

Interaction forms, agents and tellable events in EverQuest

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on forms of interaction and agents in a virtual world and how one may apply an understanding of these to an actual analysis of a virtual world. First, it proposes a distinction between four basic agents in a world: players, NPCs, objects and world rules. These agents are involved in four basic forms of interaction: navigating, manipulating, social interaction and information retrieval. Looking more closely at how these different forms of agents and actions forms are employed can help us think more closely about the construction of tellable events (emergent narratives) in a multiuser environment.

Keywords

Virtual world, interaction forms, *EverQuest*, online stories, online gaming, emergent narratives.

INTRODUCTION

Claiming 98.000 simultaneous online users in peak hours and a monthly \$4,000.000 earning on subscription fees from its 400.000 players, *EverQuest* is still one of the giants on the English-speaking MassMOG (massive multiplayer online games) arena along with games like Ultima Online, Asheron's Call and later generation games such as Dark Ages of Camelot, Anarchy Online and Lineage. Launching back in 1999 (beta 1998), it was also one of the first 3D MassMOGs to hit the market and hence have had several years to develop its game world and gaming features, including the release of two game expansions: "Scars of Velious" and the recent "Shadows of Luclin". Hence, *EverQuest* as such presents itself as an interesting object of study: as both a relatively established game world with a devoted following of users and as a world in continuing development, both with respect to graphics and content. This paper outlines the framework for exploring the forms of interaction in the *EverQuest* world in such general terms that this approach might also be useful when studying other worlds of similar nature. It should be noted that this is very much a work in progress. In this paper, I only outline the framework for an analysis. The actual in-depth analysis will be conducted at a later point and presented at the Computer Games & Digital Cultures conference

The usefulness of an "interactive" terminology?

The writings on games and digital narratives abound with attempts to apply the word or concept of interactivity to an understanding of the workings of these phenomena (see for instance Pearce 1997, Murray 1997, Ryan 1997). Be they academics or practitioners, many writers often define interaction in a paradigmatically hinged, highly normative and often quite vague discursive style (such as a "high degree of interaction is more rewarding than a low degree of interaction" etc) which makes it impossible to use these forms of interaction as operational concepts in a concrete analysis of a specific text. This vacuity of the word has even led some theorists to discard the concept of interactivity all together (Aarseth, 1997, 2002). However, we are much in need of a terminology with which to describe the relation between agents, and between these agents and the actions which characterise life in a virtual world; and this on a level of specificity which makes the terminology useful both on a micro- and macrolevel; descriptive of the world in question but also applicable when one wants to make comparison between different worlds or world genres. Hence, working with "interactivity" in some form is hard to avoid as we are, after all, talking about actions between (inter) agents - and if sufficiently specified, an interactive terminology might actually be quite useful as an analytical tool.

For instance, I may intuitively sense that one world, say *EverQuest* is more "action-oriented" than another one, *LinguaMOO*, which I experience as being more socially oriented but as is, I lack the vocabulary to actually flesh out which aspects of the world makes this difference. It could be the fact that killing rats and going fishing is an intrinsic part of life in the *EverQuest* Universe, but not allowed in *LinguaMOO*, or that *LinguaMOO* do not have any way of scoring its participants whereas *EverQuest* has a very intricate scoring system and a high number of player levels. These statements may say more about the difference of these two worlds, but are still just statements, whereas positing that the *EverQuest* world interface allows for much more manipulative interaction than the *LinguaMOO* world interface does, and that the *LinguaMOO* world primarily encourages social interaction and information retrieval, more precisely describe the formal and stylistic features of these particular worlds.

To summarise, as much as I agree with the fact that one should always try to think critically about the concept of interaction and strive at making explicit the value-judgements behind one's use of it, I find, however, that when analysing a specific virtual world, it is necessary and unavoidable to partake of some form of "interactive" terminology which describes *what people can do in a virtual world, how they are enabled to do it, and with whom they do it*, and this preferably in a generally meaningful way.

A PARADIGMATIC UNDERSTANDING OF INTERACTION

In several articles (see f.i. Jensen 1997, 2001), Danish media researcher Jens F. Jensen identifies 3 concepts of interactivity at play in 3 scientific paradigmes - those of the schools of Sociology, Media & Communication, and "Informatics" (HCI). Jensen mainly discusses the concept it in its *relational* sense as: *between whom* is the interaction going on? Where interaction in the sociological sense defines human-human interaction, the media science concept of interaction refers to the relation receiver to media "message" (and the pseudo-human-dialogic instances of these as when we actually feel that the newsreader in the BBC news is a human talking to *us*) and the tradition of Human-Computer Studies to the relation human-machine (for further information, see Jensen 1997).

A paradigm, which Jensen understandably does not refer to (as the initial article was written several years ago) is that of an emerging field of digital theory, that of "ludology", in practice used primarily as a designator of computer game theory. Within this paradigm, interactivity, at least to some game designers and theorists, seem to be an essential concept in the description and critique of games; and scrutinising the ongoing debate on "game versus narrative" (are games one version of a narrative?, should games contain narratives, are games not narratives at all, but something all together different? etc), one can often easily replace the word "games" with the word "interactive". An often heard accusation of a bad game is that it is "blocks" interactivity too much - and what blocks interactivity is often exactly the *narrative inserts* (in the form of cutscenes, loading screens etc). So instead of discussing whether something is a game or a narrative, one might as well be discussing whether it is interactive (blocking narrative) or whether it is narrative (blocking interaction). In computer game theory, interaction is often equal to the possibility of user *action* and the interactive parties are thus in this discourse accordingly posited as, at one end, the player and at the other end, "the game" itself, or perhaps rather the state machine, which should ideally be readily accessible to the player at all times.

Obviously, in the RL (Real Life) of games and narratives, distinctions are not that simple. Whether good or bad from a normative point of view, you still find games with narrative elements and narratives with gaming or interactive elements. In order to discuss these hybrids in a sensible way, I think it is essential to identify different forms of interaction and relate them to the various scientific paradigms they relate to. In this way not only are we able to make distinctions between various types of "texts" (in the broad sense), but also to get an idea of how to approach them objectively from "within" without getting into tedious discussions about which form is better or not. Furthermore, in so far the subject matter is virtual world interaction, it appears that these worlds actually contain elements of interaction from all paradigms mentioned here, since we simultaneously find relations between user and machine, user and text and user to user. And if we cut out the cut-scenes and choose to follow the belief that interaction should be able to happen continuously within the framework of an emergent story or game, we might ask whether there are other methods than narrative interrupts with which to achieve this, i.e. ways of, for instance, telling a story *with* interaction rather than *in spite* of it? Certainly, studying virtual worlds which contain both game-like and story-like experiences might provide us with some interesting answers to this question.

AGENTS

First, in order to talk about interactions form, one must think of interaction as an event which has both a relational and action character. Let us think of interaction in a broad sense: as an event which establishes a relation between two autonomous agents and results in an altered state of either one or both agents. A simple example: your casting a spell on a fellow player might cause this player to die, but the event would not be possible without both of you taking part in it initially. There are other forms of agents than human users which can be involved in some form of reciprocal relation, and we need to take those into account too: hence we should think of an agent merely as an autonomous entity which can cause or be active part of an event.

Basic agents in a world like *EverQuest* would typically be:

Players (the human users)

NPCs or "informative" objects (the non-human players or information holders)

Objects (objects which can be manipulated and moved)

World Rules (the "voice" of the programme which determines the limit of action of the human player)

What a human user is should be fairly obvious. The notion of **NPC** or informative object might be more problematic. The category tries to cover a wide range of "antropomorphic" entities, going from the very realistic character posing as a human to the bot which is so simple that it is obviously a machine. Yet, you can still communicate with it in some form in order to obtain information or it can communicate its intentions to you. The category of **objects** might also be problematical in that it might be difficult to tell *when* a object is an object. "Objects" which are part of the world fabric and cannot be acted upon directly such as the sea, the rocks, the roads or houses with their walls and roof are not included in this category. However, a door in a house which you can kick in or open through an active choice might be thought of as a form of autonomous object. The category of **world rules** (for lack of better word so far) could be questioned too. What I think of here is the state machine and the rules which govern it. It is the "invisible agent" which determines what you as a user (or perhaps even as NPC) are allowed to do. It might for instance be the rule in *EverQuest* which determines that you have only a limited amount of time you can breathe under water before you drown. If the player by accident falls into deep water, she will have to make an active effort to reach the surface of the water not to drown and if she fails the programme will inform her that she has drowned. Another rule determine that if you swim for a long time, you improve your swimming skills. So trying to swim to the surface from the bottom of the deep sea might also cause an effect on your character in the long term - it becomes a better swimmer and might easier escape a similar situation if it occurs again.

INTERACTION FORMS

In principle, one can imagine any number of interaction forms. However, there are four forms which seem very basic and recurrent, being either pretty common sense or logically applicable in many environments. Though they are often referred to individually in much literature, to my knowledge at this point of writing, I have not seen these form made explicit anywhere else in this combination. To repeat: all interaction forms are events which involve at least two agents which affect each other. Since this is what is in a colloquial sense often its implicit meaning, I have reserved the specific phrase interaction to the type of interaction referred to as "social interaction", whereas the other interaction forms are just referred to by the name of the action.

Manipulation is the form of interaction which consists of *moving and combining objects*. This is a very widespread form of interaction in most computer games. Retrieving objects, combining them with objects in your inventory, and using the combined-object+object to get new objects or help solve puzzles, is a widespread action form in adventure games, for instance. In a world like *EverQuest*, trading or fighting with non-playing characters (NPCs) or other players is another instance of this form of interaction, which will often discretely slip into a form of social interaction too. Often a manipulative event is what triggers or provides an occasion for social interaction ("So how did you kill that orc?"). But naturally it may also take place without any communication.

Social interaction is not to be mistaken for direct physical action, but can be described as the form of interaction with consists of *communication and play with non-verbal and verbal cues and languages, i.e. both linguistic and paralinguistic interaction*. **Social interaction is a feature unique to multiplayer games or worlds.** Single user games or worlds will often feature informative interaction disguised as pseudo-social interaction, but since NPCs can not communicate in the same "playful" way as humans (however "realistic")

they are programmed to mimic social interaction), interaction with NPCs remains essentially an exchange of information or entertaining distraction. Even though informative objects may actually be programmed to communicate in a non-verbal way (using for instance preprogrammed emotes or movements to express certain feelings,) they will never be able to emote freely - or precisely understand the nature of those emotes the human players use. An example: I know of a very active Active World user who has constructed a series of movements which looks much like "a dance" to another human by combining the limited number of emotes available to the players. She performs this dance with another experienced user, so it becomes the event "they are dancing with each other". But would not a NPC interpret this either as nonsense or just a very quick series of distinct emotes and respond to it as such? The prerequisite for interpreting what these players do as a "dance" is a knowledge of a world of movements, gestures and "meanings" outside of the gameworld. A human player can contextualise and compare to out-of-world actions - a NPC cannot. It can only interpret and relate what it "experiences" by relating it to the *information* available to it in-world, be it in front of or behind the stage of action.

Information retrieval is the form of interaction which consists of *providing information, obtaining or storing it*. It is different from social interaction in that this form of interaction might also take place between human agents and non-human agents such as bots or in-world message boards ("informative objects"). Information might be stored in for instance letters or books or NPCs. And retrieving this information means interacting with the object, like for instance sending commands to it to make it respond and "talk" to you. In return the object itself might change, the information it held might be erased or updated or manipulated by the user in question etc.

Navigation is a form of interaction which consists of *moving through the world* by moving your avatar (your "physical" representation in the world) from place to place in the world. In a textbased world, this typically happens by typing in commands like "go north", "go up" and so forth. In a 3D-world, navigation typically happens by moving the player forward using the arrow-keypads, a mouse or the like. It is not all navigation that is voluntary: in most worlds, you will at some point be "moved" to somewhere else by the programme; like for instance when you have to wait while the computer uploads a new piece of a city in *EverQuest* or when you are respawned in your "home" place. Or, at certain points, you will end up at exits or places you cannot access and might be informed by the programme that you cannot go any longer. Note also, that navigational interaction is not restricted to interaction between the player and the programme (which normally keeps track of the topological database and all the objects it contains). It might also happen when you choose to auto-follow another player, so it is this player's movements which actually decides where in the world you go. Or it may happen by the use of teleporter stones, which in *EverQuest* can be found on the island of Erudin. Whatever the instrument, the effect is always that both you and the world you move in are affected by this act of interaction. You are set in a new place and you leave an empty space behind you.

AGENTS AND ACTION FORMS

The relation between agents and interaction forms is outlined in this table in which I have tentatively described which agents can perform which forms of interaction. Furthermore, I have also tried to relate actions and agents to player types and immersion forms, since connections here seem both obvious and relevant. A brief

introduction to the player typology: in the piece titled "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players who suit MUDs" (Bartle, 1996), Bartle distinguishes between 4 basic player types. Players who play to level and perfect their game performance, *the achievers*. Players who primarily play to explore the world, *the explorers*, the players who play primarily for the social interaction, *the socialisers*, and finally the players who mostly enjoys to impose on other players, by for instance killing them, *the imposers*. Whereas the first 3 player types are relatively pure player types, you may find in most worlds, my experience is that the imposers are rather a sub-species of one or more of the above type and only to be found in certain worlds where imposing (killing) is allowed and doable. Hence, I do not operate with this last type.

Interaction form	Agents	Player type	Immersion
Navigation	Player, worldR, object	Explorers	Spatial
Manipulation (doing-to)	player, object	Achievers/level-hunters, Killers	Spatial
Social interaktion (doing-with)	player (chatter-bot)	Socialisers	Temporal
Information retrieval	player, object, bot, worldR	Explorers/achievers	Temporal

Fig. 1. Table of interaction forms, agents and player types..

The last parameter I have added to the table is that of **immersion**. I have made a simple distinction between spatial and temporal immersion forms (one might think of more, but these are the most relevant in this context). Spatial immersion is the form of engagement in a world which is bound to an experience of the physical space of the world, that is: the player's perception of it which comes about through the act of navigating and manipulation it. Temporal immersion is that form of engagement with the world which arises from being there "for some time", i.e. from the experience of a *series of related events*. The search for information and the social interaction with other players is often related to the attempt to construct and understand certain events or character traits or with trying to solve for instance a quest which requires you to travel to certain places transporting information to certain people or performing certain tasks for which you are rewarded, thereby following a chain of cause and effect which can only unfold in time. Hence, temporal immersion not only relates to a physical experience of the world, but also to the mental act of interpreting and connecting the events which take place in it.



This screenshot displays the average (old version) *EverQuest* world interface. It contains a "window to the world", a chat and information field, and various buttons which points to further information about the avatar such as persona, spells (which spells are available to the character) and abilities. More interesting in this context is the different forms of interaction the buttons on the right side point to. "Combat" points to the possibility of manipulative interaction; "socials" (preset emotes) and the option of "invite" and "disband" is used in social interaction (approaching people, joining and leaving groups), and the option of "camp", "sit" and "run" is related to the movement through and interaction with the world (you need to first sit and then camp in order to exit the world). It should also be noted that amongst other things, the button "persona" gives access to the objects the avatar possesses; these objects can be used either for manipulation (combats, for instance) or for the specific form of information retrieval known as trading (one mostly trade with NPCs, so trading is not necessary a form of social interaction). That for instance objects can be used for various forms of interaction should make clear that the interaction/ agent relation grid is fairly complex - as you can trigger different type of events with the same agents.

PERSPECTIVES

What can we use an analytical grid like this for? Mainly, it is intended as a the point of departure for an interactional analysis of the *EverQuest* world interface (see figure 2). The task will be to explore which action forms are on one hand encouraged through the actual lay-out of the interface and action possibilities and which forms tend, on the other hand, in practice to dominate the *EverQuest* gaming experience, especially as one proceeds from lower levels to higher levels. For instance, experienced players have told me that they tend to group and go on quests together much more as they raise above levels 8-12. This, for instance, would lead one to conclude that social interaction will dominate later in the gaming experience, but not in the beginning. However, one might need to take into account, that players are simply different (Spades, Hearts or

Diamonds) and therefore will continuously stick to a preferred form of interaction, whatever level they reach. Or accordingly choose a character type which supports their preferred mode of action.

Finally, the grid might function as a basis for the discussion of the interplay between action forms, agents and the way, they form the player's experience of the events taking place in the gameworld. Whereas it might be difficult to speak meaningfully about "the narrative" in a MassMOGs or to devise closely knit plots to be followed and performed by the players, 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. For instance, following Ryan's ideas, are social events more tellable than simple actions? And which role do the various agents typically play in the emergence of a tellable series of events, such as quests or social conflicts? Can we for instance use NPCs or objects to pace a story by using them to provide players with relevant clues? Can we force people to interact socially and thereby create a collective narrative if the reward (in the shape of desirable objects) is big enough? Hopefully, the analysis of the actual interaction in *EverQuest* can provide us with some answers and perhaps, also, with ideas for future designs of virtual worlds.

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