Storytelling in
Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores storytelling in Massively Multiplayer Online Games by focusing on the inherent factors that constrain the player's ability to make meaningful choices and experience the consequence of those choices. The approach to the subject is the construction of a storytelling model that identifies the central elements constraining the possible scope for player instigated story-based consequences in MMOGs. The model divides the constraining elements into three sub-categories: technology, gameplay and story content. The theoretical foundation of the analytical model is based on a literature study of narrative game theory. Finally, the thesis tests the validity of the storytelling model by applying it to a major new MMOG, *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*. The case study shows that there is considerable leeway for improving the storytelling experience through creative use of instancing technology and personalization of the player experience.

1. Introduction

This thesis is about storytelling in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (hereafter MMOGs). More specifically it is about how and why good storytelling is widely perceived as a missing feature of contemporary MMOGs, as illustrated in the following quote by Warren Spector:

> "The level of narrative that people have been able to achieve in MMOs has been so shallow. I'm one of those people who don't find anything interesting at all in leveling up, finding a +3 sword or paper-dolling a character with a purple cloak. That doesn't appeal to me in any way as a human being. Put that all together and the play experience of MMOs is on par with roleplaying back in ´87." (Spector in: Sheffield 2007)

The concepts of *player choice* and *consequence* are of central importance for this treatment of storytelling in MMOGs. It is my contention that what is generally perceived as a lack of story in MMOGs is really a lack of player instigated consequences arising from the players' interaction with the storytelling. When players make choices, important choices with real consequences, then they become emotionally invested in the storytelling. This corresponds with the concept of meaningful play, as outlined by Salen and Zimmerman (2004). But when it comes to storytelling, there are precious few important choices for the player to make in the typical MMOG.

Although there are plenty of computer games that tell stories, the concept of storytelling is mostly associated with singleplayer games. It is a common notion that a MMOG is a game without a story, and according to distinguished virtual world researcher Richard Bartle "it's almost taken as a given that conventional storytelling ideas do not apply to virtual worlds" (Bartle 2004, p.598). One of the most obvious obstacles to conventional storytelling is that a story requires the player to assume the role of hero or protagonist as the centre of attention for the story. This is clearly not possible in a MMOG where the player is one hero among thousands of heroes.

The fact is, that very little of what you do in the average MMOG, affects the story in any meaningful way. Character growth is measured in levels, skills and gear, but the character remains fundamentally unchanged. Changes introduced by the player in singleplayer games can have high impact consequences for the gameworld for the remaining duration for the game experience. Conversely, in MMOGs the gameworld is oblivious to the presence of the players. "They leave no lasting marks, monuments or even graffiti, only what memories they may have instigated for other players, their fellow visitors" (Aarseth 2008).

There are plenty of MMOGs out there with serious storytelling ambitions. Recent examples are *The Matrix Online* (Monolith Productions 2005), *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007) and *Tabula Rasa* (Destination Games 2007), featuring ongoing storylines and a strong focus on storytelling. MMOGs are starting to explore new ways of integrating the storytelling attributes that make singleplayer games great into the framework of the persistent worlds of MMOGs. The question is to what extend it is possible to marry the two game formats in order to create a better form of storytelling in MMOGs.

The aim of the thesis

My aim for this thesis is to explore and clarify the complexities of incorporating storytelling into the framework of MMOGs. My approach is to examine how MMOGs facilitate *consequential player choices*. This approach is based on the assumption that interactive storytelling becomes meaningful when it requires the player to make important choices with tangible consequences; i.e. consequences that players can identify as a product of their own choices.

In order to clarify how narrative structures facilitate consequential player choices in MMOGs I will examine the constraints of the MMOG format from three different perspectives: *Technology, gameplay and story content*. The sum of these three categories will form an analytical model for the study of storytelling in MMOGs. This model will be constructed on the basis of a literature study of narrative theory in game studies.

Finally, the storytelling model will be put to test in a case study of *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* (Funcom 2008).

A brief description of MMOGs

A brief definition and history of the MMOG is in order before we proceed.

MMOGs are online persistent worlds, played over the internet, and designed to accommodate hundreds or thousands of players. MMOGs have their roots in tabletop roleplaying games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) as well as in text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). MMOGs are often described by the acronym MMORPG, which stands for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, pointing back towards the heritage from tabletop roleplaying games.

Meridian 59 (3DO Studios 1996) is often credited as the first 3D graphical MMOG, but it was *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems 1997) that popularized the genre in 1997. *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive 1999) has been the most commercially successful MMOG on the western market up until the release of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004). *World of Warcraft* currently has over 10 million active subscribers world-wide[1], and it has become a cultural phenomenon that transcends far beyond the domain of computer gaming.

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[1] Source: http://www.mmogchart.com/Chart11.html

2. Narrative theory in game studies

This chapter will introduce the central concepts and terminology of narrative theory in game studies and provide the necessary theoretical tools for qualifying the discussion of narratives in MMOGs. The aim is to provide a critical review of contemporary narrative theory that can be relevant for understanding the principles of storytelling in MMOGs.

I have chosen a narratological approach because it provides some very useful literary tools for the study of storytelling elements in MMOGs. This does not imply that narratology is the only viable approach to the study of storytelling in games. An alternate approach could be based on an empirical study of the subject, for example by analyzing user groups based on reception theory. However, this thesis approaches the subject from a purely theoretical perspective.

2.1 Defining narrative

Some people would say that a MMOG by definition is a game without a story. However, this is really a question of how we define story. Outside the field of narrative theory the word "story" will often be used as a synonym of "narrative", derived from the Latin verb *narrare*, which means "to recount". In this sense of the word, story refers to both the telling of the story as well as the story itself. In narrative theory, however, the story is a constituent part of narrative, and refers to the sequence of events in a narrative, as separate from the recounting of the events. Narrative is a highly ambiguous term that we need to define in order to apply it to the study of storytelling in MMOGs.

The term "narrative" derives from the field of narratology. Narratology is the structuralist study of narrative, seeking to understand how recurring elements, themes, and patterns of stories across the world yield universal rulesets that determine the makeup of a story. Narratology originated in linguistic and literary studies, but has long since made the transgression into other academic fields, such as film studies, and more recently into game studies. Narratology has become a shared inter-disciplinary field of academia and maybe this account for the fact that there is no general agreement in the academic community on what counts as a narrative or even where a narrative is located: Is it in the written text? In the signs and symbols of a fictional world? Or does the narrative reside in the mind of the reader/spectator/player? (Simons 2007). There are many different approaches to the study of narrative, and it is simply beyond the scope of this thesis to provide the reader with an in-

depth review of all these approaches. Instead I will focus on selective analysis of contemporary narrative theory that will serve to qualify the analytical model for the study of storytelling in MMOGs.

Narratives play an evident part in certain aspects of games, such as expository introductions, non-playable parts (cut-scenes), and backstories (game manuals etc.). However, beyond these examples the boundaries between games and narratives are not very clear-cut. We need a definition, and for that I turn to the game scholar Marie-Laure Ryan, who has proposed the following definition of narrative:

> "A narrative is the use of signs, or of a medium, that evokes in the mind of the recipient the image of a concrete world that evolves in time, partly because of random happenings, and partly because of the intentional actions of individuated intelligent agents." (Ryan 2007, p.9)

Ryan's definition is generalized and independent of any particular medium, but it appears to fit very well to games telling stories and to MMOGs in particular, with its notion of a concrete fictional world that evolves over time. Let us now try to apply this definition specifically to games. A cursory analysis of the definition reveals that it builds on the three traditional components of narrative: setting, character and action. The "concrete world that evolves in time" constitutes the setting component; "individuated intelligent agents" is the character component; and the action component is contained in the "random happenings" and the "intentional actions". This distinction is relevant for computer games, because only the setting and character components provide useful design elements, whereas the action component is in the hands of the player and beyond the control of the designer. This is where narrative in interactive media differs from traditional linear media like novels and movies (Ryan 2001a).

Ryan offers the following clarification of narrativity specifically for games:

> "I would term narrative any game that invites the player to engage in role-playing and make-believe, and to perform, as part of this game of make-believe, actions that lead to practical and inherently desirable goals, like rescuing princesses and saving the earth from evil aliens, as opposed to goals made desirable by conventions, such as kicking a ball in a net or aligning three tokens in a row. The player of a narrative game engages in an act of imagination, while the player of an abstract game like football or tic-tac-toe just follows rules." (Ryan 2007, p.13)

Here Ryan defines a narrative game on the basis of its goals. What she is saying, is that narrative games have special narrative goals. If we subscribe to this theory, then it underlines the importance of integrating the story design into the game at a very early stage of development, and not just tagging on the story in the last minute. If a narrative game is truly defined by its goals, then the core rules and mechanics of the game need to support these narrative goals in a meaningful and consistent way. However, I think Ryan is painting a rather black-and-white picture of how narrative and non-narrative games sit at opposite ends of the spectrum. The player of an abstract game can certainly also engage in an act of imagination – in fact, I would say that the whole point of abstraction is to activate the imagination. Conversely, the goals in narrative games are bound by the rules of the game world, and the player who sets out to rescue the princess from the dragon is bound by these rules.

Narratology is of questionable value in the study of purely abstract games such as *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1985) or a simulation like *Microsoft Flight Simulator 1.0* (Microsoft 1982). These games do not fulfil the basic conditions of narrativity according to Ryan's definition, "namely offering an image of life by creating a concrete world populated by intelligent agents whose actions make this world evolve" (Ryan 2007, p.13). A narratological approach is more meaningful for the study of games with fictional worlds such as MMOGs, because it may tell us something about the historical heritage of these worlds by revealing how they are rooted in popular narrative traditions; from myths and legends across bardic folk tales traditions to modern fantasy and science fiction in a variety of different media (Murray 1997, p.185ff).

2.1.1 Modes of narrativity

Events are experienced as narratives by players in different ways. In other words, players construct narrative representation or meaning out of events in different ways. In the following I will outline three separate modes of narrativity, defined by the construction of narrative meaning. The following typology is loosely based on Ryan 2001b, p.244ff. However, I have left out Ryan's *dramatic* narrative mode, since it corresponds to the Aristotelian concept of plot, and I find this to be more relevant for narrative discourse analysis, which is not the subject of this thesis. The validity of the narrative concept of plot for games will be discussed in section 2.1.2. Ryan's typology of sequential and causal narrative modes is supplemented with a third category of my own making, that I have coined *narrative inference.* The three basic modes of narrativity are defined in the following:

Sequential narrative: The moment-to-moment experience of events as narrative elements in a temporal sequence. In this mode the player is registering events as a chronological chain but without connecting them by causality. The player is simply aware of the here-and-now, and the sequential narrative does not necessitate looking forward or behind to construct meaning. The player may experience narrative events this way if he perceives that there is no causal connection between events or if there is no benefit of understand the causality. Example: "The king died, then the queen died".

Causal narrative: Interpretation of events invoking causality, usually conceived retrospectively. Events are linked in a causal chain which leads to a specific outcome. This implies implicit or explicit retelling/framing of the chain of events linked by a causality that is imposed after the events have taken place. Often this gives the events a larger or entirely different meaning. This mode of narrativity echoes the old saying that life is experienced forward, but can only be understood backward. Example: "The king died, then the queen died of grief".

Narrative inference: This mode of narrativity involves the player filling out the holes and gaps in the story on the basis of inference, which is the process of deriving conclusions based on what the player already knows about the story world. The player will often use his imagination to fill out the untold and missing parts of a story, such as temporal or spatial shifts. This is a way of producing narrative cohesion by inference. It is my contention that this is typically a sub-conscious effort, requiring little thought or planning on behalf of the player. Let me give an example of narrative inference by returning to the story of the king and queen. In this basic narrative construct it is the death of the king that sets the story in motion, producing the causality of the queen dying of grief. But the narrative does not tell us *how* the king died. For the sake of the argument, let us say that it is suggested elsewhere in the story, that the king had powerful enemies, often trying to a assassinate him. Now, if the story tells us that the king's trusted taster has fled the kingdom, this knowledge of the story would cue us to fill in the blanks, by injecting a narrative element that fits the causal chain, such as: "the king died of *poisoning*, then the queen died of grief".

2.1.2 Story, discourse, plot

According to narratology, every narrative is a structure with a content plane (*story*) and an expression plane (*discourse*). The story is *what* is being told, while the discourse is *how* that

story is being told. Story refers to the actual chronology of events in a narrative; discourse refers to the manipulation of that story in the presentation of the narrative. In its common usage, the term *narrative* can refer to both a discourse reporting a story as well as the story itself (Ryan 2001b, p.244).

The discourse of a narrative can consist of verbal or written act of storytelling (diegetic narration), or of gestures and dialogue performed by actors (mimetic, or dramatic narration). For games the discourse consist of a participatory mode of narrativity, where the story is created in real time by playing a role in the story world and selecting one's behaviour (Ryan 2001a; Ryan 2007). This opens up the bag for a very complex discussion, and it is not the purpose of this thesis to discuss the different opinions on where the narrative is located. For the purpose of applying narratology to game studies we can assert, that the narrativity of computer games is located on the level of the story. The reason is that games are fundamentally different from narratives in that they are played, not narrated. "The story/discourse pair is in other words meaningless in the computer game. The computer game simply doesn't have an active dualism like that" (Juul 1998).

The narratological distinction between story and plot also needs to be defined. Story is the chronological sequence of events, while the plot is a particular ordering of the sequence of events to achieve some artistic or emotional effect. In other words, how the story is being narrated. "The events of the story are turned into a plot by its discourse, the modus of presentation" (Chatman 1978, p.43). The question is if this can be applied to games. Susana Tosca argues against the distinction between story and plot for computer games, "[…] as games are not narrated but played, and according to the narratological definition, there would never be a plot in games" (Tosca 2003). I agree with Tosca that the narrative plot definition is fundamentally at odds with computer games, because it requires the game to abandon its defining trait of interactivity in order for the author to have full control of the story and achieve the desired dramatic effect. However, I do not think that we should categorically abandon the concept of plot. While it is impossible to script the player's actions in accordance to a pre-defined plot, it is entirely possible for games to contain embedded plots, such as sequences of events that have happened before the game begins. A murder mystery is a good example of the embedded plot. The ordering of when and how the player uncovers the events of the past may constitute a narrative plot. This is the classical narrative structure employed in adventure games such as *Myst* (Cyan Worlds 1993) and *Blackout* (Deadline Multimedia 1997). Let me give an example from the recent and highly acclaimed *Bioshock* (2K

Boston/2K Australia 2007). In *Bioshock* the player gradually uncovers the fragments of a dramatic series of event (a story) that took place in the fictional underwater city of Rapture before the game begins. These fragments consist of audio logs, genetically-induced ghostly playbacks of past events, and radio messages. The order in which the player reconstructs the story of the past is not chronological, but has been rearranged in an embedded plot structure for increased dramatic effect.

2.2 The conflict between game and narrative

The essential question whether games are a form of narrative and to what extent they are narratives, has caused widely different opinions across the board between game designers, game researchers and narratologist. The polemic surrounding this question has been known as the narratology versus ludology debate, which has been going on since the early years of game studies.[2] This debate has been preoccupied with asserting the right to define the key concepts. At the risk of oversimplification I believe the discussion can be summarized as follows: In the battle between the two camps, the ludologists have been fighting to establish game studies as a new discipline on its own terms, defending their turf from encroaching narratologist trying to "colonize" the emerging field of game studies with their own theory and method from literature, theatre and film studies. The counterpoint from the narratologist camp is that the ludologist are throwing the baby out with the bath water in their eagerness to assert ludology as an independent academic discipline (Frasca 1999; Frasca 2003; Juul 2001; Pearce 2005; Simons 2007).

In many ways the strict division between ludology and narratology is an artificial construct, and it is not my intention to fuel the debate by asking the question whether or not games are narratives. For the purpose of this thesis we will proceed on the assumption that *games are not narratives, but that some games contain narrative elements*. This statement seems to be widely accepted, and it is my contention, that it is the current consensus in game studies.

The ludology versus narratology debate has resulted in a considerable body of research that helps us to identify the main differences between narratives in games and narratives in traditional linear media like novels and cinema. In the following I will outline some of the

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[2] The term *ludology* was popularized by Gonzalo Frasca in his 1999 article "Ludology Meets Narratology" (Frasca 1999).

most import differences. This is important for understanding the constraints of implementing narratives in games.

2.2.1 Sequence and causality

The conflict between games and narratives can be summarized as a clash between the trademark of games (interactivity), and trademark of linear media (sequence and causality). The most common forms of narratives contain presentations of completely linear sequences such as books, movies and television. By contrast, interactive games have non-linear, semi-linear or even multiple sequence. Linearity implies the absence of player control over the narrative. Strictly speaking, narrative and interaction cannot happen at the same time, and this is why many games alternate between interactive gameplay and non-interactive storytelling such as cut-scenes (Juul 2005).

The narrative in linear media is a sequence of events that is linked together by causality and chronology (a sequential arrangement of events). The causality is constructed by the author or narrator, and it cannot be transposed directly into an interactive non-linear game, because the chronology of events will deviate from the original structure, and therefore the causality connecting the sequence of events will get lost.

2.2.2 The element of time

Let us now explore the relationship between time in games and time in linear media.

Linear media have unrestricted freedom to rearrange and manipulate time in the construction of non-interactive narratives. In movies we recognize the usual editing tricks, such as flashback, flash forwards, slow motion, jump-cuts and shifting scenes. These editing techniques are a way to rearrange the chronology and create plot-structure within the narrative.

Games use time in very different ways, and the use of time can even vary within the same game. Singleplayer games frequently use editing techniques, such as compressed *bullet-time* in *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment 2001), or accelerated time in *Rome: Total War* (Creative Assembly 2004). The purpose and function of edited time in games varies; in *Max Payne* the bullet-time is an integral part of the gameplay that greatly affect the difficulty of

combat. In *Rome: Total War* accelerated time is a tool for skipping the boring parts of the game. It is a lot more problematic to use edited time to create plot structure in games, because games almost always are chronological. As Jesper Juul has explained:

> "Flash-forwards are highly problematic, since to describe events-to-come would mean that the player's actions did not really matter. Using cut-scenes or in-game artifacts, it is possible to describe events that led to the current fictional time, but interactive flashback leads to the time machine problem: The player's actions in the past may suddenly render the present impossible." (Juul 2005, p.148)

Editing time is ridden with problems in multi-player games in general, not least in MMOGs. Manipulation of time in a shared space of a multiplayer game can easily unbalance the game, or make it seem incoherent because it interferes with the rules of the fictional world. The bullet-time concept is actually used in the MMOG *The Matrix Online* (Monolith Productions 2005), but it is limited to a special mode of close combat called *Interlock*, where two players exchange blows with the action broken into 4-seconds rounds. Interlock effectively isolates the bullet-time from the shared space of the MMOG, so that the rules apply equally to both players. However, it does not edit the real-time progression of the persistent world, but simply provides a different representation of time that is little more than a fancy effect.

Time in MMOGs differs from singleplayer games in that MMOGs always have real-time pacing, meaning that the action can never be paused, and the players can never stop the clock from ticking. Nor is it possible to save the state of the game; time simply rolls on in the virtual world of the MMOG, whether or not the player is actively playing. You can stop playing, but you can never stop time in the virtual world, and this is why we refer to a game session as logging on/off instead of starting/stopping the game. This is an aspect of persistent worlds, and persistence is the defining characteristic of MMOGs.

Even though MMOGs are defined by having real-time pacing, they have a different way of representing time. In MMOGs, as well as in certain singleplayer games, such as *Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006) and *The Witcher* (CD Project 2007), the representation of time is *mimetic*, meaning that the time of the actions in the game mimics the time of corresponding actions in the real world (Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå 2003) [3]. However, in MMOGs the mimetic time is generally not synchronized to real world time on a 1:1 basis. Instead a full

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[3] Jesper Juul has proposed the term *fictional time* to denominate the time of the events in the game world, as separate from the term *play time*, denoting the time span taken to play a game (Juul 2005, p.142).

day cycle in a MMOG will typically be represented by considerably shorter time frame, such as 4-5 hours or real-world time[4]. There are many reasons why it is problematic to use a 1:1 time representation in MMOGs. For example, the player, who gets home from work and logs on every night at the same time, would never experience the full day-night cycle of the virtual world. A certain level of abstraction in the representation of time is also useful for facilitating certain storytelling techniques and dramatic effects.

Although most player activities in MMOGs are represented as mimetic time, certain activities use a different *arbitrary* form of representation that does not correspond to the action in the real world. These activities typically include long travels between distant geographical areas of the gameworld, or time-consuming construction works, such as building siege equipment in *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001) or the player-created cities in *Age of Conan* (Funcom 2008). These construction works are a matter of mere minutes of game time, and they constitute an arbitrary compressed time representation of the lengthy and time-consuming real-world process.

Arbitrary representation of time in MMOGs constitute an incoherent aspect of the fictional world (see section 2.4), but does not necessarily present any problems for the player experience. The battering ram in *Dark Age of Camelot* inexplicably materialize out of thin air where it is being built, while the walls of the player-made city in *Age of Conan* appear to shoot up from the ground as if guided by a divine intervention. Players know that there is no magic and no divine hand involved because it is part of the game convention of player-created constructions. Players can suspend disbelief and simply chose to imagine the fictional world (Juul 2005, p.141).

2.2.3 The element of space

The relationship between the element of game space and narrative is important for understanding the principles of storytelling in MMOGs. The construction and design of the game space is a major factor in how players make meaning of the fictional world. Celia Pearce has used the term *spatial narrative* to signify the type of storytelling where space is the primary form of narrative representation. The element of space is normally present in stories,

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[4] This ratio applies for *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001) *and Age of Conan* (Funcom 2008). *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) uses a 1:1 ratio, which is the source of quite a few complaints from players, who always play during same hours.

in the basic form of characters situated in time and space. But where a novel can take place within the mental and psychological landscape of its characters, games usually depend a lot more on explicit spatial narrative. "Games bear more in common with architectural storytelling forms, such as theme parks and cathedrals, than they do with what are generally categorized as narrative forms, such as novels and cinema" (Pearce 2005).

Spatial narratives typically consist of exploration, navigation and travel, and this applies to both games and linear media. However, the actual representation of space is fundamentally different in games and in linear media. Games - and this applies to MMOGs in particular - create space where the player is able to roam freely within the constraints of the defined world until hitting a zone-wall.[5] Conversely, linear media create a much more selective representation of spatial narrative. Movies and novels skip uninteresting space much the same way as editing time, and only conjure up the spatial narrative, that are necessary for establishing the scene. The story of a character travelling from point A to point B in a novel or a movie will normally be represented as a series of highlights to help the reader/viewer make the narrative inference and assemble a coherent mental picture of a travel.

Henry Jenkins has formulated his environmental storytelling model based on four different spatial narrative structures: *evoked, enacted, embedded* and *emergent* narrative (Jenkins 2004). In this thesis I use a narrative dual-structure model that encompasses embedded and emergent narrative. I would argue that Jenkins' categories of evoked and enacted narrative are not really narrative structures, but rather aspects that can apply to either embedded or emergent narratives. Embedded and emergent narratives will be discussed in section 2.3. Let us therefore look at Jenkins's elements of *evocative* and *enacted* narrative forms.

Evocative narrative draws upon broadly shared genre traditions and remediates pre-existing stories. Branded fictional worlds, such as those found in *Star Wars*, *The Matrix* and *Lord of the Rings*, are often used in MMOGs because they are rich on evocative narratives. When players enter these evocative spaces they step into a familiar world, that they have already visited in their fantasy when reading the books or watching the movies. Evocative narratives serve the player as a great tool in making *narrative inference* and filling out the blanks of the incomplete fictional world. Obviously this is a benefit for the designers of the branded virtual world, but there are also downsides to using branded worlds, such as having to live up to the players' expectation (Kosak 2003).

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[5] This is an example of how rules and fiction intersect in defining game space (Juul 2005, p.164ff).

Jenkins' definition of *enacted narrative* is a rather more ambiguous category, and contains two different layers. The first layer is the role of space in creating plot structure: "The organization of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds so that obstacles thwart and affordances facilitate the protagonist's forward movement towards resolution" (Jenkins 2004). Jenkins is using a rather loose definition of the term *plot*, and he is not talking specifically about embedded plot structures in games. But lets us return to the previous example of the embedded plot in *Bioshock* (2K Boston/2K Australia 2007) in order to examine the role of the enacted spatial narrative. In *Bioshock* it is characteristic, that the narrative descriptors, unravelling the backstory of Rapture, consist of audio logs, visions of ghosts, and radio messages. In other words, the embedded plot is based on character enactment and speech, which are not elements of spatial narratives. The violent events of the past have certainly left their impression on the game space of the underwater city of Rapture, but the spatial impressions are not structuring the player's experience of the embedded plot; the spatial narrative becomes meaningful when the player decodes the spatial impressions by way of the other narrative descriptors. The example of *Bioshock* illustrates that spatial narrative only plays a supporting role in the creation of embedded plots.

The second layer of Jenkins' *enacted narrative* category includes the so-called micro-narratives, consisting of localized incidents and staged events. In game design terms this translates into cut-scenes and scripted events, and I fail to see the logic of framing these storytelling techniques as a form of spatial narrative.

2.3 Narrative game structure

Games tell stories in many different ways: "[…] the development of interactive mechanisms is both a new way of telling stories and a generator of new narrative structures: broken up, open, without rise and fall of tension, unstable, multilinear, created in the act of reading, multiple, and so on" (Ryan 2001a, p.243).

In this thesis I will be using a dual structure model of *embedded* and *emergent* narrative.[6] This dual structure model of narrative is explored by Salen and Zimmerman, who propose the following distinction between embedded and emergent narratives in games:

> "Embedded elements are narrative structures directly authored by game designers that serve as a frame for interaction. Emergent narrative approaches emphasize the ways the players interact with a game system to produce a narrative experience unique to each player." (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p.384)

This definition provides a good starting point for a more in-depth examination.

2.3.1 Embedded narrative

Embedded narrative is the pre-generated story, crafted by the game developer and told in an interactive form for the player to experience. In other words, it exists prior to the player's interaction with the game. In this thesis embedded narrative is equated with storytelling.

> "Embedded narrative elements can take a variety of forms and be reached through a variety of means, but regardless of how they are experienced, embedded narrative elements are fixed and predetermined units of narrative content, like text on the page of a Chose-Your-Own-Adventure book." (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p.383)

Because of this fixed form embedded narrative tends to resemble the storytelling form of linear media. Embedded narrative serves a wide variety of purposes in games. On the large scale it provides the major story arc for the game, structuring the player's interaction and movement through the game world in a meaningful way. On a smaller scale, embedded narrative motivates the minor events and mundane actions of the game, and thereby provides the player with a sense of direction and purpose. Trivial actions can become meaningful in achieving the narrative goals of the embedded narratives. A good example of this is the typical quest in many MMOGs where the player has to kill ten wolves.

Embedded narrative contains enacted narrative elements such as pre-rendered cut-scenes, scripted sequences of events, and backstories. Henry Jenkins defines enacted narrative as a special form of environmental storytelling, as previously discussed.

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[6] According to Salen and Zimmerman, this terminology was originally proposed by Marc LeBlanc in a presentation at the Game Developers Conference in 1999 (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p.383). However, judging by the content of the presentations it must have been at GDC 2000 (LeBlanc 1999; LeBlanc 2000).

> "In the case of embedded narratives, the game space becomes a memory palace whose content must be deciphered as the player tries to reconstruct the plot." (Jenkins 2004)

What Jenkins is getting at here, is that the embedded narrative structure is a framework of possibility for the player to reconstitute events that have taken place in the past. We can identify two narrative layers of significance within this structure: the pre-generated story that the player discovers, as well as the story of the discovery itself. This is the narrative structure that is characteristic of the detective novel, and it is a formula that is widespread in story-driven singleplayer games.

2.3.2 Emergent narrative

Where the game developer is the author of the embedded narrative, it is the player that is the creative force behind the emergent narrative. Emergent narrative elements arise during play from the player's interaction with the rule structure of the game world. It is the actual moment-to-moment play during the game that produce the emergent narrative, and it inevitably varies between play sessions and leads to unpredictable narrative experiences depending on the player's actions. This complex relationship is described well by Marie-Laure Ryan:

> "In an emergent system […] the designer populates a world with agents and objects capable of diverse behaviours, also known as affordances, and the user creates stories by activating these behaviours, which affect other agents, alter the state of the system, and through a feedback loop, open new possibilities of action and reaction." (Ryan 2007, p.18)

From this description it follows, that emergent narrative can arise from the player's interaction with the embedded narrative elements. In fact, it is normal for games to combine the two narrative structures; for example the typical quest game structure is pre-generated and based on the embedded narrative, but many of the moment-to-moment game events, arising during the player's progress through the quest storyline, will give rise to unpredictable emergent narrative.

Emergent narratives are not crafted storytelling, but game designers still have an important part to play in shaping a gameworld that is ripe with narrative possibilities. Empowering emergent narratives requires the creation of an authoring environment, where players can

write their own stories and define their own goals. In Jenkins' words, the "game spaces are designed to be rich on narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players" (Jenkins 2004).

The emergent narrative structure is the trademark of MMOGs, where players create their own stories through interaction with the highly complex gameworld, often in collaboration with other players. Other types of games, such as *The Sims* (Maxis 2000) and *Black & White* (Lionhead Studios 2001), are also prime examples of emergent narratives. Some people, like Richard Bartle, have argued that emergent narrative is the only viable form of narrative in a MMOG:

> "It is important to realize that virtual worlds do *not* have, nor ever *can* they have, narrative in the conventional sense. They're places. Players can act out narratives of their own within them, but the virtual worlds can't impose a three-act structure or anything like it." (Bartle 2004, p.651)

Bartle does allow for the possibility of introducing a limited amount of embedded narrative causality. However, his opinion is that "[...] virtual worlds that impose narrative – even narrative written by a famous author – are overlooking what virtual worlds are *about*" (Bartle 2004, p.655). This argument is contested by the fact that many popular MMOGs feature storytelling components, i.e. embedded narratives, such as *The Matrix Online* (Monolith Productions 2005), *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007) and *Tabula Rasa* (Destination Games 2007). Whether these storytelling components are playing to the strength of what virtual worlds are about, is of course another question. The answer probably lies in between, in merging the elements of embedded and emergent narratives. However, it is not the purpose of this thesis to discuss which of the two narrative structures are more beneficial for MMOGs. The focus is on storytelling, defined as embedded narrative.

2.3.3. Merging the dual structures

The distinction between embedded and emergent narrative is primarily of analytical value. From the players perspective the difference between embedded and emergent narratives is not necessarily experienced as a divide during the actual gameplay; they are intertwining forms of narrative experience.

Emergent narrative is an extremely broad and nearly all-inclusive structural category for everything the player experience as narrative while playing the game, except only that which is pre-generated and laid out in advance by the game developer. As Jesper Juul has pointed out, emergent narrative is a nearly meaningless term unless it is specified (Juul 2005, p.159). Emergent narratives are context-dependent, meaning that the changes that occur are not the same every time (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p.384). Therefore emergent narrative must be studied in a specified context. Conversely, embedded narrative has a more clearly defined and fixed format that can be analyzed without the same consideration to the context-dependency of emergent narrative. This is one of the practical reasons I have chosen to focus on the embedded narrative elements in MMOGs for this thesis. However, this does not imply that we should disregard the significance of the player when analyzing embedded narrative in games. After all, it is the actions of the player that brings the embedded narrative to life and thereby lends meaning to the story.

Embedded narrative is not necessarily more important than emergent narrative. In fact, I would argue that the force of the computer game narrative is precisely its ability to successfully combine and balance the embedded and emergent approaches into something that is more than its parts. "The ideal of interactive storytelling is to merge the designer's story and the player's story into one, so that players have a real impact on a story while the story retains its dramatic qualities" (Rouse 2005, p.204). There are precious few examples of this storytelling ideal being realized in computer games, since it basically requires an Artificial Intelligence capable of responding dynamically to players, in the same way as the game master adapts the storytelling to the actions of the players in a pen-and-paper roleplaying game, like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974). Artificial Intelligence in computer games will probably never have the same storytelling potential as a human game master, but technology is constantly on the march and who knows what the future might hold.

2.4. Fictional worlds

Fictional worlds are the foundation of all MMOGs and pose special problems in relation to storytelling. The concept of fictional worlds derives from the theory of possible worlds in analytic philosophy (Ryan 2005), and has been used in game studies for example by Jesper Juul (Juul 2005, p.122f).

Fictional worlds in games can be defined as an alternate world setting that is comprehensive and self-consistent with its own rules and functional concepts, often based on elements from fantasy and science fiction. In *Star Wars*, the universal principle of the "Force" is an example of a functional concept, defining what we might call the rules of black and white "magic". Fictional worlds contain their own unique background elements, such as history and geography, however most fictional worlds are based directly or indirectly on our own world.

This definition is consistent with Ryan's definition of narrative: *the image of a concrete world that evolves in time*. Fictional worlds are full of narrative possibilities, and do not rely on a single specific presentation, whether it is played, narrated or enacted. The fictional world provides the setting and framework that allows fast-flowing narrative and believable situations to emerge.

In literature some of the great masters of fictional worlds are J.R.R. Tolkien, creator of Middle-Earth from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Frank Herbert – creator of planet Arrakis featured in the *Dune* series of novels, and Robert E. Howard – creator of the Hyborian Age[7], the world of *Conan the Barbarian*. Fictional worlds are also popular in film and TV, such *The Matrix*, *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. Computer games often build on these branded world constructs, as in the case of the aforementioned examples (Kosak 2003). When fictional worlds are based on branded worlds they can evoke pre-existing narrative association. This is a form of environmental storytelling that Henry Jenkins refers to as *evoked narrative* (Jenkins 2004).

Creating a convincing and believable fictional world requires attention to minute detail, such as geography, history, religion, politics, racial and cultural details. It is hard enough in linear games where the player's movement is controlled, and it is a downright daunting task in MMOGs where players have so much freedom to explore the fictional world. The more freedom the game affords the player, the more the fictional world will expose its inherent and inevitable narrative incoherencies that show up under the extreme scrutiny of the players capable of approaching the narrative content from a multitude of angles.

It is impossible to create a fiction that completely specifies all aspects of a fictional world, and therefore all fictional worlds are incomplete (Juul 2005, p.122). This is where *narrative*

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[7] The Hyborian Age is a fictional pre-historic setting on planet Earth, circa 14,000 BC to 10,000 BC. It is an example of how fictional worlds can build on alternate world history. See: http://hyboria.xoth.net/history/hyborian_age.htm

inference (see section 2.1.1) comes into play, when players fill in the blanks to maintain a sense of completeness and make the fictional world into a believable imaginary place. A fictional world not only cues the player to imagine the events and backstories that are made explicit, but also to make inference about the larger fictional world on the basis of the implicit narrative. This is a central part of the theory of possible worlds, what Ryan refers to as the *principle of minimal departure*. "The principle states that when readers construct fictional worlds, they fill in the gaps in the text by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own experiential reality" (Ryan 2005).

The fictional worlds of MMOGs are believable and self-coherent imaginary places, but although we can classify MMOGs as coherent world games, they still contain *incoherent* elements. Sometimes the game contradicts itself or breaks its own narrative logic, making it difficult for the player to imagine the fictional world in its entirety.

> "If the effort required to fill in a blank in the game world becomes too big, we have to resort to a rule-oriented explanation. I propose that we call this type of fictional world an incoherent world, meaning that there are many events in the fictional world that we cannot explain without discussing the game rules." (Juul 2005, p.130)

Let us consider an example from *Age of Conan* (Funcom 2008), where some players own a mammoth, serving as their steed. The possession of a mammoth is represented by a mammoth-icon that sits in the inventory of the players backpack. When the player wishes to ride the mammoth the giant pre-historic beast is summoned from the backpack by moving the icon to the quick-bar and pressing it. How can the player explain this unnatural occurrence? Spells are not carried in the backpack, and there is nothing in the description of the mammoth to suggest that it is a magical being, such as the jinni of a lamp. The summoning of the mammoth can only be explained by resorting to the rules or the game. Dying and re-spawning at a resurrection point is another example of narrative incoherence. The incoherency disputes the credibility of the fictional world as a narrative construct, and therefore it is of paramount importance that the game encourages the player to believe in and respect the fictional world, or in the words of Jesper Juul, to choose to imagine the world:

> "[…] the fictional worlds of many games are contradictory and incoherent, but the player may not experience this as such since the rules of the game can provide a sense of direction even when the fictional world has little credibility. In fact, the player's

> experience of the game fiction appears not to require much consistency – the world of a
> game is something that the player can often choose to imagine at will." (Juul 2005, p.6)

Juul is pointing to one of the central working principle behind narratives in games: the players' *willing suspension of disbelief* (Sheldon 2004, p.176). This is the basic reason why games can work just fine, despite any narrative shortcomings and logical inconsistencies. The imagination of the player is the greatest tool that a game can tap into, because it allows the player to fill in the gaps, and explain away or downright ignore any inconsistency. The player can maintain the fiction by willing suspension of disbelief if the game provides the incentive and payoff for doing so. As Juul points out, the important thing is that the player has a clear sense of direction and goal-orientation, and this is something the rules of the game can provide when the story fails.

2.5. Player agency

This thesis is based on the assumption that storytelling in computer games becomes meaningful when it presents the player with interesting and important choices, leading to tangible consequences. In order to qualify the discussion of *consequential choices* I will introduce the theoretical concept of *agency*.

The concept of agency is not part of classical narratology that deals with traditional linear media. Agency is related to interactivity, and it was introduced into narrative theory for the study of games and other non-linear media by Brenda Laurel (Laurel 1993) and later by Margaret Murray in her seminal work *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Murray 1997). Murray has defined agency like this: "Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 1997, p.126). "When the world responds expressively and coherently to our engagement with it, then we experience agency" (Murray 2004).

Agency is the capacity for players to make choices and to impose those choices on the game world. It is very important aspect of storytelling, because if the gameworld does not react to the players, then why are they there?

In order to understand the concept agency it is useful to separate it from the concept of interactivity, the defining characteristic of non-linear and interactive media, to which agency is related. Game designer Chris Crawford has dedicated a large part or his long career to

research and development of interactive storytelling in games, and he proposes the following definition of interactivity:

> "A cyclic process between two or more active agents in which each agent alternately listens [accepts input], thinks [process input], and speaks [outputs results]." (Crawford 2005, p.29)

Crawford deliberately avoids framing interactivity exclusively as human-to-computer communication, but I have inserted the bracketed text in the quote to signify this context. In the context of communication between the human player and the computer game, interactivity refers to the interactive behaviour of the computer game interface as experienced by the player. Agency on the other hand is about more than moving a joystick or clicking a mouse, and it goes beyond participation and activity (Murray 1997, p.128). Agency is the ability to act, not the acting in itself. Agency implies that the player does more than simply react to the stimuli of the game; the player also explores the boundaries of the rule structure, seeking to test or manipulate the limitations of interactivity through gameplay (Schott 2006, p.134). Gameplay is a regulated activity, governed by the rules structure of the game, and it is the player's perception of the ability to act within this rule-structure that governs the experience of agency.

Now that we have separated agency from interactivity, let us examine the meaning of agency. For story-based games I would argue, that the highest sense of agency exists somewhere in the borderland between the point where the player has learned to play the game, and the point where the player has exhausted the game's possibilities. As players we all recognize that special feeling of entering an exciting new gameworld, where we imagine (or hope) that nearly every course of action lies open, and that the gameworld will react to our presence in a meaningful way. As we explore and test the limits of interactivity, we gradually become aware of the set boundaries of the game, limiting and constraining the possible scope of our actions as players and thereby reducing the sense of agency. The perception of doors may instil a sense of agency in the player, because a door signifies the possibility for the player to open it. But if the door cannot open, which is often the case in computer games, then the illusion is broken and the agency is revealed to be a fake.

> "Agency [...] involves intentionality: it is not just a matter of expecting or predicting future events, but also of intervening proactively in order to bring them about. Computer games invite the player to act in and on the material world, traversing

gateways to unseen territories that set in motion a chain of uncertain events. Such actions are performed with the intention that they will lead to desired outcomes, but they can also produce outcomes that are neither intended nor wanted." (Schott 2006, p.139)

What Schott is suggesting is that agency is connected with the concept of uncertainty and meaningful play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p.363ff, 388f). The uncertainty of whether the door will open and where it will lead is a pre-requisite for experiencing the agency of the door. If we know in advance that the door is a fake, then there is no reason for us to try and open it, and it will simply cease to be a door. However we can still chose to imagine the door, by willing suspension of disbelief.[8]

Agency is a useful concept for describing the subjective player experience of consequential choice and impact on the gameworld. However, when it comes to player impact, MMOGs have certain limitations as a storytelling platform. Since we are dealing specifically with MMOGs we have to make a distinction between player *agency*, pertaining to the subjective player experience of having the ability to impact on the gameworld, and the more objective criteria of gameworld *impressionability.* I am defining impressionability as an expression of a fictional world's capability of receiving an impression resulting from player actions. Agency can be understood as a function of the impressionability, i.e. the constraints and affordances that have been built into the gameworld. The impressionability of MMOG worlds will be discussed in detail as part of the analytical model in chapter 3.

The concepts of agency and impressionability raise important questions regarding the level and magnitude of the player's consequential choices: Does the player change the structure of the game or is he simply navigating it? How much mark does the player leave?

In the following I will present a typology for agency, based on Mateas and Stern (2005), who have worked intensively with integrating agency into the game design for their interactive storytelling game *Facade* (Procedural Arts 2005). According to this typology we can identify two types of agency:

Local agency: "When the player's actions cause immediate, context-specific, meaningful reactions from the system, we call this local agency" (Mateas and Stern 2005). This is a form of surface agency governing the minute-to-minute player activities. It equals choice of

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[8] Ken Perlin argues that agency is a pre-requisite of the willing suspension of disbelief (Perlin 2004).

different play styles and problem solutions, and the consequences of these player actions often last only for a short time. Moreover, the apparent change may simply be a clever illusion to instil a sense of agency. Local agency can be produced by the illusion of change, rather than actual impact on the game world.

***Global agency*:** Global agency is freedom and control over the way the overarching plot unfolds. This type of agency has a direct impact on the structural level of the game.

> "The player has global agency when the global shape of the experience is determined by player action. In *Facade* this would mean that the final ending of the story, and the particulars of the narrative arc that lead to that ending, are determined in a smooth and continuous fashion by what the player does, and that at the end of the experience the player can understand how her actions led to this storyline." (Mateas and Stern 2005)

Global agency is obviously extremely difficult to achieve in computer games. *Facade* (Procedural Arts 2005) is recognized as the first and only working example of truly interactive storytelling game with global player agency. However it is a very small game of limited scope, and can completed in about 15 minutes. It is hard to imagine the same level of global agency integrated in a standard length game, and even more so in a MMOG.

The typology of local versus global agency is a reflection of the degree of impressionability of the gameworld, as we shall see in the following chapter when we deal with this subject.

3. Storytelling in MMOGs

In this chapter I will examine the constraints of storytelling mechanics in MMOGs on the basis of the narrative theory presented in the previous chapter. In doing so, I propose an analytical model for the study and evaluation of story-based consequences in MMOGs.

It is not my ambition to provide the reader with a practical design model of how to push the boundaries of storytelling in MMOGs, nor is it about how to make better storytelling games. My goal is simply to explain why storytelling in its current form in MMOGs is not on par with singleplayer games. If we compare storytelling (again, defined as embedded narrative) in MMOGs versus singleplayer games, it is evident that singleplayer games have a wider scope of storytelling mechanics and components. MMOGs need to accommodate thousands of players, sharing the same persistent world, and therefore they are more limited in their ability to employ embedded narrative techniques compared to singleplayer games.

The purpose of the storytelling model that I delineate in this chapter is to identify the main causes of these limitations and to clarify the constraints of embedded narrative design in MMOGs. The model is using the storytelling potential of singleplayer games as a baseline; by examining the storytelling elements in MMOGs from this baseline we can identify a number of *constraints* where MMOGs are hampered in their storytelling potential compared to singleplayer games. Tychsen and Hitchens point us in the right direction:

> "The virtual worlds are bound by technical, resource, format, media-related and not the least player-related limitations, which makes it inherently difficult to provide the kind of engaging, personal and emotionally meaningful storytelling, which could aid the game from in opening up to a broader audience." (Tychsen and Hitchens 2006)

The model is based on the premise assertion that the singleplayer game format facilitates a wider storytelling spectrum of embedded narrative game design, whereas storytelling in MMOGs is a subset of this spectrum. In other words, the storytelling devices and techniques that work in a MMOG can also work in a singleplayer game, but not all in a singleplayer game is a viable design option within the framework of a MMOG. This does not mean that the storytelling experience is a better one in singleplayer games; on the contrary, MMOGs have a great potential to enhance the experience of a pre-generated story. The social aspect plays a huge role in MMOGs and can arguably contribute to a stronger shared experience of embedded narratives. Therefore this model should not be construed as a balanced comparison between storytelling potential of singleplayer games versus MMOGs. The approach I have

taken examines the constraints, but leaves out the affordances of narratives in MMOGs. MMOGs have a great inherent potential for emergent narratives, and since this is left out of the analytical model it may seem like the cards are stacked in favour of singleplayer games.
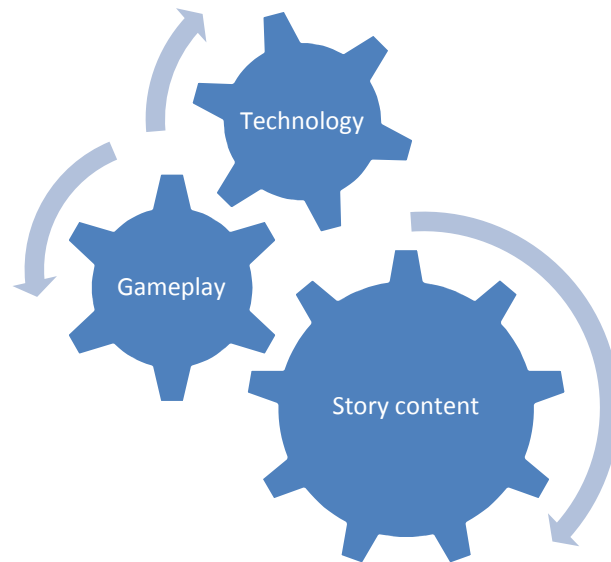

Figure 3.1: The three categories of the MMOG storytelling model.

The game elements that shape and constrain the possible scope for story-based consequences in MMOGs can be divided into the following three categories:[9]

a) *Technology*: Dealing with the storytelling constraints that can be described from a technological perspective: impressionability and persistence of the fictional world, instancing technology and cut-scenes.

b) *Gameplay*: This category approaches storytelling in MMOGs from the ludic perspective, examining the special gameplay constraints of the MMOGs such as goals, challenges and replayability.

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[9] The distinction between these categories is for analytical purposes, and some of the elements could be argued to belong to more than one category. For instance, most of the elements of the story content category could also be defined from a technological perspective; e.g. NPC relationships largely dependent on Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is mainly defined by technological constraints and affordances. However, since this thesis is based on narrative theory, it makes little sense to approach the subject of NPC relationships by discussing the limitations of contemporary AI technology.

c) ***Story content***: The elements of this category are the core components of storytelling in MMOGs, such as quests, lore, and Non-Player Character (NPC) relationships. These elements pertain to actual game content.

The model situates storytelling in MMOGs as a system of dependencies between the constraints of technology, gameplay and story content. A way to understand or rationalize this relationship of dependency between the three categories is to look at them in terms of the classic dichotomy between content and form. The *content* refers to the core components and concrete expression of the storytelling in the MMOG, while the *form* refers to its underlying gameplay structure and technological methods. The point of this interpretation is to illustrate, that the form (i.e. gameplay and technology) is the foundation and structure that shapes the content. In other words, narrative is subordinated to technology and gameplay.

In the following we will examine the constraints of story-based consequences in MMOGs from the three different perspectives of technology, gameplay and story content.

3.1. Technology

The possible scope for story-based consequences in MMOGs is first and foremost defined by the technological constraints of the MMOG format. MMOGs are persistent worlds running in real-time with hundreds or thousands of players simultaneously inhabiting the same virtual space. The basic foundations upon which all MMOGs are built are the concepts of impressionability and persistence; i.e. what can be changed and for how long. In order to overcome some of the inherent limitations, MMOGs are increasingly starting to use instancing (see section 3.1.2). Although instancing is described here in the context of technology, it should be noted that there are also gameplay reasons for using instancing.

In this section we will also look at the constraints of using cut-scenes as a storytelling device in MMOGs. Ultimately the technological constraints are tied to resources, both financial and the current state of technology. For example, the limitations of current server technology and client processing power can account for the heavy use of instancing in some games, like *Guild Wars* (ArenaNet 2005) and *Age of Conan* (Funcom 2008).

3.1.1 Impressionability and persistence

Player actions can have consequences with tangible impact on certain aspects of the gameworld. The nature and degree of these consequences varies, but most story-based consequences in MMOGs do not last very long and have limited local impact on the gameworld. Most of the high-impact global consequences that directly affect the game balance are completely unrelated to storytelling; e.g. monopolizing a certain trading commodity can change the global game economy in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004); capturing an enemy relic in *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001) changes the global power balance between the three player factions. These changes are facilitated in the game design as emergent narrative elements, but they are not parts of any pre-generated story.

The combination of impressionability and persistence is the key to understanding how MMOGs facilitates consequence, and it determines the level of agency that players will experience from engaging with the storytelling. According to Bartle, "it exposes what is perhaps the most important question designers must face, which determines the very soul of their creation: Whose world is it?" (Bartle 2004, p.54). Does it belong to the game designers or does it belong to the players?

In the following I will describe these terms and examine how they correlate by providing a few practical examples from MMOGs.

Impressionability[10] is the degree to which the MMOG world can be changed by its players. In other words, it is an expression of a fictional world's capability of receiving an impression resulting from player interaction. The impressionability of MMOG worlds differs in duration and magnitude depending on the level of *persistence*. Impressionability is a rather ambiguous term, as it pertains to the nature and magnitude of any given player instigated change. However, we can define impressionability more specifically in terms of *internal* and *external* consequence. Tychsen and Hitchens (2006) propose the following distinction:

> "Internal consequence: Affects the character itself. Internal consequences can affect e.g. the rules-based qualities of a character (e.g. abilities, skills, stats), appearance or psychological qualities, give the character new equipment or status.

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[10] Bartle simply uses the term *change* (or *player impact)*, but I find this term lacks precision (Bartle 2004, p.54).

External consequence: Affects the surroundings of the character, including other characters. External consequences can generally be described in terms of the effect on other player character-avatars (PvP) and those that affect the virtual environment (PvE). Consequence that affects other players can be difficult to balance properly."

Internal and external consequence do not equate to low and high impressionability. Some consequences are both internal and external in nature; e.g. if a player gains a powerful magic sword it will have internal consequence for his character's ability to fight. But if that particular magic sword is a unique weapon necessary to slay the archenemy of a story-based encounter, then the sword will gain external consequence when the player uses it for this particular purpose.

Imagine if a player in *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007) somehow were to obtain the One Ring and to possess it for a longer time period in the shared space of the MMOG. This would be a very high form of impressionability with completely chaotic consequence for the global game balance, and obviously the game cannot allow for this to happen. But what if the ring slipped from the player's finger before he could use it (low persistence) or if the player only had the ring in his possession while inside Mount Doom, isolated from the shared space of the MMOG world? This is where persistence and instancing come into play.

Persistence is the degree to which changes persist over time. As described in the previous section about the element of time, persistence is one of the defining characteristics of MMOGs. "Persistence relates to the amount of a virtual world's state that would be retained intact were the whole system to be shut down or restarted" (Bartle 2004, p.56). All MMOGs have some degree of persistence, but it varies from game to game exactly what type of content persists. At the very basic level a MMOG will retain the changes in character stats, skills and inventory. At the other end of the scale a persistent world might retain the effects of character-instigated changes to the environment, such as breaking a dam to flood a valley.

Persistent elements usually have a limited duration determined by the server reset cycle, and few changes have permanent persistence. Player instigated consequences with permanent persistence are mainly internal and character-related, such as the player's choice of gender and class during character creation. External consequences with permanent persistence arising from player interaction are extremely rare, since they constitute world changing events. One

of the first examples of such world-changing events in a MMOG is credited to the awakening of the dragon Kerafyrm, "The Sleeper", in *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive 1999). This event is a unique world changing event because it can only happen once on each game server, unless the game developer intervenes and resets the event.[11]

The reason why most persistent elements last for a limited time is explained by Bartle: "Players consume content quicker than it can be produced. To prevent a virtual world from becoming `played out´, therefore, some mechanism for reintroducing content must be installed – the reset strategy of the virtual world" (Bartle 2004, p.347). The longer the server reset cycle, the more inaccessible the content is for the player-base at large, and therefore the more exclusive.

In the following I will provide a few examples of how the magnitude of impressionability combines with the duration of persistence to produces different consequence structures.

Low impressionability + low persistence: This is the most common type of consequence in MMOGs; e.g. killing a monster that respawns after a few minutes. The change has insignificant affect on the game balance, and the effect on the environment (e.g. the temporary absence of the slain monster) is of short duration and negligible consequence. Player character death is another example, because the character is usually revived immediately at a nearby resurrection point, and MMOGs are generally reluctant to impose severe penalties for dying since it may alienate the playerbase.

High impressionability + low persistence: This type of consequence structure is more infrequent, and is usually reserved for the grand finale of some predesigned story or encounter, e.g. the slaying of a special "boss" type monster. Instanced dungeons are examples of a way to deploy this consequence structure, because the private space of the instance allow unrestricted impressionability that only lasts as long as the player remains within the instanced dungeon.

Low impressionability + high persistence: Player created content falls into this category; e.g. crafting a sword. The sword persists indefinitely, possibly until its durability is worn down in

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[11] For a description of *The Sleeper* event, see the following websites:
http://www.mmocrunch.com/2007/12/04/top-5-most-memorable-events-in-mmorpg-history/
http://www.albrandes.com/skden/articles/sleeper.asp

combat. Since the weapon crafting profession is open to all players, possibly with certain class restrictions, a player-crafted sword is commonplace. Therefore it does not affect the global game balance and has little external consequence. This type of change can be used as part of a predesigned story, such as the crafting quests in *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007), where the story revolves around the player collecting ingredients to craft some special item. However, the crafted item in this context is incidental to the actual storytelling.

High impressionability + high persistence: There are relatively few examples of this combination in MMOGs. The reason is that the consequences tend to have a profound impact on the global game balance. Relics in *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001) are an example of this. Capturing enemy relics provides bonuses to all players in the conquering realm. As a result, relics are a controversial subject in *Dark Age of Camelot* because they allow a group of players (the relic raiders) to effectively change the power balance between all the player factions. The captured relic remains in the possession of the conquering realm indefinitely, or until it is recaptured in a new relic raid. This is high impressionability and high persistence, but although you can go to the Frontier Keep and see the captured enemy relic on display, such as the Horn of Valhalla, there is no story-based consequence, and the change is mainly statistical (e.g. +10% bonus to melee damage)[12].

As we can see from these examples, storytelling has a hard time facilitation consequences of high persistence, whereas high impressionability is made possible within the confined game space of the private instance.

3.1.2 Instancing

Instancing is a form of crowd control in MMOGs, pertaining to certain geographical areas of the gameworld where the server will generate a new copy (or instance) of itself for each group of players that enter. Typically players need to be in the same group in order to play together in the same instance.

Most MMOGs use some form of instancing, but they differ in the manner and degree of which they use it. Instancing can serve different purposes, depending on how it is used. We can identify at least three basic functions:

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[12] For an explanation of how Relics work in *Dark Age of Camelot*, see:
http://support.darkageofcamelot.com/kb/article.php?id=283

3.1.2.1 Instancing as private game space

The main gameplay purpose of instancing is to separate groups of players from one another by isolating them from the shared space of the MMOG world. An instance is a private game space that modifies the core gameplay dynamic of the MMOG: players competing for resources. This is the nature of the multiplayer gameplay in MMOGs, whether it is Player versus Environment (PvE) or Player versus Player (PvP).

There are many types of resources in a MMOG. Some are crafting resources, such as gold deposits in *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007); some are quest resources, such as the ten wolves that need to be killed to complete a quest; and some are resources for experience point progression, such as efficient grinding spots. Resources can be defined in this context as a means to achieving a specific goal.

The problem with storytelling in the shared space is that it forces players to compete for the resources that are required to achieve the narrative goals in order to advance the story. This problem describes the typical quest in a MMOG pretty accurately. Instancing ensures that there will never be competition with other groups of players over resources, and it effectively removes some of the most aggravating aspects of MMOGs, such as *kill stealing*[13] and *spawn camping*[14].

The private game space of an instance allows the game designer to employ a much wider range of the traditional storytelling techniques that we know from singleplayer games, such as cut-scenes and scripted events. Richard Garriott, designer of *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems 1997) comments on the use of instancing as a storytelling device in his most recent MMOG *Tabula Rasa* (Destination Games 2007):

> "If you think about solo-player games, they did a great job of making you feel special, but you had to play alone. In most MMOs, they don't really try to do a lot of storytelling, because it's frankly hard to do in a shared space. In most MMOs, instances are used for when you're fighting the big dragon and going for the big drop. [...] We use

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[13] *Kill stealing* is defined by T.L. Taylor as: "The act of jumping into a fight already underway and trying to kill a monster already engaged in battle with another player or group of players. If the person kill stealing does enough damage to the monster they then reap the experience points and any items on the creature" (Taylor 2006, p.163). Newer MMOGs are trying to solve this problem by having the player "tag" the monster upon the first hit.

[14] *Spawn camping* is the practice where players wait at a particular location with the intention of killing a monster that is known to respawn there. Spawn camping can also refer to players waiting around at the resurrection points where other players are brought back to life, hoping to gain an unfair advantage in a player-versus-player fight.

> our instances as a storytelling space, so it becomes much more like a solo player game. There are lots of puzzles and traps, and NPCs that advance you through the story."
>
> (Garriott in: White 2007)

Maybe the most important thing about instances is that they allow for high impressionability in embedded narratives. The walls may tumble and the city may burn to the ground, but only as long as the players remain within their private instance and the consequences do not spill into the shared space of the MMOG world.

3.1.2.2 Instancing as server resource management

Sometimes instancing is used in a technical capacity to control the number of players in any given zone. This type of instance is triggered when the zone population reaches a certain predefined threshold, and it happens regardless of whether the players are grouped together. This is a way to manage server resources by splitting up the server load of a specific zone between copies of the same zone. This can improve game performance and preserve a smooth game experience with minimum loss of frame rate or server-client lag. Server architecture or high graphical detail of the game may necessitate this use of instancing; e.g. *Guild Wars* (ArenaNet 2005) and *Age of Conan* (Funcom 2008) are examples of this use of instancing.

This form of instancing can also serve to lessen the competition for resources in a zone with too many players ruining the experience for each other, for example when players have to wait in line to kill a quest target monster.

The problem with using instancing this way is that it prevents large community gatherings of player characters interacting with each other. It can also make it impractical for a player to meet up with in-game friends if they are located in separate instances of the same zone, and it arguably results in a more fragmented gameworld, that may interfere with the players' sense of immersion.

3.1.2.3 Instancing as a way to change the gameworld

The third approach to the use of instancing is relatively rare in MMOGs. The best example I can provide is from *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007), where the player character spends the first ten levels in a small town called Archet. The town of Archet and the

immediate surrounding area is secluded from the rest of the world by natural boundaries, and this zone functions as a kind of protected training ground for new players. Over the course of the introductory story, the town is attacked, and the houses are burned and permanently scorched and blackened by the fire. As it turns out, this high impact environmental consequence with permanent persistence is facilitated through a clever deception: *the story of the burning of Archet is contained within an instance*. The beauty of this storytelling technique is that players are not likely to notice the deception - at least not the first time they play the game. Turbine Entertainment, developer of *Lord of the Rings Online*, refers to this approach as *layered instancing*:

> "We have also developed a more complex use of layered instancing, to 'change the world' as part of special moments in the story. In layered instances, the player will encounter an area that during the course of a series of adventures will be forever altered in the 'public' persistent world. For example, an attack on a town might result in the town being consumed in flames during a battle – returning to the town later, the player will discover the buildings are burnt to ashes. This will remain the open, public world from that point on for any player that had experienced those events in the game." (Turbine Entertainment 2008)

This is a good example of storytelling that uses space to tell the story, or what Henry Jenkins calls environmental storytelling. Players return to a familiar space later in the game and discover it has been transformed by subsequent (off-screen) events. (Jenkins 2004; Carson 2000)

The problem with layered instancing is that it is very hard (if not impossible) to implement into the shared space of MMOG world. It works in *Lord of the Rings Online* because the instance is chronologically located *before* the game truly begins. It is the hallway through which the player steps into the gameworld of Middle-Earth.

A possible variation of using instancing to change the gameworld is suggested by Mike Schramm of the MMOG website *Massively*:

> "What if, after completing a certain quest, you were transported to a different version of the game's overworld, one in which every character, building and town had moved on? You could go back and visit characters you'd met at the beginning of the game, but they would be completely different (since you are in a different `version´ of the overworld).

<blockquote>
Change the world in this way a few times over the course of levelling (or with each expansion), and you've got the makings of some good storytelling." (Schramm 2007)
</blockquote>

At first glance this "overworld" design model may seem like a very good idea, but what it actually means is that the MMOG is being split up into a series of separate, connected gameworlds, where players progress linearly from one overworld to the next. This would require considerable extra resources on behalf of the game developer, as every overworld would have to be redesigned and rebalanced as a separate game. The implications of the overworld-model also have far-reaching consequences for the player community, because it essentially separates the players and makes it harder for them to form social networks. Regardless of these issues, the idea has considerable merit, and it would be very interesting to see this design implemented in a MMOG.

3.1.2.4 Implications of using instancing

The MMOGs chosen approach to instancing has a profound impact on the fictional world, and thus how the game is perceived by the players. The players who enter an instance effectively leave the coherent world of the shared space and enter a parallel plane of existence. The fact that multiple copies of the same geographical game space can co-exist obviously constitute a major assault on the coherency of the fictional world, and since there is never any narrative explanation for this spatial conundrum, players have to resort to rules-based interpretations.

Instancing is currently one of the best working examples of how to break the mould of constrained storytelling in MMOGs and approach the baseline of singleplayer games. But the advantages of using instancing for storytelling should be carefully weighed against the implications for the fictional world. Heavy use of instancing can end up making the MMOG feel like a singleplayer game, and it arguably creates a more fragmented and disjoined gameworld, that for many players can break the immersion in the fictional world.

Among players opinions on instancing differ widely, and it probably depends largely on whether instancing promotes the play style that the individual player favours.[15]

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[15] To my knowledge there is no empirical study of how players respond to instancing in MMOGs. On the basis of my personal experience with MMOGs since 1999 it is clear, that players often feel strongly about instancing, and that it can make or break the game experience for some players.

3.1.3 Cut-scenes

The cut-scene is an old storytelling technique in computer games, yet it is rarely used in MMOGs. A cut-scene is a cinematic rendering of a scripted story sequence, either pre-rendered in high quality, or real-time rendered using the game's own graphics engine. The latter type has become the norm in recent years. The function of a cut-scene is to take the control away from the player in order to tell a pre-defined story. Although cut-scenes are non-interactive, players sometimes retain partial control of their character and are able to look around; the ability to look around from a fixed position is often explained with a narrative where the character is immobilized (tied up, stunned, paralyzed, etc.). In some cut-scenes the player character is not even part of the action. This can be a way of showing parallel story events that have a bearing on player character's current situation; e.g. a cut-scene showing a terrorist planting a bomb in the cargo hold of a container ship, prompting the player to locate and disarm the bomb.

Cut-scenes can serve many different storytelling purposes:

- For dramatic effect; e.g. to set the mood of the game, establish the scene, present the central conflict and foreshadow future events.
- Steer the story in a certain direction by informing the player what needs to be done; e.g. showing that the evil dragon has an unprotected weak spot on its chest – the clue for the player to shoot an arrow at this spot to kill the dragon.
- Serve as rewards for players having achieved some major goal; e.g. a satisfying cinematic death-scene of the dragon tumbling to the ground with the player's arrow in its chest.

Cut-scenes are a somewhat controversial subject in game design because of their non-interactive nature (Klevjer 2002; Cheng 2007), but as we can see, they do offer some very useful storytelling techniques. "Cutscenes give game designers the power to dramatically reveal the outcomes of player choices, outcomes that can affect not only the player's character, but often the game world as well" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p.410). This raises the question why cut-scenes are hardly ever used for storytelling in MMOGs.

When a cut-scene is inserted directly into the actual gameplay it momentarily suspends the real-time action, and this is highly problematic in the shared space of MMOGs. The problem is that a cut-scene creates a sort of stasis bubble, where the player character is frozen in place,

while the scripted events of the cut-scene play out. If we imagine a cut-scene playing out in the shared space of a MMOG, then it would apply not only to the player who triggered the cut-scene, but to all players who share the same space. Otherwise the cut-scene would have to be construed as a personal hallucination or a dream (i.e. an incoherent fiction). The problem is that other players who share the space of the cut-scene are not bound by the rules of the cut-scene; i.e. they are not immobilized and retain their interactivity. This can result in all sorts of game-breaking problems: from other players obstructing the view of the cut-scene from the perspective of the immobilized player, to other players downright preventing the sequence of events from taking place.

As we can see, cut-scenes are very hard to deploy on an individual basis in the shared space of MMOGs. Therefore cut-scenes are mostly used in MMOGs as introductory expositions, inserted before actual gameplay begins, so that all players who share the same space also share the same cut-scene, and at the same time. An example of this is *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007), where all the players in a fellowship are presented with a short cut-scene upon entering certain instances.

3.2 Gameplay

Storytelling in MMOGs is constrained on the structural level by a number of factors pertaining to the unique gameplay of the MMOG platform. In this section we will identify and discuss some of the most important gameplay factors.

The predominant type of goal in MMOGs is based on the player's progression of a persistent character avatar. For the discussion of storytelling in MMOGs, based on this type of goal-structure, I propose the following definition of the core gameplay:

Progression of a persistent character avatar, while competing for resources in the shared space of the massively multiplayer environment. Groups of players (i.e. social networks) can collaborate by temporarily suspending the competition and working together. In this case the competition continues on a group-level, instead of on individual basis.

It should be noted that the MMOG is a very open game platform that accommodates many types of goals, depending on individual player motivations and choice of play style. MMOGs are all about freedom of choice, and some players may circumvent what I define as the core

gameplay by choosing a divergent play style, e.g. roleplaying, crafting and trading without progressing their persistent character in levels. However, progression is usually an inevitable part of engaging with storytelling in MMOGs, and all players are bound by the same formal rule system of the game, no matter what play style they choose.

Finally, the gameplay of MMOGs is also defined to a large extend by high requirements for replayability, and this has a profound impact on storytelling in MMOGs.

3.2.1 Goals

Storytelling requires that there is a clear connection between gameplay goals and narrative. "A game's goal, or series of goals, is part of the narrative context that makes up the game. When goals are well-designed to support narrative play, a player's interaction with the gameworld becomes consistently meaningful" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p. 387).

The trouble with MMOGs is that gameplay goals rarely support embedded narrative, and more often than not the two are completely separate entities, disjoined from each other. The goals of the typical MMOG are based on character progression; i.e. achieving higher level, finding better gear and otherwise improving the character. These goals follow patterns long established by pen-and-paper roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974). The problem is that the goals can be reached independently of any deep engagement with the embedded narrative elements in the game. There are no tangible rewards for appreciating the finer nuances of the story or even understanding the central conflict (except on a personal level of story appreciation), because the outcome is invariably the same, regardless of whether the player just meets the formal requirements for the progression of the story, or whether he invests himself actively in the storytelling. This again points towards the central theme of this thesis: the lack of player instigated consequence in storytelling in MMOGs. The core gameplay must support narrative goals in order to facilitate consequence of player actions.

3.2.2 Replayability

Stories in most cultures follow Aristotle's classic three-act dramatic structure of beginning, middle and ending. This dramatic structure is also common in story-driven singleplayer

games, but MMOGs are fundamentally different from singleplayer games since they have no definitive endings.

There is a very tangible reason why there can be no definite endings in MMOGs: they rely on monthly subscription fees, and must therefore encourage players to keep playing, providing new content as well as replayability. Conversely, the replayability of a story-driven singleplayer game is of minor concern, since the player has already purchased the game. The lack of definite endings in MMOGs is a fundamental problem for implementing storytelling, because "[...] we all seek closure to any extended activity we engage in, we all seek Act III's in our lives" (Klug 2002). While the lack of definite endings constitutes a problem for the overarching macro-narrative structure, it could be argued that the three-act structure is applicable to some extent on the micro-narrative level in smaller portions of the MMOG, such as quest chains. However, the smaller quest chains are usually part of a larger story, which is what makes them meaningful.

An involving storyline that engages the player with meaningful choices and tangible consequence requires an ending, and therefore it may seem like storytelling could be detrimental to the longevity of MMOGs. If the storyline follows through and delivers the mandatory payoff in the form of a dramatic ending, then it will certainly provide short-term satisfaction for the player, a sense of completion and narrative fulfilment. But the narrative ending may come at a great price, for it runs the risk of making the game feel empty and jaded, much like a singleplayer game that you toss aside after having played it through to the end. To discourage the player from quitting the game, the developers now have to introduce new story content, since there is very little replay value in reusing a story that has already been told. The low replayability of story-driven games is explained by Juul:

> "It then appears that trying to add a significant story to a computer game invariably reduces the number of times you're likely to play the game. Literary qualities, usually associated with depth and contemplation, actually makes computer games less repeatable, and more "trashy" in the sense that you won't play Myst again once you've completed it. There's no point." (Juul 1998)

A practical solution to this narrative problem is to replace the three-act structure with a recursive dramatic structure, where the resolution of one story arc leads directly into the next. This is the episodic storytelling form that we all are familiar with from ongoing TV series,

like *Lost*, *Prison Break* and *Heroes*.[16] This dramatic structure is like the layers of an onion that the audience gradually peels off, while the innermost secrets of the story and ultimate ending remains hidden. Ongoing storylines have been featured in many different MMOGs, such as *Asheron's Call* (Turbine 1999), *Horizons: Empire of Istaria* (Artifact Entertainment 2003), *The Matrix Online* (Monolith Productions 2005) and *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007). The ongoing story in *Lord of the Rings Online* is known as the Epic Quests and consists of a series of episodes called Books. The first eight Books were included in the game upon release, and since then each major update has added a new Book.

MMOGs probably have endless replayability when it comes to emergent narrative, but the story content of embedded narrative is constantly being consumed by the players, and therefore the storytelling is gradually exhausted. Starting a new alternate character and progressing through the MMOG once more, is often the way seasoned players find new challenges if they start to grow bored with the endgame. The replay value of the embedded narrative depends to a great extent on personalizing the player experience (Tychsen, Tosca and Brolund 2006). It depends on how exactly the character is defined in relation to the gameworld, which ultimately hinges on the choices that goes into character creation: race, class, gender, and physical appearance customization. These character parameters are the defining characteristics that can modify the narrative experience. NPCs may react differently to you, depending on racial prejudice, sexual or romantic relationships may present themselves, depending on the character gender, and special quests may only be available to certain classes. In other words, the player character is an important set of variables that can produce a number of storytelling permutations and thereby generate replayability.

Narrative only goes so far, and no game can rely solely on providing story content for players to consume. In the long run a MMOG has to keep the players challenged by way of its core game mechanics and its social dimension, defining the activities that the player constantly performs. One way of doing this is to make sure that the game involves some form of skill, so that the player can feel a sense of progression in mastering the game mechanics. An example follows: In the long-running and successful MMOG *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001) the endgame mainly consists of a player-versus-player (PvP) faction-based war between the three opposing realms of Midgard, Hibernia and Albion. This endgame

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[16] *Lost* is created by Jeffrey Lieber, J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof and the first episode aired in 2004. *Prison Break* is created by Paul Scheuring and the first episode aired in 2005. *Heroes* is created by Tim Kring and first episode aired in 2006.

makes no attempt at storytelling, but is rich on emergent narrative potential. Its strength lies entirely in the core game mechanics that require skilful mastery, as well as social interaction in the form of team cooperation. Progression in the PvP endgame is purely statistical and rule based, and is measured in terms of Realm Ranks achieved for killing other player characters, granting the character access to important stats or skill enhancements. This system of endgame is very effective in keeping the players challenged, despite the lack of embedded narrative, and it has served to sustain a largely PvP-oriented player base, and kept the game running for seven years.

3.2.3 Storytelling in the shared space

Storytelling can greatly improve the solo experience of computer game, as evidenced in computer roleplaying games such as *Planescape Torment* (Black Isles Studios 1999), *Baldur's Gate II* (BioWare 2000) and *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006). Conversely, storytelling in multiplayer games is riddled with all sorts of complications, and it can be argued that storytelling – in its present form - does little to enhance the multiplayer aspect of games. In fact, engaging deeply with the embedded narrative can be made exceedingly difficult by the presence of other players.

Storytelling in the shared space of a multiplayer environment is often hindered by other players getting in the way of the individual players story. This is due to the core gameplay of MMOGs where players compete for resources, very much like people do in the real world. An example follows: The player character arrive at an enemy camp on a quest to burn down a wagon, but find that another player has beat him to it, and already burned the wagon to the ground. The player has lost the competition for the quest resource (the wagon in this case), and now he has to wait for the server reset cycle to replenish the resource by "respawning" the wagon. However, the wasted time spent waiting is not the only problem: The burned wagon also constitutes an *incoherent fiction* that requires the willing suspension of disbelief. Logically the quest should be complete since the wagon has been burned (even if it was not done by the player himself), however the player still needs to burn the wagon because that is what the rule of the quest dictates. The "respawning" of the wagon constitutes in itself another incoherent element that the player cannot explain without resorting to a rules-based or extra-diegetic explanation. Moreover, the respawning wagon suggests that the quest is

fundamentally meaningless, because no matter how many players burn the wagon, it just keeps coming back.

The problems of storytelling in the shared space are not unique to the massively multiplayer open world environments populated by thousands of players. Experiencing a crafted story with a small group of players within the private space of an instance can also present problems. The Epic Quests in *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007) are good examples of this; these quests are quite challenging and many of the chapters require the corporative efforts of a full group of players working together in a so-called Fellowship[17]. These quests take place in private instances and features scripted events and NPC reactions that are triggered at various points by player interaction with quest NPCs. Some of the story content of the Epic Quests is relayed from the self same NPCs over the course of the instance in the form of written text boxes. However, reading this text may prove difficult if other members of the Fellowship activate the triggers that advance the story, prompting all players to focus on fighting and surviving the ordeals of the epic quest. Therefore it is very easy to miss out on the actual story content of the Epic Quests. Players tend to focus on the tangible challenges of combat and navigation, and pay little or no attention to the story because there is no choice and consequence involved, nor is there any significant benefit from engaging with the story layer of the quest. This is an example of players adopting an instrumental and goal-oriented play style that suppress the narrative components of the game.

This example illustrates that the current form of instanced scripted storytelling in MMOGs works best to support the solo player experience or small-scale group experience, ideally with players in tight communication who are familiar with the rules for *how* to advance the storyline and have reached an understanding on *when* to do it.

3.3 Story content

The elements of this category in the storytelling model are the agents and concrete expressions of storytelling in MMOGs, such as lore, quests, and Non-Player Characters (NPCs). These elements pertain to actual game content, as defined by Richard Bartle: "Essentially, content is that which the world provides to hold the players' interest. If players are consumers, content is what they consume" (Bartle 2004, p.54). The presence of other

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[17] For example "Epic Book II - Chapter 8: The Red-pass".

players can be considered a special form of intangible content, and therefore I have chosen to deal with the subject of hero dynamics under the heading of this category.

3.3.1 Hero dynamics

Storytelling in computer games is generally based on the narrative paradigm of the hero's journey, described by Joseph Campbell as the *monomyth* in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 1949). According to Campbell, the monomyth is a basic pattern that can be found in narratives in many different times and cultures around the world. The essence of the monomyth can be summarized in the following quote:

> "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." (Campbell 1949, p.28)

As we can see, this description fits very well to the typical narrative structure of quests in MMOGs. However, it is a fundamental storytelling problem for all MMOGs that they follow this narrative paradigm, where the player character is cast in the role of the hero of the story. The narrative structure enforces the idea of the player as the pivotal main character that the story revolves around. The presence of thousands of other heroes simultaneously acting in the same story obviously constitutes a major incoherency of the fictional world.

Branded worlds in MMOGs instil in the players certain expectations that often impose a monomyth narrative approach on the MMOG, even when such an approach is not in the game's best interest. Everybody cannot be Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*, or Frodo Baggins in *Lord of the Rings*. This also applies to many MMOGs that create their fictional worlds from scratch, because they often build on genre conventions, such as high fantasy or science-fiction, where the monomyth is the pre-dominant storytelling paradigm.

The problem with casting players in the role of heroes is that players are going to expect to have the powers that we normally associate with heroes, and that means being able to make a deep and lasting impression on the world. Tychsen and Hitchens have explained this problem:

> "Western MMORPGs can be seen to derive in large part from what might be called `hero literature´. Well-known examples of such literature are Lord of the Rings and Star Wars. In such stories the actions of the protagonists have large-scale consequences on

the fictional world of which they are part. The actions of the characters results in permanent, long-term changes to the fictional world." (Tychsen and Hitchens 2006)

As we have seen in the section on impressionability and persistence, this type of consequence structure is the hardest to integrate into MMOGs, and therefore it would seem that the monomyth approach to storytelling is fundamentally at odds with MMOGs.

3.3.2 Non-Player Characters

The Non-Player Characters (NPCs) that inhabit the gameworld serve many purposes and have important storytelling functions. They are carriers of embedded narrative text and their wants and needs often shape the storytelling, and dictate the nature of the quests that players undertake.

Players have the capacity to care about NPCs if they are believable and emotionally interesting. Story-based singleplayer games are full of such memorable NPCs; just think of Alyx Vance from *Half-Life 2* (Valve Corporation 2004), Minsc and his space hamster companion Boo from *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare 1998), or Shodan, the almost corporeal sentient A.I. of Citadel Station from *System Shock* (Looking Glass Studios 1994). Such memorable NPCs with well-defined personality are conspicuously absent in MMOGs. Therefore players tend to think of NPCs in MMOGs mainly in terms of their functionality as trainers, merchants or quest givers.

The root of the problem is that MMOGs rarely allow for players to build long-term relationships with the NPCs, and MMOGs have only taken small steps towards getting NPCs to even recognize player characters. One day you may save the life of an NPC, only to be greeted the next day with a simple "Hello stranger!" *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007) has a quest called "Lalia's Safe Passage" in which the player finds the young hobbit Lalia stranded inside the dangerous Barrow Downs. To complete the quest the player must escort Lalia through hordes of undead skeletons in order to find her lost cloak and get her safely back home to Bree. The quest rewards the player character with a nice cloak to wear, but the player may be surprised, upon the next visit to the Barrow Downs, to find Lalia in the same predicament as before. In other words, there has been no storytelling consequence for helping Lalia, and she does not even recognize the player character. Without some form of

recognition from the NPCs, players may start to feel like ghosts in a world where everyone suffers from collective amnesia.

The most common form of recognition that players receives from NPCs is through variations of dialogue, scripted to react to certain player character parameters, such as name, gender, race, and class/profession (Tychsen, Tosca and Brolund 2006, p.256).

The NPCs of the virtual world are often defined in opposition to other NPCs in their proximity. These groupings are commonly referred to as NPC *factions* (Sheldon 2004, p.138ff, 402ff). Factions are usually based on conflicting ideologies, such as religion, or politics, or racial and cultural differences. Certain factions are hard-coded into the game design as permanently hostile and aggressive towards player characters; e.g. the dark forces of Sauron in *Lord of the Rings Online*. This serves the narrative purpose of aligning the player characters on the side of good against evil, and stays true to the original fiction of Tolkien.

Occasionally the player character is able to change their standing with certain NPC factions, by repeatedly helping them through quests, and thereby building up reputation. The player may benefit from a NPC faction in many different ways; NPCs may change attitude towards the characters, and may offer new quests that were previously unavailable. Merchant NPCs may offer price reductions.

Factions provide a way of opening up new story content exclusively for players who meet certain requirements, while closing it off from the rest of the player-base. Factions can be used to implement consequential player choice if the choice of faction A negates the choice of faction B; e.g. having to choose side between two warring clans. The use of factions differs widely between MMOGs, however, most MMOGs are reluctant to permanently close off content for the players, and as a result the player's choice of faction will rarely have permanent consequence.

Getting NPCs to recognize player characters and providing means of establishing long-term relationships with consequence, is only a part of what is needed to approach the baseline of NPCs in story-driven singleplayer games. In order for the player to take an interest in the lives of the NPCs, it likely requires that the NPCs actually have lives to lead. The NPCs in the singleplayer roleplaying game *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006) are scripted to go about their business in their daily routines according to the day cycle, and

actually go to sleep in their beds at night. Conversely, most NPCs in MMOGs are rooted to the same spot and never move an inch.

One of the ways to flesh out the personality of NPCs is to provide voice acted dialogue. Voice acting is a great way to immerse the player in the story and it has been put to popular use in story-driven singleplayer games for a long time, even in games with huge sprawling storylines like *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006) and *The Witcher* (CD Project 2007). MMOGs have only used voice acting sporadically until recently. *EverQuest 2* (Sony Online Entertainment 2004) features extensive voice acting, but that is the exception to the rule. *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007) has cut-scenes for the epic quests with a narrated voice-over, but the myriad NPCs throughout the game have no voice acting. The general lack of voice acting in MMOGs can be explained with budget considerations. It is extremely expensive to hire actors and it also requires a lot of pre-planning, since it becomes impractical to change the text of a quest once the voice acting has been recorded. Moreover, the voice acting often needs to be localized in several languages. The pay-off for all the hard work of voice acting in MMOGs is probably also a deterrent because there is little replay value in it; many players tend to skip the voice acting on consecutive play-through since they have already heard it and are eager to move on. Besides, the essential text for the quests is usually accessible from the journal or quest log that is a stable of all MMOGs.

3.3.3 Quests

The quest is the most common narrative structure in MMOGs. In some MMOGs they are called missions or tasks, but they still follow the same basic narrative structure, reminiscent of the classic dramatic three-act structure:

a) The hiring scene: the initial contact with a quest giver where a player is offered the quest.
b) The confrontation: where the player defeats the challenge and accomplishes the goal of quest.
c) The return: where the player delivers the quest result to the designated receiver and is rewarded.

Quests serve a multitude of storytelling purposes. On a functional level the quest is a system of rules that guide the player in a certain direction. Susana Tosca defines quests like this:

"A quest [...] brings some or all the storytelling elements (characters, plots, causality, world) together with the interaction, so that we can define it as the array of soft rules that describe what the player has to do in a particular storytelling situation." (Tosca 2003, p.78)

The problems of using quests as a storytelling device in MMOGs already becomes apparent during the hiring scene, when the quest giver is located in the shared space of the gameworld.

"[T]here may be dozens of other players standing nearby when the super secret mission is granted to a player. The crowd ruins the illusion. The player is no longer special, with her own relationship to the quest giver; she is just one of many faceless adventurers lined up in a homeless shelter waiting for her soup bowl to be filled." (Sheldon 2004, p.427)

Instancing can be used as viable solution to this problem, by moving the hiring scene to a private environment where the presence of other players will not break the immersion. This also allows the designers to relocate NPCs to a new part of the world as part of a storyline. *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007) has several examples of this technique, for example Strider's room at the Prancing Pony. Players will find Strider in his room at the appropriate point in the quest when he is supposed to be in Bree with Frodo and the other hobbits, but later when Strider has led the hobbits to Weathertop and beyond, the room will be empty. The use of instanced quests can facilitate sequence and causality in storytelling, but as we have seen, instancing also carries with it a whole new set of problems, and we cannot hide all the NPCs quest givers away in private instances without leaving a vacuum in the shared space.

Quests in MMOGs are often written and designed exactly the same way as quests in singleplayer games, but a quest that worked fine in singleplayer game may not make any sense in a MMOG. "A single-player quest in a multiplayer game is one that resets its conditions for every player who undertakes it." (Sheldon 2004, p.421) In other words, this type of quest is repeatable in the sense that every player character in the game can do the quest at least once, providing the character meets any formal requirements for the quest (level, faction, class, etc.). Our previous example of the quest where the player had to burn the respawning wagon can be construed as a singleplayer quest, inserted directly into a multiplayer game without much thought for the consistency of the fictional world. It is not a true multiplayer quest, but is merely masquerading as such. Unfortunately, this type of quest is more the rule than the exception in MMOGs.

Some of the inconsistencies can be avoided by creative writing of the quests from a multiplayer perspective to provide narrative consistency. Lee Sheldon provides two examples of how to fix the inconsistency of singleplayer quests in *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive 1999) and *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001) by rewriting them as true multiplayer quests (Sheldon 2004, p.422ff). However, there is only so much you can do in order to conceal the basic problem if a quest in a MMOG yields no tangible consequence, and leave no lasting impression on the gameworld. If every outcome of the quest is the same, regardless of what actions the player takes, then there is no reason for the player to engage deeply in the decision-making process. This relates to the important subject of meaningful play, as discussed by Salen and Zimmerman:

> "Uncertainty is another requisite quality of meaningful play. If a game is certain, if the outcome is known in advance, there is no reason to play in the first place. But uncertainty is also a narrative concept, for the element of the unknown infuses a game with dramatic tension." (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p.388)

Uncertainty hinges on the player's ability to make choices and to impose those choices on the quest, and it would seem to be a pre-requisite of player agency (see section 2.5). The most common way of presenting players with meaningful choices in quests, is to use modular or branching storytelling, like Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books. This is common in quest structures in singleplayer games where the storyline often follows different paths towards multiple endings. The problem with this approach is that it closes off a considerable amount of story content from the player; if the player has to choose between door number one, door number two, and door number three – the player will miss out on two thirds of the story content. Game designers, like Chris Crawford, have been struggling with this problem for years, trying to find viable strategies and technologies for interactive storytelling (Crawford 2005). MMOGs need to keep their players engaged, and have a hard enough time keeping ahead of the players, providing them with story content to consume. Therefore branching storylines are something of a rarity in MMOG quests. Finally, if a branching quest provides significantly different outcomes, and if the quest is non-repeatable, then it can potentially cause game imbalance; e.g. one player slays the dragon and crafts the unique Dragonscale Armour of Doom from its hide, while another player befriends the dragon, and receives a precious heart-shaped ruby worth a thousand gold pieces. Granted, game designers can try to balance different quest rewards, but in the end players will usually want the unique armour that money cannot buy, and are therefore likely to choose to slay the dragon.

3.3.4 Lore

The backstory of a fictional world in a MMOG is normally referred to as the *lore*. Lore consists of all the narrative elements of the fictional world that exists prior to the point at which the players enter the MMOG world. The lore of fictional worlds is often incredibly detailed, with elaborate descriptions and histories of nations and cities, religions, notable characters, etc. The lore is located both inside and outside the gameworld. Some parts are revealed inside the gameworld, where it can be found in books, or told by sage NPCs etc. Other parts are located outside the gameworld in external materials such as the game manual, the official game website, fan websites, the back of the game box, even the title of the game (Juul 2005, p.135; Rouse 2005, p.216f). In the case of branded worlds, where the fictional world is based on an intellectual property such as *Lord of the Rings* or *The Matrix*, the lore is contained in the original work, i.e. the novels or movies, and players will expect the MMOG to remain consistent with this canonical lore. This imposes some heavy constraints on the storytelling in MMOGs that use branded worlds (Kosak 2003).

The narrative function and significance of backstories is a contested subject. Some game scholars argue that games cannot benefit from backstories (Myers 2003), and it is certainly true that you do not need to know the lore of the fictional world in order to play in it. Yet MMOGs are always extremely rich on lore, and part of the reason is undoubtedly that lore has commercial value, sparking the imagination and motivating players to play the game.

Lore provides a cognitive frame for the narrative events that the player will encounter throughout the game. It is a reference point anchoring the individual narrative elements in the greater scheme of things. "Backstories position a player in the context of a larger story; a player's action in the game is the means by which the larger story is realized" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p.380).

Bartle gives a good description of some of the ways in which lore is used, with varying degrees of success:

> "The better worlds use them to add richness and depth, explaining why things are as they are; the worse ones retro-fit a backstory to make illogical gameplay features seem logical. If a virtual world's initial configuration is constructed to echo events of a fictional past, this can be a great aid to immersion. When it's to erect some façade to

justify why characters don't die, or why magic-users can't wield swords, or why artifacts exists that no one can make, that's less satisfactory. The backstory should come first, not second." (Bartle 2004, p.651)

Lore does not constitute the setting of a fictional world; it only describes it. Players can ignore it, and still play the game in the setting of the fictional world. It is largely up to the player to decide the level of engagement with the lore, but it will arguably influence the way he perceives and experiences the storytelling.

The question is to what extend lore constrains the storytelling in MMOGs, and whether players can influence a narrative that takes place in a fictional world that is highly defined by lore. The fundamental difference between the lore-constraints in a story-driven singleplayer game and a MMOG is that the gameworlds of MMOGs are constantly expanding with the addition of new content, whereas singleplayer gameworlds generally are much more static. The lore of a MMOG grows as new story content is added to it, and story content is gradually absorbed in the lore and becomes part of the history of the fictional world as it evolves over time.

In the MMOG endgame players are constantly pushing against the boundaries of the original lore, and this makes it difficult for a large successful and long-running MMOG to keep true to the pre-defined lore. The designers must constantly find new ways of keeping the players challenged, and a common solution is to make the game more difficult, for example by making the players fight more powerful enemies. Therefore MMOGs have a tendency to get harder with time. The problem with this solution in a storytelling context is that the need for ever more powerful adversaries or difficult challenges sooner or later will collide with the original lore. In *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007), the ultimate challenge must be to overcome Sauron himself, but in the original lore of Tolkien's creation the destruction of Sauron (embodied in *The One Ring*) brings about the end of the Third Age, with far-reaching consequences, such as the departure of all the elves from Middle-Earth. This would mean the end of the game as we know it. The example illustrates the problem of setting up a highly lore-defined character as a target in storytelling.

Lore is a key element in the meaning-making process that is part of the player's mental construction of the fictional world, on which all MMOGs are build. Lore can greatly enhance the storytelling experience in a MMOG, but it can also work as a straitjacket constraining the

possible scope of story-based consequences. The devil is in the details, and as always, game designers have to strike the right balance.

3.4 Concluding on the analytical model

The analytical storytelling model that I have presented in this chapter does not show how to break the boundaries of the storytelling constraints. The model indentifies the problems, but without presenting the solutions. However, I believe that the first step in breaking the boundaries is to find out what they are and how they work: "[...] in realizing the theoretical foundations behind the challenges of creating engaging and personalized storytelling in MMORPGs, it is possible to realize the operational space within which storytelling in these games must operate" (Tychsen and Hitchens 2006).

4. Case study: Age of Conan

In this chapter I will use *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* (Funcom 2008) as a case-study to test the analytical storytelling model presented in the previous chapter.

Age of Conan (hereafter AoC) is developed by the Norwegian game company Funcom, who has previous experience with MMOG development from their science-fiction MMOG *Anarchy Online* (Funcom 2001). Funcom is also known as a storyteller game company, with games like *The Longest Journey* (Funcom 1999) and the sequel *Dreamfall* (Funcom 2006) in their portfolio. These singleplayer adventure games feature elaborate fictional worlds with a strong focus on storytelling. It is no surprise then that Funcom should seek to integrate the strong points of singleplayer storytelling into their virtual world design in AoC. The storytelling ambitions for AoC are made clear by quest designer Joel Bylos:

> "Funcom is well known for its stories, and I think a part of the original design intention was to make sure that we were telling a real story in an MMO. A lot of MMOs tend to fail at that - we really wanted to tell a strong single-player story, and that thread runs the whole way through the game, not just from 1 to 20. If you follow the Destiny quests all the way through the game, you'll really feel the single-player experience very strongly." (Fahey 2008)

AoC has been in development for the last five years, and the first players were able to enter the game on the early access release date of May 17, 2008.[18] The launch has been relatively smooth, with frequent updates to fix the most glaring issues. AoC has been very well received by the gaming press, and has earned a total review score of 81% on Game Rankings and 80% on Metacritics.[19] The game has also been a huge commercial success, with the game topping the sales charts wherever it is available for sale and 700.000 active subscriptions as of July 1, 2008. A recent press release from Funcom proudly stated that "In the second month after release it is also clear that Age of Conan has taken the position as the undisputed #2 subscription MMO in the western world" (Funcom 2008a).

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[18] I was part of the closed beta and have therefore been playing AoC since May 1, 2008.
[19] The review scores are from July 12, 2008. See:
http://www.metacritic.com/games/platforms/pc/ageofconanhyborianadventures; and
http://www.gamerankings.com/htmlpages2/927504.asp

4.1 The Destiny quest

AoC has mainly been touted as a massive player-versus-player (PvP) MMOG with focus on bloody and brutal combat using a mature rating, but Funcom's love and affinity for storytelling is clearly apparent in the so-called Destiny quest, which is the overarching storyline that runs throughout the game. Of special interest to this thesis is the fact that Funcom has included a singleplayer part with focus on storytelling that is integrated into the general MMOG. This makes AoC an ideal candidate for application of the storytelling model proposed in this thesis.

4.1.1 Tortage

The story begins *in media res* with the player character as a slave onboard a galley. This is when the player chooses gender, race, profession, and is able to customize the appearance of the character. Male characters are toiling at the oars under the whip of the slave master, while female characters are held at the back of the ship, presumably to entertain the captain. This is an excellent way for the game to integrate the character creation process into the storytelling.

The slave galley is shipwrecked, and the character nearly drowns and is washed up on the shore of the tropical island of Tortage. The character bears a strange mark on the chest and suffers from amnesia. On the beach, the character is met by the mysterious Kalanthes, who sets the story in motion by urging the character to seek her past and regain her lost memories. This is the classic narrative point of departure where the player has to reconstruct the identity of the character, and piece together past events. Amnesia is a frequently used device for solving the problem of interactive storytelling, where the character knows more about the story world than the player (Adams 1999). As we have seen in the chapter on narrative game theory, amnesia can be used as a storytelling device to plant embedded plot structures in the storytelling (see section 2.1.2), and this is precisely what AoC is doing.

Kalanthes tells the character to seek the help of the old seer Nadini in the pirate city of Tortage, and learn the cause of the strange Mark of Acheron that the character bears on the chest. Before the player is able to leave the island of Tortage he must first deal with the evil tyrant Strom and his regime of Red Hand guards, blockading the city of Tortage. Nadini directs the character to seek the assistance of a class trainer at the Thirsty Dog Inn, and from that point on the class-specific Destiny quest begins.

The Tortage part of the game is intended to work as a kind of tutorial, where the player learns about the story world, and the basics of how to play the character. The Destiny quests provide a great incentive for the player to engage with the fictional world, instilling a strong sense of purpose and direction that guides the player though the learning phase of the game.

The island of Tortage offers a unique and innovative type of gameplay where the player can alternate between singleplayer and multiplayer modes, simply by talking to the trainer inside the local inn. The two game modes are described in the game manual (Ellingsen 2008, p.28):

> "**Night-time:** During night-time you are in a single-player environment and you are unable to play with others. This part of the game puts more emphasis on storytelling and your experience alone in the world.
>
> **Day-time:** During day-time you are in a multi-player environment. Here you can see other players, quest with them and communicate with them. This part of the game puts more emphasis on group experiences."

It is very unusual for a MMOG to allow players to control the change between day and night, because it interferes with the mimetic real-time pacing of time, visibly represented by the day-cycle of the gameworld (see section 2.2.2). In order to facilitate this special form of gameplay, normal real-time mimetic day-cycle has been suspended in Tortage. The sun never sets in Tortage during the daytime mode, and it never comes up during the night. This does not imply that the real-time pacing of the MMOG world has stopped; it simply means that time in Tortage is not represented by the change between day and night. The player is able to control the change between day and night, but the consequence of this change is localized and only applies to individual player in the instanced night-time game mode. The player is granted limited power to control time in the singleplayer night-time because the game state is saved whenever the player leaves the private instance, but the player is unable to exert any control over the real time pacing of the daytime shared-world MMOG.

There is a good narrative rationale behind the decision to move the singleplayer story to the night-time, as Funcom producer Gaute Godager has explained: "This works great with our story line as it is focused on helping the resistance in the city of Tortage, ruled by the vicious ruler Strom. When is most clandestine work taking place? Night-time, naturally" (Godager in: Massey 2007).

The technical solution to the singleplayer night-time game mode is private instancing of the isle of Tortage. According to Funcom:

> "The single player experience is a complete story that we're able to tell in a cinematic and interactive manner. Because you're adventuring in a closed instance of the gameworld, we have the power to create world-changing events and really let parts of it play out like a single-player game." (Funcom 2008b)

The singleplayer story utilizes the strength of instancing to facilitate story-based consequences of high impressionability. Over the course of the Destiny quest in Tortage the environment undergoes major changes; buildings are ravaged by fire, streets are barricaded, and objects are broken and overturned.

Figure 4.1: Tortage by night, before the uprising against Strom.

Figure 4.2: Tortage during the uprising.

The player will also gain access to certain areas, such as Tortage Keep, that are inaccessible in the daytime multiplayer game mode. Moreover, the player will be killing several major story-defined NPCs in the final battle for Tortage during the night-time quest line, such as the slave trader Sakumbe, the malicious Delia of the Red Hand guard, and eventually Strom himself. Most of the notable story-defined NPCs are only physically present in the private instance, as in the case of slavemaster Ulric and admiral Strom. This is the logical way to circumvent the major narrative inconsistency of meeting a story-defined NPC during the day that the player has already killed during the night. However, a few of the notable story-defined NPCs, such as Delia and Sakumbe are also present in Tortage during the daytime, and are therefore a persistent part of the shared space of the city of Tortage. At first glance this would not seem to present any problem, because after the final battle of Tortage and the defeat of Strom, the player is whisked away to his homeland. The quest journal informs the player that Valeria has resumed her old rule of Tortage, now that the city has been liberated from Strom and his Red Hand guards. However, should the player decide to return to Tortage at some point (a NPC smuggler will offer to transport the player back to the island), he will find that nothing has changed. The Red Hand guards are still patrolling the streets of Tortage, and for all intents and purposes the city is still ruled by Strom. Sakumbe and Delia are even back from the dead, and show no sign of recognizing their former killer.

Figure 4.3: Captain Sakumbe. **Figure 4.4**: Delia of the Red Hand.

Players are accustomed to the rules-based phenomenon of re-spawning NPCs in MMOGs, but when a NPC is a well-defined individual with a unique name and personality, and plays a

major role in an ongoing storyline like the Destiny quest, then players will expect them to stay dead so the story can move on. The fact that you can converse with NPCs that you have previously killed is truly testing the fourth wall of the narrative consistency.

Returning to Tortage is not a very rewarding narrative experience, as it becomes clear to the player, that all his efforts during the Destiny quest have been inconsequential. I can think of two ways in which this problem could have been avoided. The first solution is to simply prevent players from ever returning to Tortage; a narrative explanation for this could be that the island was destroyed by the erupting volcano that already plays a part in the story. The second - and in my opinion superior - solution is to handle Tortage like the town of Archet in *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007) (see section 3.1.2). If the daytime and night-time part of the Destiny quests were both contained in an instance, it would allow Funcom to create a persistent version of Tortage that could reflect the consequences of the player's actions, and where the character could be greeted as the hero and liberator of Tortage, without feeling like some sort of time-traveller in a ghost-town. In this version of Tortage, the city could truly serve as a narrative memory palace (see section 2.3.1), like Henry Jenkins suggests (Jenkins 2004), and it would provide a setting rich on narrative potential for new quests and storylines.

4.1.2 One story - four perspectives

Age of Conan offers 12 character classes divided into four familiar archetypes: soldier, mage, priest, and rogue. Each class archetype has its own individual singleplayer Destiny quest that takes place in Tortage till the character reaches level 19 or 20. The choice of class is by far the most important decision that the player will make in AoC regarding the storytelling. It determines which of the Destiny quest lines that the player will follow, and therefore has significant consequence for the storytelling. It should be noted, however, that this choice is made prior to the beginning of gameplay, and it is not an informed choice, based on storytelling, but a choice based on the players' personal preference of the gameplay associated with the chosen character class.

The four different Destiny quest lines are weaved together to tell the story from four different perspectives. This gives the Tortage part of the game some added replay value, provided that the player chooses a class from a different archetype on subsequent play-through. This variation is much needed because all characters start in Tortage, regardless of the choices that go into character creation. This is a departure from most other MMOGs, where characters

typically start in different geographical areas, determined by racial affinity; e.g. *Dark Age of Camelot* (Mythic Entertainment 2001) and *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007). MMOG players often like to create new alternate characters to explore the different class options, and they will most likely end up playing the same Destiny quest more than once. Funcom has put a lot of hard work into the storytelling that takes place in Tortage, and they obviously want players to experience their creation. Still, it would probably be a good idea for Funcom to allow players to bypass the Destiny quest if they have already completed it with another character belonging to the same archetype. There is very little replay value in a story that has already been told.

Occasionally the four different Destiny quests intersect in ways that cause inconsistency. In the Destiny quest for the rogue archetype, an agent of King Conan named Arias is taken captive by Quesado, Strom's right-hand man, in an ambush down by the harbour. In the next step of the quest, Tina (the rogue trainer) asks the player to go and talk to Arias, who can now be found in his camp outside the city gates of Tortage. The story of Arias rescue from Quesado and his men on the White Sands isle is told in the other Destiny quest lines (priest, mage and soldier), but from the rogue's perspective it is an unexplained mystery, how Arias has managed to escape his captors and set up camp outside the city. The cause of this continuity error is that the narrative sequence does not convey any sense of time progression to the player. One minute Arias is one place, the next he is somewhere else. This is a storytelling design flaw that could have been avoided, and this inconsistency is not a result of any constraints of storytelling in MMOGs since the whole story is taking place in an instance.

4.1.3 Continuation of the Destiny quest

The Destiny quest continues after the player has left Tortage, but the four different storylines converge into one storyline for all character classes. The player's chosen race decides where the character is transported to after Tortage: Stygia, Cimmeria or Aquilonia. However, the player is not restricted to playing in his respective homeland, and can travel freely between the different areas.

The continuation of the Destiny quest storyline is split up into four parts, interspersed along the character progression path towards level 80, which is the level cap in AoC. The player will not be able to continue the Destiny quests before reaching the level requirements at level 30, 50, 60 and 80. The level progression speed in AoC is fairly fast, so there is a good flow in

the storyline up until the level 30 part. However, from this point on, the levelling speed starts to slow down noticeably, and it may take quite some time, before the player is able to continue the Destiny quest. The levelling curve in MMOGs is usually exponentially steeper with each level, and AoC is no different in this respect. The gap between level 60 and 80 will therefore most likely be experienced as a discontinuation of the storytelling, breaking the narrative flow.

The four subsequent parts of the Destiny quest rewards the character with a permanent skill enhancement of the player's choice, such as slightly increased health regeneration rate or attack rating. These rewards are explained through the narrative, in terms of the character remembering the past and reacquiring former skill. Thus the destiny quest integrates character growth into the storytelling. The quest reward is a one-time choice that cannot be redone, and therefore has permanent persistence, but the skill enhancements are so minor that the player is not likely to notice the difference through gameplay. The changes are character-based with local consequence; they have insignificant effect on the game balance, and are therefore of low impressionability.

The Destiny quest in AoC is a perfect example of storytelling based on the monomyth paradigm; the player is the hero and pivotal character in a story where the fate of the world is decided by the actions of the player. In the final quest at level 80, the player will have to confront the ancient malevolent Grim Grey God, who has been summoned by the arch-nemesis Thoth-Amon. Unless this god of destruction can be stopped by the player, it will bring about the end of the world. This is what the story is asking the player to believe, but in the context of a MMOG this type of extremely high impressionability story consequence is a hollow threat; experienced players are well aware that the consequence of events that takes place in the private instance have no direct influence on the shared space of the persistent MMOG world, which the story is threatening to destroy. The consequence structure of the confrontation with the Grim Grey God has high impressionability, but low persistence because it is contained within a private instance.

This type of storytelling is typical for singleplayer games where it can be used for great dramatic effect because the consequences can have permanent persistence and effect on the gameworld. However, the narrative consistency falls flat in MMOGs when storytelling consequences of high impressionability threaten to affect the shared space gameworld, but is constrained by the low persistence of instancing. Other MMOGs like *Asheron's Call* (Turbine

1999) have dealt with this problem by enacting the high impressionability events of the ongoing storyline as one-off live-events, taking place in the shared-world MMOG.[20] Live-events facilitate story-based consequences of permanent persistence, but it is a highly exclusive form of storytelling, that favours the most hardcore and dedicated player segment. Casual players are likely to miss out on live events, and will only be able to experience this storytelling second hand by reading about it after it has occurred. Therefore this solution is not ideal for a game like AoC that is targeting the casual player segment in the storytelling.

4.2 The lore of Hyboria

The fictional world of AoC is a branded world, based on the writings of American author Robert E. Howard. Howard wrote the stories of Conan the barbarian in the 1930's, and since then a multitude of writers have contributed to the Conan universe, not just in books, but also in movies, television series and comics. Conan the barbarian is featured in several video games, and there are even pen-and-paper roleplaying games based on Conan license.[21]
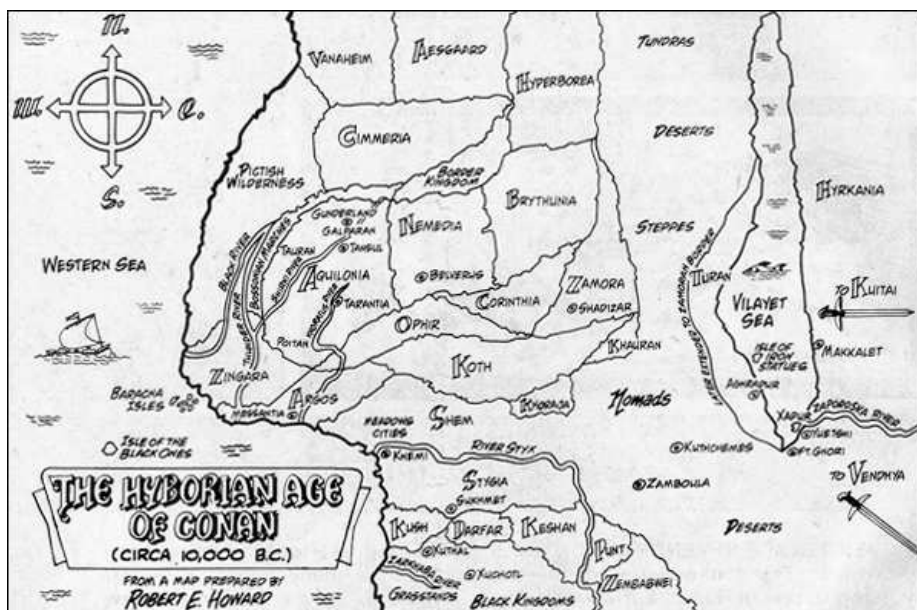

Figure 4.5: A map of the Hyborian Age.

All this material represents over 70 years of accumulated lore and backstory, and the fictional world of Hyboria is therefore a highly lore-defined place, where new storytelling can easily

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[20] An example of such a live-event in *Asheron's Call* (Turbine 1999) was the player community's killing of the nemesis NPC Bael'Zharon. (Sheldon 2004, p. 414-15).
[21] E.g. *Conan: The Roleplaying Game*, Mongoose Publishing 2004.

end up causing narrative inconsistency with the original lore. Funcom's official stance is that AoC primarily is based on the writings of Robert E. Howard, while other sources are used in a secondary capacity where it does not contradict Howard. The official FAQ about the gameworld makes it clear that Funcom has taken the lore very seriously in developing AoC:

> "We've focused on the lore like nothing else, and we've worked hard to ensure it stays true to the spirit of the stories. Most of the developers are huge fans of the Conan universe, and steeped themselves in the novels, comics, and films. We also have dedicated "lore people" that focus on keeping everything consistent, and we also work closely with the other companies working in Hyboria, like Mongoose Publishing, Penguin Books, and Dark Horse Comics. In addition, Conan Inc., the license holders of Conan, are closely involved with the development." (Funcom 2008c)

In addition to the pre-existing sources of lore that exist outside the gameworld, Funcom describes the official lore for AoC in the extensive Lore Library that can be found on the official website (Funcom 2008d), and some of this information has also been included in the game manual (Ellingsen 2008).

The world of Conan the barbarian, as depicted in Robert E. Howard's original writings, is a place of great danger and terrible beauty, full of vile sorcery, dark demons, and scantily clad damsels in distress, waiting to be rescued by Conan. The Destiny quest in AoC is very much in tune with Howard's original Conan stories. Conan's personal story is the tale of character growth, from thief and mercenary to king of Aquilonia. The stories belong firmly in the hero-literature tradition, and the monomyth narrative approach is therefore a pre-existing aspect of the original lore. AoC is an example of how a branded world can predispose a MMOG towards a certain form of storytelling. Players will enter the MMOG world of AoC with preconceived ideas and expectations formed by the extensive pre-existing lore. They may expect to play Conan's part in the storytelling, but it is simply impossible for the individual player to take centre stage in a MMOG populated by thousands of heroes.

The highly lore-defined fictional world is one of the main attractions of the game, but it also constrains the storytelling and the creative latitude for the game designers. In the following I will provide an example of how the storytelling fails to accommodate a certain character class by causing inconsistency with the lore.

The Tempest of Set is a character class described in the game manual as faithful disciples of the Stygian snake god Set, drawing their awesome destructive power of lightning directly

from Set (Ellingsen 2008). The Destiny quest in Tortage requires a Tempest of Set character to assist and work with the trainer of the priest archetype. That trainer is the beautiful woman Belessa, who happens to be a priest of Mitra. She is constantly bestowing the blessing of Mitra upon the character, and does not acknowledge or recognize that the character is disciple of Set. This constitutes a major clash with the lore that describes the relationship between the two major gods of the fictional world, Mitra and Set. In the Lore Library on Funcom's official AoC site, Set is described as Mitra's arch-enemy, a cruel, jealous god who demands constant human sacrifice. Mitra on the other hand is describes as a kind god, strongly opposed to Set, and he abhors the ritual of human sacrifice (Funcom 2008d). Clearly the two gods are as different as night and day, and it makes no sense for a Tempest of Set to be running errands for a priest of Mitra. From a story perspective, the Tempest of Set character is more or less forced to relinquish his faith by accepting a priest of Mitra as mentor and spiritual advisor, helping the character regain his lost memories. The player has no choice but to corporate with the Mitra priest if he wants to progress in the storytelling. This lore-based inconsistency undermines the narrative credibility of the Tempest of Set character, and is highly detrimental to the storytelling.

4.3 Quests in Age of Conan

In addition to the singleplayer Destiny quest line, that mainly takes place in private instances, AoC also features hundreds of traditional MMOG quests, situated in the shared space of the gameworld. The narrative structures of these quests are fairly standard for MMOGs and typically involve killing things or delivering items. The quests are often tied together and do a good job of connecting the different people and places of the gameworld through storytelling.

Quests in AoC offer the player plenty of choices in the dialogue with the NPC quest givers, but these options cannot be characterized as meaningful choices since they nearly always lead to the same pre-determined consequence. The conversations basically boil down to either "Accept" or "Decline". The element of uncertainty is generally absent in the outcome of the quests, and this leads to a low sense of player agency. The dialogue options in the quest conversations follow the following general scheme:

Option #1: Advance the quest.

Option #2: Elaborate on the story / suggest an alternate approach / refuse the quest givers request (with the option to change your mind).

Option #3: "Tell me about yourself" – Triggering a self-styled description of the NPC and his/her role in the story world.

Option #4: "Goodbye" - Ends the conversation with the NPC and resets the dialogue options to the starting point if the conversation is resumed.

Aaron Dembski-Bowden, senior dialogue writer on AoC, has commented candidly on the design of the conversation/quest system:

> "Every quest had to be available to every character, no matter what they said or what race/class combo they were. [...] No class quests were allowed outside of Tortage. No race-based quests were allowed at all. I hated that. I think it was a wasted opportunity on an incredible scale to make the game like that. So many reviews and previews alike were heavy on how great the conversation/quest system was for an MMO. I think there was a real chance to do something great, rather than take the first steps towards something great. Don't get me wrong, I'm pleased as punch with what I did and what the quest design team got into the game, but while seeing all the great reviews, I always think 'Yeah... but we could've done so much more'." (Dembski-Bowden in: Bott 2008a)

Clearly, it has been a design priority for Funcom to make all the story content non-exclusive to the point where it negates any possibility of personalizing the storytelling to the individual player. The advantage of this design strategy is that all player characters have full access to the entire bulk of story content upon the first play-through. The disadvantage is that it fails to facilitate replayability, and this is a serious issue for a MMOG. Exclusive and personalized story content encourage players to replay the game and explore the consequences of the choices they did not make the first time around. AoC has been criticised for lack of high level content, and the non-exclusive quest design strategy may be a remedy for limited or insufficient content. It is always a difficult challenge for a new MMOG to provide enough content to satisfy the players, who are consuming content like army ants chasing after the developer. It is entirely possible that AoC will change quest design strategy in the future with the addition of new content expansions.

The game has a mature rating and is rich on sexual innuendo. Sometimes this can produce awkward dialogue results that can impose homosexual relationships to certain NPCs without

the player's consent. This problem is evident in the quest called "The Love of a Countess" in the Noble District of Tarantia, where the player character falls in love with the beautiful Countess Albiona as part of the quest line. The outcome is the same whether the character is male or female. This is a poor form of interactive storytelling with total disregard for the individual player character and no consideration for player's choice. This quest example illustrates the problem of neglecting to personalize the player experience. Of course the player can refuse to do the quest, but this is hardly a satisfying solution.

Branching quests where the player's choice will alter the outcome of the quest are very rare in AoC. Normally the quest dialogue does not present any meaningful choice for the player to make, and you can simply keep selecting the #1 dialogue option to accept the inevitable predetermined outcome. Back in January 2008 it was stated by Joel Bylos, quest designer for Funcom, that branching quests lines were planned to go into the game (Bye 2008).

As part of the research for this thesis I have explored AoC in order to locate and identify examples of branching or mutually exclusive quest. These quests are notoriously hard to find because the dialogue options are constantly trying to create the illusion that there is a meaningful choice to make. Exploring the alternate choices (the option #2 variety) nearly always leads to the same consequence, and therefore constitutes a fake sense of player agency.

I have only been able to find a few examples of true branching quests, such as "The Wrong Kind of Message" that the player can pick up from the priest Nepthammon in Old Tarantia. Talking to this priest of Set about Conan and his reign will lead to three different sub-quests, depending on the player's choice of arguments ("The Right Kind of Message", "A Poor Attempt" and "The Stygian Kind of Message").

There are also rare examples of quests that are mutually exclusive, where the player has the choice of doing either quest A or quest B, but cannot do both. This occurs in Khopshef Province, where the player can choose between working for the Mantis creatures and freeing them from the evil necromancer Remuses ("Reaching out"), or work for the necromancer's disgruntled apprentice Mencar and enslave the Mantis on his behalf ("Usurping the Power").

Exploring the consequence of a branching or mutually exclusive quest requires subsequent play-through with a different character, and this is impractical in a MMOG where a quest can have high level requirements and you are unable to save the game state. Depending on the

design, the player may never even notice if a quest is branching, and this is probably the reason why branching quests are the first to get scrapped in the development process when the company is rushing to meet deadlines.

4.4 Interaction with NPCs

One of the most remarkable and innovative aspects of the storytelling in AoC is the way players interact with NPCs through conversations.

MMOGs typically represent NPC speech in a monologue form where a box of text pops up when the player talks to the NPC. In AoC the NPC conversations are shaped as real dialogue between the character and the NPC, where the player can choose between different lines in a branching conversation tree. Unfortunately the different lines usually yield the same result, as discussed in the previous section. This type of NPC interaction is typically associated with singleplayer roleplaying and adventure games, and closely resembles *The Longest Journey* (Funcom 1999) and *Dreamfall* (Funcom 2006). It is more reminiscent of games like *Star Wars: Knight of the Old Republic* (Bioware 2003) and *Neverwinter Nights 2* (Obsidian Entertainment 2006), than typical MMOGs such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004).

The most remarkable thing about the NPC conversations in AoC is that Funcom has integrated them into a special cut-scene mode that actually can take place in the shared-world space of the MMOG. When the player interacts with the NPC the game takes control of the camera and creates a cinematic camera perspective of the scene in which the player is temporarily unable to move or control the character (except through the dialogue options). This cut-scene mode provides an original and innovative form of personalized player experience through instancing – not by instancing of gameworld space, but by creating a *private instance of the NPC* that the character is talking to. In the cut-scene the player will interact with his private personalized version of the NPC, even when the conversation takes place in the shared space of the gameworld. This allows the NPC to focus the attention on the player character that he is talking to, without interruptions from other players arriving to interact with the same NPC. This is a very elegant way of solving the narrative problem when players line up at quest giver NPCs located in shared space.

The cut-scene conversation system is pretty advanced, and actually establishes eye contact between the character and the NPC, adjusting for differences in height and elevation between the character models.[22] It also allows the NPC to supplement the conversation with physical gestures, enacted through the use of an extensive system of emotes. NPCs will be seen to clap their hands in recognition of the player, slam their fist down in the palm in anger, extend their hands to receive items from the character, and point out directions – all in a meaningful context to the conversation.
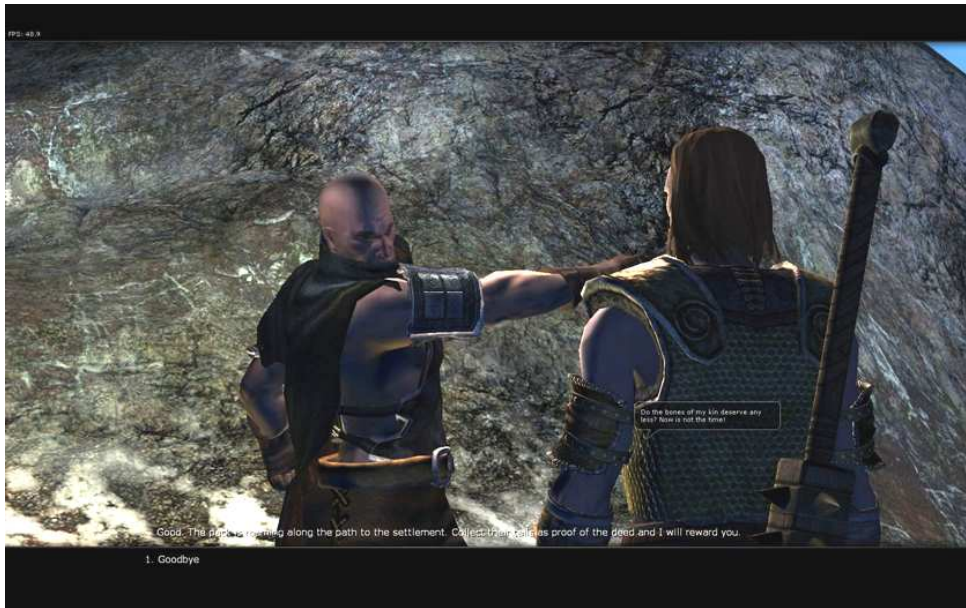

Figure 4.6: NPC quest giver pointing the character in the right direction.

This form of NPC behaviour would be impossible to create in the shared space of the MMOG world without the use of private instancing. The NPC emotes would then have to respond simultaneously to all player character interaction, and this would turn the NPC into some sort of twitching jumping jack with multiple players pulling the same string.

The main problem with the cut-scene conversation system is the resulting lack of control with the camera, and the temporary loss of player interactivity. For the full duration of the cut-scene conversation you are essentially frozen in place in real-time, without the ability to react to the event in your immediate surroundings. You are afforded a pre-defined view unto the shared space gameworld, where you see other players running by, or stopping next to you to talk to the NPC. Occasionally this results in some very awkward camera angles, when the

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[22] The cut-scene conversation system has been undergoing some changes since the game was released (for a long time the NPCs did not meet the eyes of the player character), and there are still some bugs that need to be ironed out, such as NPC occasionally turning to face another character while keeping eye contact with the player character.

view is obstructed by another player character entering your view, and there is no way of adjusting the camera or changing the positioning of the character.

The most aggravating consequence of the cut-scene conversations occurs if the player character is being attacked during the conversation, either by a NPC monster or by a another player. The character can actually die during a cut-scene, without any means of defending herself – as illustrated by this humours comic strip:

Figure 4.7: "AoC - Cut Scenes From Hell" by Linda Carlson. June 1, 2008. Retrieved from: http://www.thebrasse.com/game-comics/189

All the NPCs in the Tortage starting area feature high quality voice-acting, which makes them stand out as individuals with defined personalities. The voice-acting is a great way to get the players hooked on the narrative, but unfortunately it stops after the player leaves Tortage, except in the continuation of the Destiny quest. The transition from Tortage to the main land is rather abrupt when the player has grown accustomed to NPCs with voice-acting, and it can arguably make the fictional world seem a bit lifeless when the NPCs suddenly stop talking out loud.[23] You will still hear the occasional voice sounds from the NPCs, like angry outbursts and cheering sounds. These grunts and groans are an audible extension of the emote system to create more expressive NPCs, but at the present they are lacking the basic voice response, like

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[23] Funcom has announced that they will be implementing more voice-acting in some of the major quests in a future patch.

greetings and farewells, that players have come to expect from other MMOGs such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004).

While the storytelling in AoC does not facilitate a high degree of player instigated consequence, the NPC conversations do provide a very engaging and audio-visually appealing form of storytelling. The emote-based body language and the voice-acting goes a long way in defining and characterizing the NPCs as believable individuals, and it greatly helps in bringing the story to life. In AoC the NPCs are real actors with a personality, not just place-holders for a wall of text, and in this area AoC has most definitely raised the bar for storytelling in MMOGs.

4.5 Factions

In the early game in Tortage the player character is a freed slave allied with the secret resistance, fighting to rid the city of the tyrant Strom and his Red Hand henchmen. The Destiny quest is the classic story of a conflict between two opposing factions, where the player is aligned on the side of good against evil. Although the game does not allow the player to choose which faction to join, the fact that the player belongs to a faction is very important, because it defines the conflict and constrains the player's actions in a meaningful way in context with the storytelling.

The continuation of the Destiny quest after the player leaves Tortage is still fundamentally a conflict between factions, with the player working with king Conan's agent Kalanthes and a few others to stop Thoth-Amon and the Grim Grey God. But these factions are much more loosely defined in the storytelling, and the player can easily lose focus because of the large gaps between the four consecutive parts of the Destiny quest.

AoC does not feature any NPC factions that the player can join by his own choice. This is a deliberate omission by Funcom, as stated in the official FAQ:

> "There will not be any factions as you know them from other MMO games. This is a design choice we made based on our experiences with other systems, as we found they tend to lead to a lot of grinding and repetitive gameplay." (Funcom 2008e)

It is true that NPC factions in MMOGs traditionally involve repetitive gameplay, such as repeatedly doing quests to help the faction the player wishes to join. The reason why players

often have to work hard to gain a particular faction is that MMOG designers are reluctant to permanently close off content for the player characters, and therefore they want to allow players to change their faction. Grinding and repetitive play makes the factional content exclusive by means of player effort (play time) rather than by player choice. This makes it difficult and time-consuming, but still possible, for a player to change his faction. However, I fail to see why NPC factions would necessitate grinding and repetitive play. There is no reason why characters should not be able to gain faction by way of player choices, providing the MMOG designers are willing to close off content for the character (*not* the player) with long-term or permanent persistence. Of course this requires that the MMOG contains enough story content to support this exclusive design strategy. While it decreases the amount of content simultaneously available to a character, it also increases the replay value significantly. Join the forces of good with your first character, and you'll probably be wondering what it would be like if you had chosen to join the dark side – replay is the way to find out.

The lack of factions in AoC is yet another example of how Funcom has chosen to make all content readily available to every player character. It is an unusual design choice for a MMOG that includes a storytelling component, and the consequence for AoC is illustrated by the following commentary by Adrian Bott:

> "It's this blogger's opinion that much of the criticism of AoC's later game can be traced to this abrupt loss of a sense of side-taking after Tortage. The player goes from being a hero of the Resistance to being an aimless mercenary rattling about in an enormous, indifferent environment." (Bott 2008b)

4.6 Gameplay

The core gameplay in AoC is typical for MMOGs; i.e. progression of a persistent character while competing for resources. However, the gameplay is shaped very differently in the storytelling-supported progression to level 80, and in the competitive PvP-based endgame. While AoC contains this dual-structure gameplay, there is only one set of core game mechanics to support both types of gameplay, and that is the active combat system. While this may be great for PvP, it does not contribute to the storytelling. In fact, the PvP gameplay can be downright detrimental to the storytelling, especially when AoC is played on a non-consensual free-for-all PvP server, which is how all AoC PvP servers are designed to operate. On PvP servers, the storytelling will frequently be interrupted and constantly suppressed by

the threat of unprovoked player attacks. Engaging with the storytelling that takes places in shared space constitutes a clear and present danger to the player character on a PvP server. Every time the player talks to a NPC he is a sitting duck for hostile players, helplessly caught inside the cut-scene conversation.

The storytelling in AoC is the backdrop for the core gameplay of character progression through combat. According to senior dialogue writer Dembski-Bowden:

> "[T]he inspirational quote on our internal homepage, for every day of the project, was `Combat – combat – combat – the game in a nutshell´. That's fine; that's what sells copies of the game more than anything. Let's just say that I was always made aware that the writing on the project was considered overall as something of a side consideration. More like polish, really." (Dembski-Bowden in: Bott 2008a)

Combat is the way to deal with nearly all challenges, and there are no other game mechanics in place to facilitate alternate solutions to the problems that the player is presented with in the storytelling, except the standard MMOG mouse-click interaction with highlighted quest objects in the environment. AoC is lacking core game mechanics to facilitate a wider array of narrative goals that goes beyond combat and simple object interaction, but in this respect AoC is really no different from the mainstream MMOGs. "Right now, story tends to be the backdrop that is laid down last to cover all the potholes the game system has left in its wake. This encourages the creation of stories that don't make much sense" (Klug 2002).

4.7 Concluding on the case study

The case study of Age of Conan has shown that the analytical elements of the storytelling model presented in this thesis provide a useful tool set for explaining some of the major constraints of storytelling in MMOGs. The storytelling model is validated by the fact that the analytical elements were applicable and relevant for the selected case study, and there is nothing to suggest that it should not be equally useful for the study of storytelling in MMOGs in general.

While the case study has revealed many storytelling inconsistencies and shortcomings in the design of AoC, it has also shown that AoC has raised the bar of storytelling in MMOGs on several counts, particularly in the area of NPC interaction, and in the design of the early game,

with the highly original integration of the instanced singleplayer quest in Tortage. The storytelling model has proven very adequate in the analysis of these elements in particular.

5. Conclusions

This thesis has explored the obstacles for storytelling in MMOGs by identifying and explaining the main factors that constrain the player's ability to interact with the storytelling in a meaningful way, where the player's choices and actions can have long-term consequence.

In order to evaluate the particular constraints of the MMOG as a storytelling platform, I have formulated an analytical model for the study of storytelling in MMOGs. The storytelling model is constructed on the basis of a literature study of contemporary narrative theory, focusing on the elements pertaining to the storytelling experience in computer games. The literature study constitutes the necessary theoretical groundwork for the analytical model, and serves to qualify the discussion of storytelling in MMOG in general.

The narrative theory presented in this paper makes an important distinction between the dual structure of embedded and emergent narratives. MMOGs are inherently rich on emergent narrative potential, and some game theorist would argue, that it is the only viable form of narrative in MMOGs. However, the focus of this thesis is on embedded narratives, which are the constituent parts of the pre-designed storytelling experience. The thesis shows, that the embedded narrative often takes a backseat to the core gameplay in MMOGs, defined as character progression and competition for resources. It is a fundamental problem for storytelling in MMOGs, that they rarely support the pursuit of narrative goals through game mechanics other than combat or simplistic puzzle-solving. Furthermore, MMOGs rarely encourage players to take an active interest in the storytelling by providing alternative sets of rewards or benefits for trying to reach a narrative goal.

The storytelling model is a categorization of the main elements that constrain storytelling in MMOGs. These elements are identified and analyzed from the three perspectives of technology, gameplay and story content. The limitations of the MMOG in facilitating player instigated story-based consequence are explained by the interplay between these three analytical categories, where story content (embedded narrative) is subordinate to gameplay and technology.

The most fundamental and irrefutable constraint of the MMOG is identified and explained from the technological perspective by way of consequence structures combining the concepts of impressionability and persistence. One of the main conclusions is that MMOGs have great difficulty in facilitating player instigated changes of high impressionability and long-term

persistence. Conventional storytelling depends to a large extend on high impressionability events lending dramatic impact to the story. The concept of instancing is introduced into the storytelling model as a concrete technical solution to circumvent some the constraints of impressionability and persistence. Instancing allows for the integration of high impressionability storytelling events in the MMOG framework, but the thesis also illustrates the problems of using instanced storytelling, when the story that takes place in an instance threatens to affect the shared outside gameworld with high impressionability consequences. The instance represents a self-contained and separate gameworld reality and story-based consequences need to be contained within these bounds, or they risk causing narrative inconsistency in the fictional world at large.

The thesis has examined the fundamental problem of sharing a storytelling experience with other players in a multiplayer game. Instancing goes a long way in solving some of the more aggravation issues of players getting in the way of each other's story. But even so, sharing a storytelling experience with other people still requires a high degree of group coordination and mutual understanding between the players.

Another important element that constrains the storytelling in MMOGs is the predominant use of a narrative structure, rooted in the *monomyth* paradigm of hero literature. This narrative approach is often an inherent part of branded fictional worlds, which have gained popularity in recent years as the foundation for world building in MMOGs. The thesis suggests that branded fictional worlds can enforce a problematic approach to storytelling, because they are based on characterization. Branded worlds are first and foremost associated with the pivotal characters of the stories, defining their particular fictional world; e.g. when you think of *Star Wars*, the first thought that comes to mind is probably Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker. But MMOGs cannot empower players to make the consequential choice that is the defining characteristic of these pivotal characters in branded worlds. For this reason it might be more beneficial to create the fictional world from scratch, like Dereth in *Asheron's Call* (Turbine 1999), where players can enter the gameworld without expecting to play as Conan, Luke Skywalker, Neo or Frodo Baggins, and not have to feel cheated when they are denied the world-changing powers of these heroes. This would suggest the need for storytelling in MMOGs to move away from the hero-paradigm and focus instead on creating compelling narratives where the players are small cogs in the storytelling machinery, rather than cast into the impossible role of hero among thousands of heroes.

The sheer amount of factors that constrain storytelling in MMOGs begs the question why we should even bother to tell stories in MMOGs, if we can do it better in singleplayer games. However, the fact remains that MMOGs can benefit significantly from storytelling due to the social experience of sharing stories with other human beings. Singleplayer games may facilitate a wider scope of story-based player consequence than MMOGs, but the consequences that MMOGs *do* manage to facilitate, can have a much deeper impact, because they are met with the social recognition of a society of human players, who share the same virtual gameworld. The player may be a genuine hero and world saviour in a singleplayer game, but the hero status is diminished without social recognition. When it comes to social recognition, the real-life human players in a MMOG arguably have more to offer than a society of AI-controlled NPCs in a singleplayer game.

The case study of *Age of Conan* (Funcom 2008) has shown important examples of how the scope of storytelling techniques can be expanded by merging singleplayer gameplay with the multiplayer MMOG structure through the use of instancing. Another example is the innovative use of privately instanced NPCs to personalize and dramatize the player experience of conversations. However, the case study has also revealed, that the storytelling design strategy regarding the exclusivity and accessibility of story content, is one of the decisive factors in facilitating player instigated story-based consequences. *Age of Conan* has adopted a strategy for content accessibility that leaves very little room for players to make meaningful and consequential choices.

The challenge of facilitating story-based consequence in MMOGs is to strike the delicate balance of a storytelling form that is non-exclusive without being repetitive. A story with world-changing consequences of permanent persistence will be consumed and locked out by the first team of players who complete the tasks of the storyline, because it cannot be repeated. Such a storytelling form tends to favour the most dedicated and elitist player segment and leaves out the casual players. Conversely, an all-inclusive participatory storytelling form that welcomes repetition by thousands of players must necessarily appear highly inconsequential and therefore fundamentally meaningless.

It may seem like the challenge is an impossible one, but let us give it some time. MMOGs have only been a part of mainstream game entertainment for about ten years, and storytelling in MMOGs is still in its infancy.

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