A network of quests in World of Warcraft

Jill Walker

I'm Yggdra, a human warrior in World of Warcraft. I'm also an undead rogue and a dwarven warrior and a night elf hunter, but they're only my alts: my main character lives in Elwynn Forest, where she's well on the way to becoming one of the Alliance's staunchest defenders. She's also spending a surprising amount of time mining and blacksmithing to earn money for all the training and equipment her warrior career requires.

Like many other games, World of Warcraft is organised through its quests (Aarseth; Tronstad). Within seconds of logging on for the first time, I saw my first non-player character with a yellow exclamation mark over its head. Clicking on him set my first quest into motion, with a short narrative, some fixed objectives and a resolution. The quests I've experienced so far have all been designed to spur me on to discover more of the game in fairly limited ways, and all instruct me either to:

1. Explore, by:

   a. Finding a person (report to a person, deliver an object to a person)

   b. Exploring an area (scout an area, report back and tell us the condition)

   c. Learning to use a game function, such as buying an item from a vendor.

2. Slay monsters, with slight variations:

   a. Kill X number of a particular kind of monster.

   b. Bring the quest-giver an object that is found on the body of a slayed monster.

c. Bring the quest-giver an object that is found in a monster-infested area.

World of Warcraft has a very explicit quest management system. At any time, I can pull up my quest window, and see which quests I have accepted, how much progress I've made on them and even whether I'm likely to succeed at the quest playing solo or should team up with other players. Additional organisation of the quests is provided less explicitly: some quests build upon other quests, some quests are only for specific races, classes or professions (humans, warriors, miners) and related quests can be found close to each other in the in-game geography.

Each quest in World of Warcraft sets up a capsule narrative situation. The person who gives you the quest will always have a short dialogue. One of my favourite series of quests from the early levels of the game began, for me, when Maybell Maclure at the Maclure Vinyard near Goldshire asked me to help her:

> Oh, I'm cursed! My heart belongs to Tommy Joe Stonefield, but our families are bitter enemies. So I can't see him, even though my eyes ache to gaze upon that handsome face! Please, take this letter and give it to Tommy Joe. He's usually at the river to the west of the Stonefield Farm, which is due west of here. ("Young Lovers")

The writing is poor and the plot is unoriginal and predictable, so why did this engage me so? I was admittedly thrilled to find a quest that seemed to break the already dull slay more monsters mould, but the basic structure is a straightforward example of quest type 1 a, "deliver an object to a person".

In trying to see what is appealing about this series of quests, I quickly ruled out the quality of the plot and the aesthetical pleasure of the language. If that was what I was after, any novel would be an improvement. Is it my engagement with the plot, then? My agency? Well, I really only have two choices: decline or ignore the quest, or accept it and walk over to Tommy Joe. If I try to complete the quest, I'm really just enacting whatever role the game designers devised.

What most appealed to me about the series of quests between in Maclure Vinyard and Stonefield Farm was the abundance of stories I discovered and the tight network between the quests in the series. As I was

working on helping Maybell and Tommy Joe to get together, other members of their families asked me for help. One had lost a necklace, which led to my having to slay boars so that she could bake a pie for the horrid little boy at the neighbouring farm, who refused to tell me where he'd lost the necklace he'd stolen from her unless I got him that particular pie. Finally he told me that a vicious kobold in the nearby mines had it, so off I went, back to the same mines I'd already scouted in a previous quest, with a new goal. Another storyline is introduced in the Princess Must Die, where I had to go to another farm and kill the pig, but since bandits had taken over the pig's farm, that required teaming up with other players. Each time I achieved one goal, a new objective was given to me, and I trotted back and forwards between the two family farms dozens of times to complete all the quests set up between them. Through this abundance of quests and stories in the area quests, a whole world was set up, where I gradually came to know a little about many of the people at these farms. Certainly, Maybell and her family stand like stiff cardboard cut-outs simply waiting for me to come and find them, but I know the farms and the mine south of the road leading east from Goldshire as intimately as you can only do when you know the stories of a place.

Of course we might wish for games where the individual quests were better written. But the true importance of quests in World of Warcraft is not at the level of the individual quest. There are at least two reasons we need quests. First, they function as tutorials guiding the player through learning how to play the game and expanding the game as the player progresses. Secondly, they flesh out the world, making it interesting. They do that not so much through each individual quest as through the densely stories landscape that I come to know as I work through quest after quest.

Another quest based game is Grand Theft Auto. In Grand Theft Auto, quests are called missions and of course it's a single-player game, but apart from that it has much in common with World of Warcraft. The played can choose from a series of quests, not all of which are compulsory. There are always other options. You can simply explore the world, car-jacking in Grand Theft Auto and walking and later flying in World of Warcraft. You can earn money through taxi-driving in Grand Theft Auto and through a myriad of professions in World of Warcraft. You can work out and train, and you can

buy yourself clothes and gadgets. You can fight monsters without having any quest to do so.

I would argue that this semi-structured organisation through a network of quests and always available self-selected activities within set boundaries matches the way we read and experience the world today. These days we do things in fragments: we surf, channel flip and multitask. We write and read emails and blog posts rather than novels, we listen to 4-6 minute songs rather than symphonies, and we listen to the news in 30 second sound bites. We devour these fragments, flicking through hundreds each day, and we return to many, spending a few minutes at a time on one topic or blog or news story, maybe, but returning to it again and again. This fragmentation doesn't necessarily mean that we're more superficial. We return to things again and again, and the cumulation of fragmentary experience may be as deep or deeper as a single but lengthier exposure to something.

An increasing number of narratives and art works are designed for this kind of fragmentary yet cumulative reading. *Online Caroline* is meant to be read for five or ten minutes a day over a period of about three weeks (Bevan and Wright; Walker). *The Impermanence Agent* (Wardrip-Fruin et al.) pops up while you're doing other things, David Claerbout's *The Present* (2000) grows quietly on your desktop, only visible in between other tasks, and the novel *Implementation* (Montfort and Rettberg) is told in 192 stickers stuck in public places around the world. Weblogs, one of the first native web genres, provide a perfect example of a work that is completely composed of fragments that don't necessarily have anything in common except for the visual design and, perhaps, a common narrative voice.

In a recent paper about stretchtext and stretchvideo, Anders Fagerjord noted the appropriateness for these new medias of Roland Barthes' analysis of narrative as consisting of indices and functions (Fagerjord). Indices are Barthes' word for descriptions and settings, while functions are sets of actions, for instance buying a gun and later firing it, or explicitly not firing it. Functions can be *nucleii*, that is indispensible, or *catalysers*, which are less included for fleshing out the story. Perhaps this non-linear form of narratology can help us understand the ways in which quests work *together* to shape our experience of World of Warcraft.

On the surface, video games might appear the exact opposite of today's fragmentary expression. They routinely last for at least 40 hours of play, and the popular image of the gamer is of a person in deep, continuous concentration. Indeed, a recurring story reported in newspapers is of the gamer who dies from having played for too long, too intensively. This would appear to be precisely the sort of concentration on a single cultural object that protectors of tradition novel-reading have lamented the loss of (Birkerts).

Look more closely, though, and you'll find that a game is a network of fragments, most of which are not necessary to experience the game fully, and yet which cumulate into a rich experience of a storied world.

Bibliography

Aarseth, Espen. "Beyond the Frontier: Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse." First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game. Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Forthcoming.

Bevan, Rob, and Tim Wright. "Online Caroline". 2000. Serial web drama with automated email correspondence. September 2001. <http://www.onlinecaroline.com >.

Birkerts, Sven. The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994.

Fagerjord, Anders. "Editing Stretchfilm." Hypertext 2005. Salzburg: ACM Press, 2005.

Montfort, Nick, and Scott Rettberg. "Implementation". 2004. 30 March 2005. <http://nickm.com/implementation >.

Tronstad, Ragnhild. "Semiotic and Nonsemiotic Mud Performance." COSIGN, 2001.

Walker, Jill. "How I Was Played by Online Caroline." First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game. Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, et al. "The Impermanence Agent". 2000. Web narrative. <http://impermanenceagent.com >.