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Interfaces: Bodies and Technologies in Multiplayer Role-Playing Games

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Abstract

Role-playing games create fictional spaces within which imaginary, exotic, and often heroic identities can be acted out. MMORPGs, Massive Multiplayer Role-Playing Games with virtually unlimited numbers of participants, offer increasingly complex and complicated networks of player interaction - here playing becomes especially time-consuming and at times even boring. I want to look at two multiplayer role-playing games, the action-centered *Diablo II* and the massive multiplayer game *Dark Age of Camelot*, comparing their ways of corporeally immersing players. I want to introduce the following hypothesis: multiplayer role-playing computer games, usually considered to form a relatively homogeneous genre, offer very diversified, indeed in some aspects oppositional, playing experiences.

The Media and Bodies

Media always have exercised power over human bodies. In fact, they have continually produced specific historical and aesthetical conventions for perceiving, presenting, and, ultimately, experiencing bodies as aesthetically and socially significant¹. At the same time, the media are themselves defined and empowered by their relationship to bodies. That is, they depend on the symbolic power they exercise over bodies². Therefore, media revolutions are revolutions of the body and revolutions of body construction. Inferring from this, I propose the following hypothesis: the digital media are not bodiless, neither is the net; rather they are defined through their symbolic, their mediating relationship to human bodies. What, then, about bodily aspects in specific virtual worlds? What about net-based role-playing games? In this article, I want to compare aspects of space, time, and navigation in two different games: First, I will look at the online version of the role-playing game *Diablo II* (2000)³, analyzing on-screen movement, speed, tactics, and kinds of navigation through space and time. Secondly, I'll concentrate on *Dark Age*

of *Camelot* (2002) ⁴ and compare this massive multiplayer game with the more action-oriented *Diablo*.

Action and speed in *Diablo II* (2000) and its expansion, *Lord of Destruction* (2001)

Just like pen-and-paper role-playing games, role-playing at the computer foregrounds the performative aspects of gaming: a story is enacted involving several characters whose qualities keep being performed, developed, and changed throughout the game. The characters do not act in isolation, rather, their standing has to be in relation to a group of players. Often the story, the character traits, and, accordingly, the characters' interactions are very complex. Role-playing games set up systems of magic, and various kinds of placements and hierarchies are fought out between the numerous participants.

In order to accomplish player commitment and establish a functional communication network, role-playing computer games seek to establish especially tight relationships between players and avatars, as, for example, a television spot advertising *Diablo II* demonstrates in which the first-person voice-over comments on the fact that game characters have entered into his everyday life ⁵: "[...] it was clear that their world was becoming mine." "Their world" refers to the world of the game's avatars as well as to the world of *Diablo II* players - and this spot shows both to be identical: in quick successional cuts, actors dressed up as *Diablo II* avatars are themselves seen sitting in front of the computer playing the game in which they are stars, thus being inside and outside of the game at the same time. Correspondingly, these actors are inside and outside of a movie, a game, and the everyday world. 'My world,' the narrator's living space, is shown to be the world of middle-class suburban America which the game characters have invaded and in which they fulfill everyday chores like pruning hedges or lighting a barbacue fire in full gaming gear. When the narrator wakes up in the morning, even his wife lying next to him in bed is clad in an amazon costume straight out of *Diablo II*. The spot ends with her question: "Bad dream, hon[ey]?"



Image 1: In the *Diablo II* advertising video, the narrator's wife is clad in a *Diablo II* costume.

The short spot uses traditional film technology: from the opening total shot as a character runs toward the static camera, to the final shot-reverse shot showing the narrator and his wife in bed, well-known filmic means demonstrate the immersive aspects of a digital game. The switching between the media - video and computer game -, between human actors and avatar characters, mirrors the complex relationship between character and viewer, avatar and player, between a fantasy world peopled by monsters and heroes and American suburbia. Medially, various manners of identification and immersion are juxtaposed: the video creates an interface between technically induced identification with movie characters and with avatars.

One kind of identification is created through filmic means - total shots and close-ups, shot and reverse shot, time-scanning cuts, voice-over, dramatic music. Another kind is created by way of digital means, by navigation through a spatial world, participation in fights and chats, competition with other players. Beyond the difference between the specific media, the digital means - just like the filmic ones - in themselves can differ, they can create and then depend on specific generic conventions and can induce contradictory forms of identification. Now to the look and feel of the game itself. I want to demonstrate the timing, pace,

and navigation by introducing the *Diablo II* expansion *Lord of Destruction*. The game is played with mouse and keyboard, the pace is fast. The online-version of *Diablo II* allows only up to eight players per game at one time. Even though that's not too many, the screen constantly looks crowded, and even if there are not too many players involved, there's always some action going on.⁶ Almost all spaces of *Diablo II* and its expansion are dangerous ones.



Image 2: One of the many dangerous spaces in *Lord of Destruction*.

Monsters crowd in on the players, and a player needs quick reflexes to survive the numerous assaults. Due to the number of non-player opponents, the fighting consists of many identical confrontations in a row, and the action is fast paced. Players have to concentrate, movements have to be effective, quick, and automatized, reaction time short.

Explosions and fire balls fill the air. Machines and helper characters add to the rather hectic impression. The scenes are exciting, some would call them stressful. One must continually keep an eye on the vials at the screen's bottom showing the level of the avatar's life on the left and magic power (the 'mana') on the right.

By overlaying the so-called auto map, a map showing one's position relative to the world's set-up, one can gain an overview. Other than that, the player always has the same view of the game, she cannot change her perspective on the fictional world. Via a teleporter function, one can use shortcuts to quickly get from one scene to

another. This beaming function speeds up the game considerably, so distances between spaces and levels shrink to almost nothing. Since speed is important, the traversing of space isn't allowed to slow down the action.

The avatar has to prove that she is fast, strong, and well organized, in short, a superhero. The user chooses one of five (*Diablo II*) to seven (expansion) fighter characters with different qualities, skills, and strategies and supplies it with ever more and better equipment. She navigates this avatar in real time through four acts (five including the expansion), each with different quests set in the middle ages. The game can be played on three levels of difficulty. The aim is to perfect one's avatar, to develop specific traits, and to better one's score - the more experience one collects, the better. One fights, collects accessories, trades pieces of equipment, barter; the players can cheat and plunder, each establishing her avatar's specific disposition, reputation, and rank. At the same time, the player can acquire a reputation for herself within the community of *Diablo II* players. The game has no single goal. Each player aims at developing her avatar's four characteristics, strength, dexterity, vitality, and energy plus 30 possible skills per character. Both speed and effectiveness are important in fights; in order to win, one has to choose the right combination of accessories, develop complex strategies, and evaluate one's playfellows, bonding with as many as possible.

One can click different menu buttons in order to be shown one's inventories and to buy or exchange pieces of equipment. The return button opens chat channels with other players. These chats are important features of role-playing games enabling communication with one's fellow players not only on topics concerning the specific here and now of a scene itself but also on general strategy, or on topics beyond the game. Chats widen the scope of game communication adding a self-referential and meta-discursive dimension.

Boredom and Repetition in Dark Age of Camelot (2002)

As I'll demonstrate in the second part of my statement, a massive multiplayer role-playing game like *Dark Age of Camelot* relates space, time, and navigation in ways which create immersive effects which are quite different from those of *Diablo II*.

Being a massive multiplayer game, *Dark Age of Camelot* (2002) stages a very complex kind of role-playing allowing up to 3,500 players in one game at a time. Thus, an entire server represents one world with three realms and a frontier space. On the frontier the inhabitants of the three otherwise separated realms can fight each other.

Fighting is important to some players of *Camelot*. In contrast to *Diablo*, there exist not only small skirmishes asking for repetitious movements and small cooperations, but also huge battles between members of different realms involving virtually unlimited numbers of participants - as many players as can be rallied at a time. Yet, huge battles are relatively rare because it is hard to get enough people together at one time and to organize such big crowds across the complex hierarchies formed within small groups, guilds, or alliances. In fact, the everyday playing situation is rather dreary.⁷

The goals of this game are very complex, and, again, not the same ones for every player. One should try to accomplish perfection in all possible directions. There are personal accomplishments and communal goals. Among the personal aims may be the wish to reach the highest possible personal level, to gain the respect of one's fellow gamers, or to maximize one's commercial success. Collectively, the inhabitants of a realm or the members of an alliance or a guild strive to accomplish many victories over members of another realm.

Just like *Diablo*, *Dark Age of Camelot* is played with mouse and keyboard but the pace is very slow. Even though the realms are visited by thousands of players and avatars at a time, the screen usually looks rather orderly.



Image 3: In *Dark Age of Camelot*, the screen looks very orderly most of the time.

There are times when one hardly meets any player or non-player character, for example when one is exploring the huge playing space or looking for non-player opponents.

The game is constructed as a continuous three-dimensional space. You don't run into people and obstacles but rather run right through them, so accidents are avoided. In the many peaceful, meditative moments, one has time to enjoy the multifarious perspectives which the game offers. A player can zoom in and out, look up, down, and around, choose a radical first-person perspective or step back from her avatar and thus choose a third-person perspective.

First, it seems like each realm presents an ever changing backdrop: night falls, day breaks, the vegetation changes from one area to the next, it starts raining or snowing. Yet, after some time, the atmosphere starts feeling ever the same. Distances are very great, and there exists no teleporter or beaming function, so space and time are drawn out over the hours or even days of playing.



Image 4: In *Dark Age of Camelot*, travelling takes up a lot of time.

Every now and then, the avatar even has to sit down and rest in order to recover his energy. The sequences of *Dark Age of Camelot* are not held together by a strict economy of acts. Rather, progress is measured in terms of slowly growing skills, time-consuming travel, and complex interaction with others.

The space of *Dark Age of Camelot* feels very different depending on one's playing strategy. One can simply avoid danger by not getting in the way of non-player monsters. In fact, one doesn't have to fight at all but rather can barter with other player characters, build things, or heal other avatars.

Just like *Diablo I* and *II*, *Camelot* presents a set recalling the middle ages. The massive multiplayer game doesn't just present period costumes and genre-specific magic, but also simulates a historically specific time management and initiates social interactions slowing down the pace to a crawl. The game's time management projects its players back into a time when men got around by walking and riding horses, when people lived far apart, and communication was sparse and difficult. As opposed to *Diablo*, *Camelot* nostalgically replaces our postmodern Western pace by a much slower one.

It takes a long time and much skill to gain craftsmanship and to develop relationships with other players. Therefore, one's free time in real life is an important resource in *Camelot*. Only those players who have the time and the money to spend much of their life in this fictitious world can increase their standing or prove to be successful otherwise.⁸

Some players of *Dark Age of Camelot* do not only communicate via chats but also by showing videos online.⁹ They create their own private trailers introducing their personal interpretation of the game to others, to fellow players as well as to those not familiar with *Dark Age*. Interestingly enough, these trailers tend to present the game according to conventions known from movies, especially from action movies set in the middle ages.

For example, when a player of *Camelot* introduces the game's realms and the frontier region, she pointedly contrasts not only images showing the different kinds of architecture, costumes, aesthetics, weather, and vegetation characterizing each region or different ways of playing the game. She also accents the scenes by using very emotional film music, for example from the movie *The Gladiator* (2000) or other musical scores by Hans Zimmer. Whereas the inconspicuous musical scores used in the actual game rather resemble elevator music, of a kind of generic middle-age jazz, *Camelot* fans musically structure their videos, thus making them much more dramatic than the playing actually is. Partly, this strategy highlights the fact that this game feels distinctly different for everyone who plays it.

But generally the private videos try to aesthetically overcome the boring aspects and the loose structure of *Dark Age of Camelot* by traditional filmic means, stressing linear sequence, a distinct sense of purpose and plot, and often narrative development. The players create pointedly structured stories about their life and identity in cyberspace, leaving out the boring negotiations, the tedious role performing, and the time-consuming repetitions.

Summary

As I showed, role-playing games organize space, time, and navigation in ways which enforce not only different concepts of role-playing but, at the same time, different ways of technically mediating - one might also say technically creating - a being-in-the-world. In comparison with *Diablo II*, a massive multiplayer scenario like the one presented in *Dark Age of Camelot* foregrounds the 'performative' aspects of role playing considerably. And here I think of performativity in terms of Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter*. *Camelot* encourages players to take up subject positions evidently authenticated by the interaction with a great number of other players. By foregrounding the tedious aspects of fictional role playing, it illustrates the interactive aspects of everyday subject positioning - thus playing becomes repetitive, time-consuming, and at times even boring.

Considering that all role-playing games foreground the performative aspects of play and taking into account that they all share the same roots, it is interesting to watch the development of different kinds of games within this genre. I am even tempted to suggest that in the long run, there will evolve even more distinctly different subgenres of role-playing at the computer. The number of players alone may not justify another generic differentiation, but the very distinct ways of immersing players confirms Crosbie Fitch's prediction of role playing's great future. In times of drastic generalizations about computer games, it seems necessary to closely watch the development of genres, subgenres, and genre mixes and point out their specific effects.

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Notes

1. Cf. Jean-Louis Comolli's "Machines of the Visible" on viewing technologies in film, Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, on the construction of gender, Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, on gendered body images in action movies, and Maurizia Boscagli, *Eye on the Flesh*, on a historical approach, as well as Scott Bukatman's *Terminal Identity* on bodies and identities in the traditional and the new media at the end of the 20th century, and Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (eds.), *Cyberspace - Cyberbodies - Cyberpunk* on technological embodiment..
2. Cf. Donna Coco, "Creating Humans for Games," on the importance of human body images for computer game development..
3. The *Diablo II* Homepage can be found at <<http://www.blizzard.com/diablo2/>> .
4. The *Dark Age of Camelot* Homepage can be found at <<http://www.camelot-europe.com/en/home.php>>.

5. The video by Holiday 2000 can be watched at <http://www.blizzard.com/diablo2/cinematics.shtml>>.
6. In this game, avatars can increase their fighting power by creating doubles, thus also increasing the number of characters fighting.
7. On the attraction of dreariness and repetition in the postmodern media of the late 20th century, see Umberto Eco's "Innovation and Repetition."
8. The Diablo II Battle Chest Limited Edition (PC/Mac) on CD-ROM costs € 44,95 and includes both Diablo II and the Lord of Destruction expansion set. Dark Age of Camelot costs € 34,90 for the game itself and one month of access to the server. Then one can choose between three subscription modes: 1 month costs € 10, 3 months cost € 27, and 6 months € 50.

The videos can be found at <http://camelot.stratics.com/content/movies/movies.shtml>>.