

Computer Games, Fictional Worlds, and Transmedia Storytelling: A Narratological Perspective

Jan-Noël Thon

Introduction

New and evolving forms of medial narration and transmedia storytelling pose a profound methodological challenge for narratological approaches within literature and media studies. While some narratological concepts such as ‘character’, ‘event’ or ‘fictional world’ seem to apply ‘across the media’, they do not necessarily apply to every medium in exactly the same way (Ryan 2004; 2006; Thon 2009; Wolf 2005). It is, for example, generally acknowledged within computer game studies that many contemporary computer games are set in fictional worlds often expanding beyond the games themselves (e.g. Jenkins 2004; 2006; Juul 2005; Ryan 2006; Thon 2007). But while the conventionally distinct media of the novel, the film and the computer game may all present fictional worlds, these worlds differ in significant ways that cannot and should not be reduced to “idiosyncrasies of individual texts” (Ryan 2004: 33). Situated in the context of a more comprehensive research project in the field of transmedial narratology, the present paper discusses the medium-specific ways in which the gameplay of the real time strategy game *WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS* (2002) and the massive multiplayer online role playing game *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* (2004) is enriched by and contributes to the transmedial presentation of the fictional world of *WARCRAFT*.

Computer Games and Fictional Worlds

Contemporary computer games often use a variety of ‘genuinely’ narrative techniques such as cut-scenes or scripted sequences of events and the events thus presented are generally highly determined *before* the game is played. However, the actual gameplay mainly consists of presentations of events that are determined *while* the game is played so that the mode in which ludic events are presented is more precisely characterized as simulation instead of narration (e.g. Frasca 2003; Ryan 2006: 181-203; Thon 2007). The movements of the player-controlled units in a game of *WARCRAFT III* or of the players’ avatars in the battle grounds of *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* occur as a result of the players’ interaction with the game space which is *partly* determined by the various game rules but clearly not as *fully* predetermined as the ‘genuinely’ narrative elements presented through narrative techniques such as cut-scenes and scripted sequences of events. However, this distinction between rule-governed simulation and predetermined narration as two fairly different modes of presentation does not necessarily imply that only ‘genuinely’ narrative elements are contributing to the presentation of fictional worlds. In fact, the way in which computer games present fictional worlds cannot and should not be reduced to either simulation or narration, since it is constituted precisely by the complex interplay between these two modes of presentation.

But what is the relation between a fictional world and its presentation in a computer game? All presentations of fictional worlds are necessarily incomplete and players – adhering to what is known as the “reality principle” (Walton 1990: 144-150) or the “principle of minimal departure” (Ryan 1991: 48-60) – use their world knowledge to ‘fill in the blanks’ when trying to imagine these worlds. While the question of how we construct mental representations of fictional worlds is certainly relevant, it has to be emphasized that fictional worlds are neither their *medial* presentations nor their *mental* representations. Accordingly, Jens Eder argues that “[j]ede fiktive Welt ist [...] ein kommunikatives Artefakt, das durch die intersubjektive Bildung mentaler Repräsentationen mithilfe fiktionaler Texte entsteht. Fiktive Welten [...] formen einen Gesamtzusammenhang, ein System, das neben Figuren und ihren Beziehungen auch deren verschiedene Kontexte umfasst: eine raumzeitliche Umgebung, unbelebte Gegenstände, Situationen und Ereignisse, Normen und Gesetzmäßigkeiten.“ (2008: 78-79; “Every fictional world is a communicative artefact that is constituted through the intersubjective construction of mental representations based on fictional texts. Fictional worlds are systems that include not only characters and their relations, but also spatio-temporal environments, inanimate objects, situations and events, norms and rules.”)

However, the “simulation aspect” (Aarseth 2001: n.p.) makes it difficult to determine which elements of a computer game contribute to the presentation of such an ‘intersubjective’ fictional world. In his discussion of the relation between rules and fiction in *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul observes that the presentation of fictional worlds in computer games is often not only incomplete, but also incoherent (2005: 121-133). This leads him to believe that “by *game conventions*, the player is aware that it is optional to imagine the fictional world of the game.” (Juul 2005: 141) While I agree with Juul that constructing the mental representation of a complex fictional world while playing a computer game is often optional (Thon 2008), I would argue that the problem should not be reduced to the game ‘inviting’ the player to construct such a fictional world and the player being able to “refuse the invitation and still play the game” (Juul 2005: 139). Instead, one can distinguish between at least two kinds of ‘fictional presentation’: Firstly, there is a *local* kind of presentation that cues players into imagining fictional entities situated in rather ‘subjective’ fictional worlds. Secondly, certain parts of contemporary computer games may also contribute to a more *global* presentation of ‘intersubjective’ fictional worlds that often expand beyond the games themselves.

Obviously, this distinction becomes especially productive if one looks at computer games from the perspective of transmedial narratology and, moreover, remembers that many contemporary computer games refer to rather elaborate narrative contexts, even if they are not part of one of the more visible transmedia storytelling franchises (Jenkins 2004; 2006). While the fictional worlds of THE MATRIX and STAR WARS, both prime examples of transmedia storytelling, originate in commercially successful movies, transmedia storytelling franchises based on commercially successful computer games seem to become more and more common. In fact, the fictional world to which the gameplay of the massive multiplayer online role playing game WORLD OF WARCRAFT refers, was first introduced by the real time strategy games of the WARCRAFT-series, i.e. WARCRAFT: ORCS AND HUMANS (1994), WARCRAFT II: TIDES OF DARKNESS (1995) and WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS as well as their various add-ons. However, the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT is not exclusively presented through these games and their official websites, but also through various comics and novels, a board game, a collectible trading card game, and a wealth of more marginal merchandise and fan fiction(s). But while the gameplay of WARCRAFT III and WORLD OF WARCRAFT is clearly enriched by this transmedial narrative context, not all elements of the games themselves contribute equally to the presentation of the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT.

WARCRAFT III and the fictional world of WARCRAFT

The single player mode of WARCRAFT III uses a variety of narrative techniques to present the story of Prince Arthas being seduced by the demonic sword Frostmourne and murdering his father to become a deathknight of the Lich King (and ultimately the Lich King himself). Accordingly, players will watch pre-rendered ‘cinematic-style’ cut-scenes conveying events that are of central importance to the story as well as a significantly greater number of ‘machinima-style’ cut-scenes mainly used for conveying dialogue between characters. Moreover, the loading screens between levels use maps and small language-based narrations to situate the various game spaces within the story and the fictional world of WARCRAFT and, finally, the players will experience a variety of scripted events within these game spaces. While the events conveyed through these narrative techniques are not always highly relevant for the unfolding story or the player’s understanding of the fictional world, they are all still predetermined elements of the ‘designer story’. Hence, they may be seen as more *reliable* with regard to the presentation of the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT than the locally simulated events of the ‘player story,’ which, in the process of playing, are determined through the rule-governed interaction of the player with the game (Rouse 2005: 204-206).

Leaving the question of reliability aside for the moment, the more emergent components of WARCRAFT III’s gameplay are ‘fictional presentations’ as well, since the player-controlled units obviously cannot be reduced to some abstract ludic function, but rather take the form of footmen, priests, knights, or even of Prince Arthas himself. More precisely, the units in a real time strategy game like WARCRAFT III are *both* abstract game pieces *and* fictional entities. As Jesper Juul notes in *Half-Real*: “If we play a board game such as *Axis & Allies*, all our actions have a double meaning. We move a piece around the board, but this *also* means we are invading Scandinavia with our troops. In *Tomb Raider*, we click the keys on the keyboard, but we are also moving Lara Croft. In these examples, the *actions* that we perform have the duality of being real events and being assigned another meaning in a fictional world.” (2005: 141) While I doubt that the action of ‘moving Lara Croft’ should in itself be considered fictional, the resulting ‘fact’ that Lara Croft moves at least partially is. Much in the same way, footmen, priests, and knights appearing in WARCRAFT III are ‘non-fictional’ units in a real time strategy game, but *at the same time* they are ‘fictional’ footmen, priests, and knights whose locally simulated presentation cues players into imagining fictional entities.

It is, however, quite a different question if the presentation of these fictional entities contributes to the presentation of the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT. Kendall Walton’s assertion that “[a] fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something” (1990: 39) may be related to Eder’s description of fictional worlds as collective constructs: When we read a novel or watch a movie, we are generally quite aware of what kind of fictional world we are *supposed* to imagine, and although our imaginations will of course differ with regard to details, we will still imagine fairly similar fictional worlds. When we play a computer game, however, the process is a little more complex: While the presentation of simulated gameplay in WARCRAFT III may cue players to construct ‘subjective’ mental representations of *some* fictional world (which may even be rather similar to the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT), most players will recognize that these local presentations may differ significantly from player to player and from playing session to playing session and are therefore not stable enough to contribute reliably to the detailed presentation of the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT. Nevertheless, mental representations of the gameplay in WARCRAFT III will often be enriched by the players’ specific world knowledge about this transmedially presented world.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT and the fictional world of WARCRAFT

The notion that there is no straightforward relationship between the fictional gameplay of a computer game and the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world it presents also seems to apply to the relation between fictional worlds and the social spaces of massive multiplayer online role playing games such as WORLD OF WARCRAFT (Klastrup 2003; Taylor 2006; Thon 2007). While I cannot go into detail with regard to the social interaction between players or the practice of role-playing in the present paper, it may still be helpful to examine briefly how other players influence the extent to which a massive multiplayer online role playing game can contribute to the presentation of an ‘intersubjective’ fictional world that expands beyond the game itself. Although WORLD OF WARCRAFT uses cut-scenes and more complex forms of scripted events as well, large parts of the ‘backstory’ are presented through – rather one-sided – quest dialogues (Krzywinska 2006; Walker Rettberg 2008; Thon 2007). Just as in WARCRAFT III, the information conveyed through narrative techniques tends to be quite reliable with regard to the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT when considered out of context, but the fact that WORLD OF WARCRAFT is played simultaneously by a very large number of players turns it into what Juul calls an “incoherent world game” (Juul 2005: 132).

In the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT, the legendary orc leader Thrall cannot be young and old *at the same time* and the pirate Andre Firebeard cannot be alive and beheaded *at the same time*. However, the latter – if not the former – is routinely the case during a quest that asks all players of WORLD OF WARCRAFT to let their avatars fight Firebeard and return his head to the quest-giving goblin Security Chief Bilgwhizzle. Moreover, since the quest in question is a group quest, killing Firebeard *once* will produce ‘Firebeard’s Head’ up to *five* times, depending on the number of group members. Much in the same way, a very large amount of avatars in WORLD OF WARCRAFT will routinely fight against and kill the bosses of the high-level dungeons and one and the same avatar can (and usually will) kill a certain boss repeatedly. Following Juul, we could indeed talk about “events in the fictional world that we cannot explain without discussing the rules” (Juul 2005: 130) in these cases and WORLD OF WARCRAFT has even been described as “a game that is essentially a mechanism to obscure the loot table” (Holkins 2008: n.p.). Just as in WARCRAFT III, then, players will usually be quite aware that there is no straightforward relationship between the presentation of WORLD OF WARCRAFT’s – simultaneously experienced, but still more or less locally simulated – gameplay and the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT.

It is worth remembering in this context that computer games may entail large passages of time where “the narrative design is not the focus of the player’s attention” (Ryan 2006: 196) and that it is a common practice of the players of both WARCRAFT III and WORLD OF WARCRAFT to skip cut-scenes and quest dialogues. This seems to resonate well with Juul’s thesis that the construction of a mental representation of a fictional world while playing a computer game is often optional. But *if* the attention of the players shifts to the fictional aspects of WORLD OF WARCRAFT’s gameplay, what kinds of mental representations do they construct? In her *Poetics of Virtual Worlds*, Lisbeth Klastrup rightly emphasizes “that users do not necessarily join a world to ‘commune’ or socialise, but to play or game” (Klastrup 2003: 147). Much in the same way, it should be stressed that players of WORLD OF WARCRAFT do not necessarily join the game primarily to experience ‘ontological fusion’ (Pavel 1986: 137-143) with the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT: the gaming experience may certainly be enriched by their specific world knowledge, but most of them are still mainly interested in interacting with the game spaces and will seldomly confuse the local presentation of these spaces with the global presentation of the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT.

Conclusion

The present paper has briefly examined the medium-specific ways in which the gameplay of contemporary computer games is enriched by and contributes to the transmedial presentation of fictional worlds within so-called transmedia storytelling franchises. An analysis of the real time strategy game WARCRAFT III and the massive multiplayer online role playing game WORLD OF WARCRAFT has, among other things, shown that the presentations generated by contemporary computer games through ‘genuinely’ narrative elements as well as the interactive simulation of ludic events may be considered fictional in at least two ways: Firstly, the complex interplay of narration and simulation so typical for contemporary computer games generates ‘player stories’ that may vary widely from player to player and from playing session to playing session. While these local fictional presentations may cue players to imagine *some* kind of fictional world, the resulting mental representations will be considered just as local and ‘subjective’ as the medial presentations on which they are based.

Secondly, WARCRAFT III and WORLD OF WARCRAFT do not only locally refer to the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT, but also contribute to the global and transmedial presentation of that world. In order for a fictional presentation in a computer game to be considered reliable enough to contribute to the global presentation of an ‘intersubjective’ fictional world, this presentation must be reasonably stable, i.e. it need not vary too much from player to player and from playing session to playing session. Hence, while the ‘player stories’ of contemporary computer games cue players into locally imagining ‘subjective’ fictional worlds, it is primarily their predetermined ‘designer story’ that contributes to the global presentation of an ‘intersubjective’ fictional world. Obviously, this only holds for those elements of the ‘designer story’ that can be considered reliable due to a lack of inconsistencies with other elements of this global presentation which – at least in the case of WARCRAFT III and WORLD OF WARCRAFT – expands beyond the games themselves.

Finally, it needs to be emphasized that the proposed distinction between ‘subjective’ and ‘intersubjective’ fictional worlds is in at least two ways not as clear-cut as I may have suggested in the preceding paragraphs. On the one hand, certain ‘structural’ aspects of locally simulated gameplay generally *are* consistent from player to player and from playing session to playing session: it is, for example, a relatively stable ‘fictional truth’ that Prince Arthas murders the people of Stratholme in chapter six of WARCRAFT III’s single player mode and the various game spaces of WORLD OF WARCRAFT seem to be rather reliable models of the ‘intersubjective’ fictional world of WARCRAFT’s landscape. On the other hand, the mental representations of ‘intersubjective’ fictional worlds are, to a certain extent, necessarily ‘subjective’ due to the incompleteness of the (trans-)medial presentation(s) they are based on. Hence, while it may be more appropriate to conceive of the distinction between ‘subjective’ and ‘intersubjective’ fictional worlds in terms not of an absolute, but of a gradual opposition, it still seems helpful to draw the proposed distinction when looking at computer games, fictional worlds, and transmedia storytelling from a narratological perspective.

Games

- WARCRAFT: ORCS AND HUMANS. Blizzard, PC, 1994.
- WARCRAFT II: TIDES OF DARKNESS. Blizzard, PC, 1995.
- WARCRAFT III: REIGN OF CHAOS. Blizzard, PC, 2002.
- WORLD OF WARCRAFT. Blizzard/Vivendi, PC, 2004.

References

- Aarseth, Espen (2001): "Computer Game Studies, Year One." In: *Game Studies* 1.1: n.p. [URL: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>] (07.08.2009).
- Eder, Jens (2008): *Die Figur im Film*. Marburg: Schüren.
- Frasca, Gonzalo (2003): "Simulation versus Narrative. Introduction to Ludology." In: Mark J. P. Wolf/Bernard Perron (Eds): *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York/NY, London: Routledge (pp. 221-235).
- Holkins, Jerry (2008): "A Large Rock and A Steep Hill." [URL: <http://www.penny-arcade.com/2008/01/28/>] (07.08.2009).
- Jenkins, Henry (2004): "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." In: Noah Wardrip-Fruin/Pat Harrigan (2004) (Eds): *FirstPerson. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge/MA, London: MIT Press (pp. 118-130).
- Jenkins, Henry (2006): *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York/NY: New York University Press.
- Juul, Jesper (2005): *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge/MA, London: MIT Press.
- Klastrup, Lisbeth (2003): *Towards a Poetics of Virtual Worlds. Multi-User Textuality and the Emergence of Story*. Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen [ph.d thesis].
- Krzywinska, Tanya (2006): "Bloody Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories. World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth in World of Warcraft." In: *Games and Culture* 1.4: 383-396.
- Pavel, Thomas G. (1986): *Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rouse, Richard (2005): *Game Design. Theory & Practice*. Plano/TX: Wordware.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure (1991): *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington/IN: Indiana University Press.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure (2004): "Introduction." In: Marie-Laure Ryan (Ed.): *Narrative across Media. The Languages of Storytelling*. Lincoln/NE: University of Nebraska Press (pp. 1-40).
- Ryan, Marie-Laure (2006): *Avatars of Story*. Minneapolis/MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Taylor, T. L. (2006): *Play Between Worlds. Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge/MA, London: MIT Press.
- Thon, Jan-Noël (2007): "Unendliche Weiten? Schauplätze, fiktionale Welten und soziale Räume neuerer Computerspiele." In: Klaus Bartels/Jan-Noël Thon (Eds): *Computer/Spiel/Räume. Materialien zur Einführung in die Computer Game Studies*. Hamburg: Universität Hamburg (pp. 29-60).
- Thon, Jan-Noël (2008): "Immersion Revisited. On the Value of a Contested Concept." In: Amyris Fernandez/Olli Leino/Hanna Wirman (Eds): *Extending Experiences*. Rovaniemi: Lapland University Press (pp. 29-43).
- Thon, Jan-Noël (2009): "Perspective in Contemporary Computer Games." In: Peter Hühn/Wolf Schmid/Jörg Schönert (Eds): *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization. Modeling Mediation in Narrative*. Berlin, New York/NY: de Gruyter (pp. 279-299).
- Walker Rettberg, Jill (2008): "Quests in *World of Warcraft*: Deferral and Repetition." In: Hilde G. Corneliusen/Jill Walker Rettberg (Eds): *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity. A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge/MA, London: MIT Press (pp. 167-184).
- Walton, Kendall L. (1990): *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*. Cambridge/MA, London: Harvard University Press.
- Wolf, Werner (2005): "Metalepsis as a Transgeneric and Transmedial Phenomenon. A Case Study of the Possibilities of 'Exporting' Narratological Concepts." In: J. Christoph Meister/Tom Kindt/Wilhelm Schernus (Eds): *Narratology Beyond Literary Criticism: Mediality – Disciplinarity*. Berlin, New York/NY: de Gruyter (pp. 83-107).