and geography) were disrupted. In time, role-play activity decreased as "real" personalities emerged. Voice chat made some aspects of the game easier, especially in raids and team combat, but it made role-play difficult, and perhaps pointless, to maintain. Inevitably, personality conflicts intensified and hard-core role players began to migrate away from the guild.

Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler argue "role-playing is almost impossible within MMORPGs, even ones with such a developed world background as *WoW*. The game absolves itself of responsibility, sets no rules, and gives no guidelines on how to role-play within its structure." They conclude that the "act of role play" is "an act of deviance within the text" (243). On the microlevel of the solo toon, where role-play is little more than a citational gesture to its own impossibility, this may be the case, as no role-play action can disrupt or change the game. Social role-play might produce entertaining events, but they still have no actual in-game impact. But social impact seeps through the portals of gamespace. A powerful example of this is the annual Pride march on *WoW*'s Proudmoore server. Now in its tenth year, Proudmoore Pride is a player-created role-play event that has become established as one of the largest in-game events in *WoW* culture. For the 2013 Pride, the organizers announced:

> The theme for the parade this year is Marriage Equality and parade participants are encouraged to wear appropriate in-game Wedding attire (White Wedding Dress, Tuxedo Jacket, Tuxedo Pants, etc.). We hope to present an incredible marriage procession through the Barrens—to celebrate the gains the LGBT community has achieved this past year, and to express our hope that everyone, everywhere, will some day be able to marry the person they love. ("About Proudmoore Pride")

Proudmoore Pride takes place on only one out of hundreds of servers, but it is a cross-realm event because of the large number of players from other servers who roll a toon on Proudmoore and join a temporary guild to participate. As in the real world, Pride is a tourist draw, and the Proudmoore server is a tourist destination.

1.5 You have been disconnected from the server

As Proudmoore Pride suggests, the "nations" of gamespace are the horizontal communities of play. In gamespace economics, cultural

production and nation have been disassociated. Game becomes the way we live in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's "empire": boundless, formless, but constitutive. But if gaming is dislocated from national spaces of production, it is nevertheless dependent on cultural spaces of playing, because playing encodes expectations of social interaction and group behaviours that are culturally contingent.

For Castronova, gamespace is also economic space. Following this we can see gamespace as a neoliberal fantasy that promises infinitely renewable resources and equal opportunity for progression. But renewable and respawning resources lead to harvesting industries and exploitation. Castronova was drawn to the phenomenon of "gold farming" in the original "vanilla" *WoW*, in which bots and low-wage workers harvested resources for profit, typically by selling in-game gold for offline dollars. In response *WoW* gradually shifted the economic model to one of elite production in which in-game gold became easier to acquire but high-demand crafted materials and gear required elite and time-consuming player achievements.

As the neoliberal market becomes increasingly regulated and exclusionary, the fantasy of libertarian play is more evidently untenable. In *WoW* players can toy with the limits of the economy by engaging in speculative trading in the player auction house (with its 2.8 million trades per day) and can limit interactivity by selecting the realm type. The most common type is PvE, in which factional combat is limited to battlefields and fighting with cross-faction players requires consent. In PvP realms, players risk "death" and harassment from enemy players. The difference between the two types can be striking: PvP realms seem to be more balanced between factions. But in my own experience, when I followed some online friends who migrated from our PvP realm (with a population of 16,518 Alliance and 25,520 Horde players) to a PvE realm, I was surprised to see that the new server was almost exclusively populated by one faction. As in many PvP games, players are divided factionally; in *WoW* the two factions are the Horde (made up of orcs, goblins, bovine Taurens, trolls, and undead humans) and the Alliance (comprising humans, gnomes, alien Draenie, and Night Elves). Globally, the two factions roughly balance out, but on my new server the figures are disproportionate: 177,257 Horde to 21,179 Alliance players ("US Realm Pop"). On a PvE realm, where inter-faction combat is voluntary and role-play is rare, factional difference loses its purpose; perhaps players cluster on one side to facilitate group questing.

That such census figures exist points to the fact that games offer highly regulated and tightly scripted fantasies of freedom in regimes of extreme surveillance. There is no privacy in a game world like Azeroth; the world is one of public display, and all actions and conversations—and indeed the player's computer—are subject to monitoring by Blizzard. In game, the signs of corporate control manifest primarily in procedural mechanics and periodic changes in loot tables and encounters. The economy is effectively fixed: players buy and sell in the auction house, and can profit from the laws of supply and demand. But the game determines what will be in demand at any given time by producing crafting recipes that set the demand for trade goods.

The most famous example of a libertarian game world is CCP Games's starship simulator MMORPG *Eve Online*, in which the shoot-to-kill universe is one of unregulated piracy, player warfare, and economic exploitation. *Eve* evolved from one of the earliest space trading games, Acornsoft's *Elite* (1984), which used wire-frame graphics to give a cockpit-view interface. In *Elite*, players travelled from system to system to buy and sell in order to finance upgrades to fight off pirates. Commonly derided as a spreadsheet with a sci-fi overlay, *Eve* maintains that fundamental logic but expands it in a vast multiplayer galaxy of total war, unrestrained capitalism, and exploitation. If your ship is lost in a battle, you lose it and the capital investment it cost; at the top of the line, according to the developer, a Titan-class ship can cost $10,000 USD and three months of intensive collaborative labour to produce. *Eve* is the libertarian answer to *Second Life*, with real-life costs.

1.6 A noob in gamespace

My first game was the now-classic *Destroyer* (Epyx, 1986). The yellow lines traced by the keyboard command on the monochrome monitor of my IBM XT formed the outlines of a World War II-era destroyer's bridge, with button toggles to control damage, guns, engines, and navigations. It was in effect a computer version of the classic *Battleship*, which began as a pen-and-paper grid game. It had very simple victory conditions and decision trees, and in that regard functioned, as *Angry Birds* does today on billions of smartphones, as a procedural series of what Ian Bogost calls "unit operations." But my second game changed everything. 3DO's *Might and Magic 1* (*MM1*; 1986) was one of the earliest computer role-playing games (RPGs), and along with *The Bard's Tale* series, it established the role-play conventions that continue to inform the genre. *MM1* asked the player to roll and assign character statistics to form a template questing party. In *MM1* these characters were text-based, and the screen window moved the player through monochromatic line-drawn dungeon mazes in an early stab at first-person graphics. Random encounters with pixelated monsters produced options to fight, surrender, or flee. This was a game procedure adapted from *Dungeons and Dragons*, as was its underlying fantasy quest narrative. Despite its crude rendition, *MM1* was a deeply immersive game that took close to 100 hours to play through, although it only used 260 kilobytes of disc space. (By 1994 I was observing that games were taking as much as 40 megabytes.)

As games engines became larger and faster, with the ability to crunch data fast enough to enable real-time instead of turn-based play, "immersion" became a major draw for RPGs. Even in *MM1* you could get lost in the world (literally, because the game did not have an automapping feature). But a new generation of persistent worlds drew the player into vast open spaces that could permit collaborative network play. Some, like Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, rewarded the impulse to wander and explore; others, like BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights*, allowed players to host their own servers to write and distribute variant modifications of items, characters, and narrative episodes. Solo RPGs like the *Might and Magic* series were windows into the game world, but online digital technology turned them into doors. The expanding horizon of immersive worlds and graphic realism gives players an increasing range of in-game choices.

From the beginnings of gamer theory, choice has been theorized in terms of player *agency*, which draws into question the

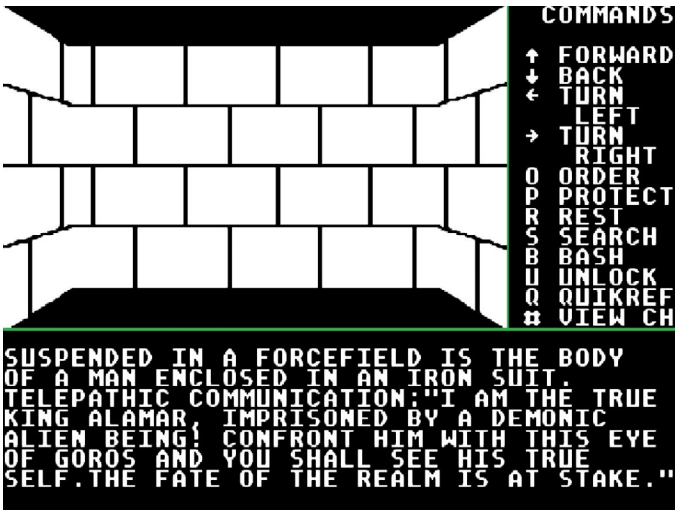
 doi:10.3138/ctr.159.007

reasons that players play in the first place. Who am I when I project my senses in that world of digital code and pixels that comes alive in my brain as a vast and boundless world of possibility? How much choice do I have? The question of player agency is a frequently raised issue in video game criticism. At the core of all digital culture is a string of binary code, of on/off switches that build complex procedures that produce and populate simulated environments. If our actions as players, at their most basic, come down to a simple task of either/or decision trees, what does "play" actually entail?

In *MM1* the thrill of the decision moment was the unknown consequence and the narrative push of the quest. "Agency" was a matter of making the correct decisions to solve the puzzle or open the secret door. Some years later, a game like BioWare's *Baldur's Gate* (fondly remembered by many as an optimal balance of story and gameplay) gave players choices from scripted dialogue trees, which offered a range of ethical stances. But these choices did not affect game progression; its frame-structured game world allowed the player to survey future encounters that had to be cleared before entering the next frame. In time, expanded processors and graphic capabilities smoothed the entire world into one persistent frame, and dialogue trees could result in ethical choices that produced in-game results. Kill enough people in *Fable* and you grow horns. But faced with these choices—walk into a village in *Skyrim* and kill everyone, or solve their problems—"agency" is a product of narrative.

Agency arises in gaming because games encode the possibility of disruption unconstrained by materiality, of playing "against" the game. If there's only one road, you follow it, and games nudge players along scripted pathways. In that respect, *WoW* is not much different than early console games, or *Angry Birds* for that matter. There are just more and more complex pathways to follow. But seeking exploits or creating role-play events in-game does not result from agency in the construction of gameplay. Even in the most free-form games (*Eve Online*, *Minecraft*), we are still playing worlds defined by someone else. Karen and Joshua Tanenbaum argue that game theorists lack "an agreed-upon definition and no shared formula for how to design for the experience of agency" (11). Typically, they suggest, agency has been proposed as "interactive narrative and game experience as improvised performances between the player and experience designer" (12). They conclude that this notion of agency as in-game freedom is insufficient and pose instead a model of player agency defined as a "commitment to meaning" (12). Online game worlds are familiar with the griefers and gankers who take pleasure in harassing other players (especially in PvP realms: "Let's go to the Barrens and kill noobs"). Following Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum, playing against the game is not agency, but making decisions about how to strategize and master content is.

Agency might usefully be thought of as *how* we play, and in multiplayer worlds, that means it is both ethical and political. How we play begins with why we play. The template model of player types, proposed by John Bartle, originally assigned players to four categories, based on broadly defined motivations: achiever, explorer, killer, or socializer. This led to the establishment of the "Bartle Test," a fairly unsophisticated instrument that identifies players through a thirty-question survey. More recent analyses of



Might and Magic 1: anchored in text, controlled by keyboard commands, it offered a compelling gameplay experience.
Screen image from Might and Magic 1, *© Ubisoft Entertainment*

player types critique the Bartle test's reductivity. Nick Yee, whose Daedalus Project undertook a longitudinal study of players and census data in *WoW* realms, builds on Bartle to propose a model with three main categories, each with "subcomponents": achievement (advancement, mechanics, competition), social (socializing, relationship, teamwork), and immersion (discovery, role-playing, customization, escapism) (Yee, "Model"). Blizzard's major achievement, and the reason for *WoW*'s durability, is that the game offers ways to satisfy every combination of weight in these areas. Yee concluded:

> It is NOT the case that we have come up with 10 boxes that we can put players in, but rather, we have revealed 10 subcomponents that co-exist and together reveal the motivations of a player. Bartle assumed that your underlying motivations "suppressed" each other. In other words, the more of an Achiever you were, the less of a Socializer, Explorer and Killer you could be, but just because you like ice-cream doesn't mean you will hate pasta. ("Model")

In fact, if we consider that Blizzard's numbers indicate a general average population of five toons per player, the multiplicities of gamespace enable multiplicities of player motivations that can vary from toon to toon (Blizzard). Docktorboom was created as a role player (an immersion type); Featherw as a raider and PvP fighter (an achievement type). In gameplay, changes in mode might lead to toon switching ("I'm bored with harvesting crafting materials to upgrade my gear for the raid; I'm logging on to my Alt [Alternative Character] for some PvP action …"). Yee found that player motivations are dynamic and change over time, moving through stages of learning, ramping up, mastery, burnout, and casual/recovery. He found, for instance, that 48 per cent of female players and 40 per cent of males fell into the "casual" category and that "overall, gender and age differences" in the player life cycle were "quite minimal" (Yee, "Player Life-Cycles"). However, statistical data cannot answer the question of multiple motivations distributed across toons and servers. Motivation enables play, but play cannot be reduced to motivation.

Promotional image for *Eve Online*.
Image from Eve Online *press kit, © CCP Games*

1.7 Log Out. Log In. Play.

We are drawn into these universes of unrelenting slaughter, in which success means becoming a mass murderer, because they stream adventure, novelty, and competition into our lives. But the real thrill is the levelling-up progression through structures of reward. Docktorboom and Featherw are both suffering endgame ennui, stalled because any further progression would require more player time commitment than they are going to get. So they wait, not knowing they wait, for the next major expansion. Fishbreath and Macbethany remain subaltern as recreational Alts. As a player, I embody several of Yee's life-cycle phases at once: I'm casual, I'm burned out; I've achieved, I've killed, and I've explored all that we can.

We are Docktorboom, Featherw, Fishbreath, and Macbethany. And as I write, in another window another portal opens, into the *Eve* galaxy. It's a whole new universe out there. I can be anyone we want, and we're going to space. Our name is Ig Saken. It's time we L2P (Learn2Play).

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 doi:10.3138/ctr.159.007