



A Touch of Medieval: Narrative, Magic and Computer Technology in Massively Multiplayer Computer Role-Playing Games

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Abstract

The paper provides an in depth examination of the narrative structure of Massively Multiplayer Online Computer Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). The analysis is focused on the narrative complexities created by the relationships between computer technology, the medieval fantasy that is central to the genre, and the emergent nature of the online player society. The paper is divided into four major sections: the first examines the question of neomedievalism (as pronounced in the 1970's by Umberto Eco) and its relationship to technology and magic. The second section recounts the historical development of the MMORPG genre. The third section examines the narrative form unique to fantasy genre computer games that arises when the cogent narratives of the fantasy genre are mixed with the equally fantastic narratives of high tech computer culture. The fourth section examines a specific set of game "artifacts" that make the specific narrative diegesis of MMORPGs.

Keywords

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, MMORPG, Everquest, Ultima Online, Asheron's Call, Fantasy, Computer Game Genre, Magic, Online Games, Role Playing Games, Narratology

MAGIC & TECHNOLOGY

Neomedievalism

I recently visited the *39th Annual Renaissance Pleasure Faire* in San Bernardino California while shooting scenes for a documentary film. The creatively anachronistic *Renfaire* crowd is comprised of a colorful band of jolly Anglophiles, mediaevalists, woodworkers, elves, druids and wizards selling handmade crafts, performing jousts, drinking mead and offering an all out sun-beaten Californian version of new-age virtual reality. On a stroll down *Lord Mayor's walk* on my way to *Maybower Commons*, a middle-aged barbarian standing behind the counter at the *Shepherd's Pye* caught my eye. I stopped in for some ale and mutton and struck up a conversation with the bearded Mr. Moody. I was curious to learn what makes him, on this Sunday morning in August 2001, don a suit of leather armour, sip pynts of ale and cook up a mess of medieval pot pyes. Mr. Moody aptly replied that for him this sort of getaway is a much needed reprise from his daily drudgery of debugging assembly code, which he's practiced for nearly twenty years in the cleanroom of a nearby computer chip laboratory. I suspected that Mr. Moody's motivations for timesliping from 21st century California to take refuge in 12th century Medeva were not uncommon among the inhabitants here at the faire.

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In his 1973 essay, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* [4], Umberto Eco discusses the phenomena of neomedievalism. Eco looks to pop-culture and observes the "avalanche of pseudo medieval-pulp in paperbacks, midway between Nazi Nostalgia and Occultism". He notes that many structures that define the western world such as modern languages, merchant cities, and capitalistic economies find their roots in the Middle Ages. At the risk of falling prey to Eco's cynicism, I will choose to follow his ironically offered advice whereby "If one can not trust *literature*, one can at least trust pop culture". Pop-culture is at question here and the "pseudo-medieval pulp" hasn't ceased to froth in the past thirty years. In fact these days, the phenomenon is rampantly on the rise, and the new concoction includes intriguing new ingredients. "*Now, Gandalf, Merlin, and Prospero, I have some exciting news for you boys. From this moment on, you will have to get used to sharing your towers and castles. Please meet the P4, the VooDoo III, and the T1*". The beige age of swords and circuitry is upon us!

The Internet-mediated arenas for the hugely popular gaming environments known as "Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games" (MMORPGs), *Ultima Online's* "Britania," *Everquest's* "Norrath" and *Asheron's Call's* "Derreth" are prime loci of our new 21st century's version of neomedievalism. The range of historical and cultural influences on the fantasy game mise-en-scene includes a wild amalgam of Celtic, Gothic, Medieval and Renaissance combined with a deep commitment to a Wagnerian, Tolkienesque, Camelotian, and *D&D*'ish verisimilitude. The three mentioned industry-leading game worlds are practically identical; all are set in a pseudo-historical magical medieval realm, offering players a

familiar selection of characters, settings, and motivations. And one must ask if this monotone ubiquity is a result of market research about the current game-player's zeitgeist, or of the corporate copycatting so pervasive in the game industry where each successful game spawns dozens and sometimes hundreds of clones.

Why has neomedievalism resurfaced now at the apex of the "digital revolution"? The answers to this question can be traced to a philosophical and historical genealogy of the connections between magic and technology and to a certain crisis in the relationship between America's role as media superpower and the relationship Americans have to their national history.

As the great Superpower matures, its citizens must find a historical narrative that makes them "proud to be (an) American" and validate the glory of their culture. American history, if bound geographically, would quickly lead through the 18th and 15th century colonialist adventures to a disconnected and un-inscribed Native American past that has been easily disclaimed as not befitting Superpower number one. A much more acceptable lineage for the 21st Century's Christian Caucasian Empire would be that of Majestic Europe; colonialist headquarters, home of kings and queens, kettle of Christianity, with all its architectural grandeur, source of great Art, and English Literature, and the self proclaimed cauldron of culture and site of the enlightenment and scientific revolution. It is within this early mix of power, religion, science and art, that many early narratives of magic and technology were brewed.

The Bonds of Magic and Technology

Historically, magic and technology possess a complex bond; and ever since the Middle Ages, the discourse of magic emanating primarily from the pagan remnants of the Roman Empire and that of the new scientific reason have battled for sovereignty over the human soul's epistemological allegiance.¹ The science and magic of farming calendars, home remedies, astronomical maps and Alchemical concoctions are only a few examples of pre-occupations that originated in the context of magical belief systems and were gradually transitioned to fall under a scientific rubric during the Middle Ages [6,8].

More recently, in California of the 1960's and 1970's, the early seeds were planted that defined the explosion of personal computers and the Internet into mainstream pop culture. An anecdotal tale of one of the first computer games written establishes an early connection between the 60's and 70's cultures of romantic escapist fantasy and the then nascent computer culture. As the story goes [9], the early version of the famous computer game *Adventure* was first written for the PDP-10 computer in 1972 by William Crowther during his research stint at the US Department Of Defense's ARPANET project. It is perhaps here that the connection between *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* and computer culture was first established. Crowther recounts his then recent encounter with *D&D*, as the inspiration for *Adventure*, and incidentally inaugurated the definitive genre of computer adventure games. Today, we stereotypically associate socially awkward "geeks" with fantasy games like

the pen and paper *Dungeons & Dragons* and the popular card game *Magic*. These same “geeks” in their pop-cultural perception often share a passion for computers, science and engineering. Speculation here may suggest a psychological correlation between adolescence, social awkwardness, escapist fantasy, and a dubiously close bond with a non-human entity that forms this archetypal personality.

One could say that technology operates to *realize* what was previously in the hypothetical realm of magic. There is definitely some connection in the way both magic and technology create a sense of wonder as they seem to expand upon the notions of what is or has been feasible in the realm or the real. The assessment that they are part of one and the same wonder is quite pervasive; just remember Sir Arthur C. Clarke’s famous quote that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” However the positioning of magic and technology as opposites is even more common. The official web site for the new magical/technological MMORPG *Arcanum* explains the relationship: “Magic and technology are opposites. Magic bends physical law to the will of the mage. Technology depends on physical law. And, in the fantasy world of *Arcanum* the use of technology reinforces physical law, countering the effect of magic.” [1] What is clear is that the desire for magic and magic-related fantasies frequently surfaces in arenas of the contemporary world purportedly based on scientific and rational principles. In his book *TechGnosis*, Erik Davis has provided ample evidence of this as he explores the new-age culture of techno-mysticism tracking many of the cybercultural impulses to mesh the digital with the magical.

What follows in this essay is an examination of the emerging narrative twists and turns that result when computer technology is mingled with the vicissitudes of magical medieval fantasy. I will briefly introduce MMORPG genre, where most of the action I have examined takes place. I will then propose what I see as the central underlying narrative paradox of medium and message in fantasy computer games by delving into the clockwork of the industry leading game *Everquest* to examine a collection of narrative artifacts (gathered through many months of addiction²) where narrative, technology and metaphor collide.

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MMORPGS – A HISTORY

My own experience playing MMORPGs began in 1997 playing *Ultima Online* (UO). In late 1998 I signed up for the *Everquest* (EQ) beta test. Since then I’ve played EQ, UO and *Asheron’s Call* (AC) extensively.

The technical evolution of MMORPGs goes back to the pen and paper *Dungeons & Dragons* games of the early 70’s. Transferred to the computer environment, they evolved into the text-based adventures like *Adventure* and *Zork*, and on to early graphical adventure games from the 1980’s like *Bard’s Tale*, *Wizardry*, *Might and Magic*, and *Kings Quest*. These, in turn, provided the staging point for more complex realtime scrolling graphical 2D isometric (fixed perspective) games like the *Ultima* and *Baldur’s Gate* series. While

