

Nummer  
14

In and Out of Character  
Complex Role-play and Dramaturgy  
in an Online World

Af Kjetil Sandvik

*Center for Digital Æstetik-forskning*

Digital

# SKRIFTSERIE

## Center for Digital Æstetik-forskning

Nr. 14 – 2006

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**Udgiver:** Center for Digital Æstetik-forskning  
IT-Parken Helsingforsgade 14, DK-8200 Århus N  
e-mail info@digital-aestetik.dk • www.digital-aestetik.dk

**Tryk:** Reprocenteret, Det Naturvidenskabelige Fakultet, Aarhus Universitet

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ISBN 87-91810-05-1

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## IN AND OUT OF CHARACTER

### COMPLEX ROLE-PLAY AND DRAMATURGY IN AN ONLINE WORLD

Playing roles is a crucial part of many computer games. Some of these roles are pre-designed by the game designers, others are more open and the player has to fill out the role herself. In so-called role-playing games (RPGs) the player gets to build her own role using the games' character templates, and in massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) the creation of a role mixes with the possibility of dramatic improvising with other characters within the game world as well as chatting with other players. This gameplay creates a complex kind of role-play. Using *Ultima Online* as example, this essay examines the mode of role-play in MMORPGs as well as the complex dramaturgy in these games and the different levels on which the player performs her actions in the game.

#### INTRODUCTION

This essay takes a closer look at the characteristics of computer games as a work and communication form. My point is to show how computer games' interactive dramatic story-structure and fictitious worlds facilitates a new way for the recipient to deal with the work or media message. There is no longer an interpretation at work distanced from the work itself but an interpretation, which becomes an active participator and agent in the enunciation of the work. The work is so to speak engaging in a dialogue with

its recipient. The work is thus open in the way described by Umberto Eco (1989): The work confronts its recipient as unfinished and is susceptible to influence, and the recipient's interpretations and interaction with the work is what completes it.

In this analysis I will use some concepts from the field of theatre science like role-play, dramatic plot and contract of fiction, because these concepts appear to be especially useful in so far that there are striking similarities (multimedial aesthetics, dramatic plot-structure, real-time action) between many types of computer games and the theatre. This is particularly the case with theatre forms, which are open, based on improvisation and audience participation, that is a kind of theatre in which the performance does not takes place in front of an audience but where the spectators are included in the dramatic plot as participants (Cf. Szatkowski 1989). What I intend to display in this essay is what may be called an interactive dramaturgy, which organizes dramatic plot structures in which there is no audience, only participants.

Even though my reflection, in principle, could be used in regard to most types of computer games in which an interactive structure of possible player actions is embedded in a fictitious world, I have chosen to use a so-called massive multiplayer role-playing game (MMORPG) – *Ultima Online* – as a case because this game demonstrates the openness and complexity of computer games' plot-structure and dramaturgy as well as the complexity of its reception and the role of its recipient, the player.

## ULTIMA ONLINE

There exists an enormous medieval realm called Britannia (see Figure 1) with large dark forests, endless plains, rivers and lakes, small villages and impressing fortresses. It is inhabited by

traders, brave knights, highwaymen, traveling entertainers, murderers, dragon slayers, craftsmen, magicians. In the woods are trolls, werewolves, and other lethal monsters lurking, fire-spewing dragons hover over the plains. Situated around this medieval world are



Figure 1 Britannia

thousands of people. They are sitting in front of their computer screens world wide staring 'down' on what takes place in Britannia. What they have in common is that they all have bought a version of the computer game *Ultima Online*, logged on to one of the game servers and used the creative tools the game has to offer in order to create their own unique game character and using this character they are partaking in the collective improvised dramatic fiction taking place in the fictitious world Britannia, which is constantly evolving and changing due to the actions of its players and their characters and have done so since the computer game *Ultima* went online in 1997.

## INTERACTIVE AND PLAY-CENTRIC FICTIONS

Traditional fictions (I use the word fiction to avoid the more biased word 'narrative') – that is most types of fiction within literature, films and theatre – make use of a communication model describing a transition of a message (a fiction) from a sender (author, playwright, director) through a medium (novel, movie, performance) to a recipient (reader, spectator) who interprets the message. This is all in all a one-way kind of communication and even

though a fiction may be interpreted in various ways depending on its complexity and openness, the fiction itself is not influenced by the various interpretations. Even though the reader or spectator is invited to get seduced by the plot and to empathize with its characters she is always distanced from the fiction's setup and development as such. Traditional fictions are fixed entities; they are 'told' – even when they unfold in real-time in front of its audience like in the theatre (Cf. Bordwell 1985).

The fiction found in *Ultima Online* – like all computer game fictions, which are integrated in the game and not just functioning as aesthetical framework or 'icing on the cake' – presents itself as interactive and – to use a term coined by Celia Pearce (2002) – as play-centric. It is interactive in that it is constituted by interactions between a fictitious world and a plot structure (how ever complex and multi-threaded) and player's action within and in relation to this world and structure. It is play-centric in that this interaction between game and player uses role-play as its primary mode. Computer game fictions come in many shapes and forms – 1<sup>st</sup> person shooters (*Counter-Strike*), adventure games (*Myst*-series), strategy games (*The Sims*), vast fictitious online-worlds, which work as arenas for improvisation with player-designed characters (*Ultima Online*), but their differences aside they all have one thing in common: role-play and participation in some kind of story-producing process or "production of [...] events" (Klastrup 2001).

Role-play is to be understood in the theatre theoretical sense of the word and not in lines of its different psychological or sociological derivations brought to us throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century where role-play has tended to cover (post)modern life as such as well as the way in which we create and experiments with our identity (Cf. Goffman 1959, Piaget 1976, Turkle 1995). Role-play connotes in the context of this essay what constitutes the theatre where actors put on different fictitious characters, which interacts with each other within the framework of a dramatic fiction (the degree of fiction and distance between character and actor may vary from one type of theatre to another as is the case in computer games depending on whether the player's character has been pre-defined and therefore at first distanced and differentiated from the player or whether the player is allowed to create her own character and thus have a closer relationship to the character).



Figure 2 Paper doll in *Ultima Online*

Fiction-based computer games present themselves as fictitious worlds into which the player is invited to play along the story-line and is offered a role as a character in the plot. This is the case whether the player engages in playing the part of the space soldier in *Halo*, the assassin in *Hitman*, the adventuring heroine in *Tomb Raider* or she puts on the role as creator of systems; families, cities, empires in *The Sims*, *SimCity* or *Civilization*. And in a MMORPG like *Ultima Online* this role-playing mode has been extended to the degree that the player can create her own unique character using the creative tools the game has to offer and by us-

ing this character she can create her own story-lines together with other player-characters and non-player characters (NPCs) within the framework of the fictitious world of Britannia. The player creates her character either from pre-described templates (magician, warrior, blacksmith etc.) and develops it from there, or she can create the character ‘from scratch’ using the tools for character design integrated in the game. The character works like a paper doll (see Figure 2), which the player not only dresses; the player also defines the character’s looks (color of hair, eyes, skin, its sex) and skills (ability to fight, to cast spells, to heal and so on).

With this ‘new-born’ character the player enters the game and the fiction world to develop its characteristics, its life, social status, wealth, social relations and so on and makes it perform a role in the different story-lines, which emerges due to the interactive improvisation with the fiction world and the other characters in it.

Interactive and play-centric fictions differs from traditional fictions in that they offer a dramatic plot in which the player gets to perform a role in the plot structure contained in the game: She is no longer merely spectator, but is projected into the game’s fiction world and into the player character, which may be pre-defined like the Lara Croft-character in *Tomb Raider* or defined by the player herself like in *Ultima Online*.

A fiction being interactive and play-centric thus implies that the fiction is not a closed and static system brought to a reader or spectator but that it offers an open structure in which the recipient is invited inside as participant, as player. And this *playing-along* is the most important mode of reception in computer game fictions. When Celia Pearce (2002) points out that game designers are disinterested in ‘storytelling’ and rather engages in creating a compelling framework for play this does not necessarily imply that stories are inferior elements in game design. Rather it implies that stories

in games are placed in the service of the game as tools for the game itself. Interactive and play-centric fictions are played out and the player therefore performs a crucial part in the dramatic story-line.

## COMPUTER GAMES AS DRAMATIC FICTION

Dramatic fiction, as it appears in movies and theatre performances, may be defined as characters' actions in time and space (Cf. Lehmann and Szatkowski 2004). These characters are related to each other in various ways and act according to some kind of conflict that exists within the framework of the time-space continuum of the dramatic fiction and which may appear differently from one character's point of view to another. It may put on various dramaturgical shapes and forms – from a classic linear and causal-logical plot-structure (the Aristotelian drama) to more circular or fragmented story-lines (Brecht's epic theatre, the simultaneous dramaturgy of medieval theatre, the meta-complex dramaturgy of contemporary performance theatre)).

When looking at computer games, which contain a plot-structure in which different actions and events are constituted by fictitious characters in a fictitious world, this is exactly this kind of dramatic fiction. But, opposed to the traditional theatre performance (or the movie) in which the fiction is acted out in front of an audience without any possibility to influence the dramatic story-line, the computer game player is granted the possibility to engage in a dialogue with the game's interactive and play-centric dramatic fiction.

Thus interactive and play-centric dramatic fictions imply a transformation of the recipient. From merely playing the role as a spectator to the dramatic story unfolding in front of her, she is offered a role within the story itself. This does not necessarily mean

that it is up to the player to create the story all together: The dramatic framework has been design already and interactive and play-centric fictions do not fulfill the ‘death of the author’ utopia (as pointed out by hypertext theoreticians like George P. Landow (1997) as a possible consequence of the emergence of computer mediated narratives), but still classic narratological and communicational models need to be reconsidered when it comes to this type of fictions: The interactive fiction is open and flexible and dynamic in that the player can partake in it and make it unfold and develop and thus determining its course. As Celia Pearce (2002) points out, the computer as a dynamic two-way medium makes it possible for game designers to create a new narrative ideology in which the designer rather than as storyteller works as creator of a narrative framework for the players own game-stories. This becomes particularly clear – as Pearce demonstrates – when it comes to games like *Ultima Online*, which includes a *meta-story* in the shape of a pre-designed fiction world containing a variety of *plot-lines* in which the player can engage (or not) and a *story-system*, which enables the player to develop her own game stories within the framework of this world. What we have here is a kind of collective, collaborative and improvisational story-production, which develops and evolves in real-time for the players who are logged on to the game.

The point is that the fiction contained in a computer game invites the player inside to play along and is dependent of her presence and actions. But at the same time as the player is invited inside and thus sees the interactive fiction of the game from within (be it in 1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective), the game demands that she can apply a double perspective on her play: She has to be a part of the interactive fiction and at the same time regard the rules, navigational operations, game logic – in short: the interface and the gameplay, which defines and makes the dialogue between recipient and fiction work. The player is both participant and spectator

even when it comes to types of computer games in which the player is ‘physically’ immersed with the game universe (games that run on different kinds of Virtual Reality-platforms such as panoramas and caves).

The interactive and play-centric dramatic fiction found in computer games dissolves the line between spectator and fiction, which is why it is not to correct, as claimed by Brenda Laurel (1991), that interactive systems (regarded as theatre) imply that the audience (the users) enters the stage and becomes actors. It is meaningless to talk about actors and audience in the traditional sense. There is no point outside the game from which an audience is intended to watch and therefore there is no-one for an actor to act to. A game is not meant to be watched like a theatre performance. The central issue in a game is to play. This involves different demands on the interactive and play-centric fiction than on traditional fictions, which are meant to be read or watched. Narrative contingency, psychological character development, depth in characters as well as story plays to some extent a minor role compared to possibilities for the recipient to play a role *within* the story. The point is not to discover, reveal or to read for the plot (Cf. Brooks 1984), but to *play the plot*.

Game designer Richard Rouse (2001) defines gameplay as the one component in computer games, which can be found in no other art forms; that is interactivity: “A game’s gameplay is the degree and nature of the interactivity that the game includes, i.e. how the player is able to interact with the game-world and how that game-world reacts to the choices the player makes” (Rouse 2001, p.xviii). In the context of this essay though, I will claim that gameplay cannot solely be linked to the game’s interactivity, gameplay is also connected to the game’s fiction. Gameplay is tied to both interactivity and fiction and is what connects these two: Gameplay stages and regulates the framework for player’s possi-

ble interaction with the game and it also stages and regulates the game's fiction, which is dynamic and emergent in that it unfolds and evolves as a result of players' interactions with the game world and its logic. Thus gameplay express the dramaturgy of the game; the rules conducting the dramatic story-line and development. When it comes to computer games it is imperative that the player understands and recognize the dramaturgical principles, which are embedded in the gameplay in order to make it possible to play the game at all.

Having a recognizable dramaturgical structure may be an important part of what makes a game fascinating (in the sense that the player can play within the framework of some fiction genre she knows and likes) and may create both identification (when recognizing the genre) and surprise (when the game design challenges the genre). Lisbeth Klastrup (2001) describes the how well-known genres like the mystery trail in the design of dramatic events in on-line worlds like MUDs and MOOs: "As a genre, the classic mystery is formulaic, well-known by most people, and hence not that difficult to make people perform without thinking too much about "what to do next", they will naturally expect to be expected to solve the mystery given and yet retain some kind of anticipation of unexpectedness, not knowing who might be murdered next or whom to suspect or not". In *Ultima Online* the use of the fantasy genre well-known from e.g. the universe of J.R.R. Tolkien functions as a similar structuring device, which evokes anticipations in the players regarding the characteristics of the fictitious world (its topology, its culture, character gallery and so on) and the possible ways to act within it. A similar use of different genres and media matrixes as useful dramaturgical vehicles for other forms of improvisational role-play such as so-called *live action role-play* (LARP) has been pointed out by media scientist Anne Marit Waade (2006) and game designers Nina Riis and Rikke Mørkholt (2006).

Whether a game fiction uses well-known genres or other ways of regulating player-activity it is necessary for the game to make its dramaturgical rules and structures visible to the player. In traditional fictions like the classic novel, drama, the Hollywood movie the main rule is that the author's or director's strategies are hidden enabling the reader or spectator to get seduced by the fictitious world and its characters, which is rolled out in front of her. A similar 'hiding the rules' is to a great extent not possible in an interactive and play-centric fiction because the player here is to play along and therefore needs to gain some insight into the story and game logic that makes the fiction work. Otherwise it is difficult for her to interact with the game's fiction. In *Ultima Online* this visible dramaturgical principles is amongst other things expressed by the fact that the designers of the game is roaming the game world as visible game master-characters, which the players can get help and seek advice from.

## COMPUTER GAMES AND *THE OPEN THEATRE*

There are striking similarities between the collective story-producing processes taking place in MMORPGs like *Ultima Online* and that type of theatre, which over the past 10-15 years especially within Danish theatre and educational drama research has been described as *the open theatre* (Cf. Szatkowski 1991, Krøgholt 2001, Sandvik 2003, Lehmann and Szatkowski 2004). This is a theatre that offers a dramatic fiction world to its 'audience' to participate in. But they are not just invited to partake in a devised theatre fiction but are also granted the possibility to devise the fiction themselves. The framework is constructed so that the narrative outcome is not yet determined. The participants contribute to the development of the story-line and are thus situated in the middle of the creative process.

*The open theatre* insists on fiction as a crucial creative (as well as pedagogical) tool, which is expressed by the fact that *the open theatre* implements the possibility for its participants to require important tools (acting techniques, dramaturgical competences and so on) which are needed in order to create fiction. This characteristic can be found in *Ultima Online* as well. The game not only contains tools for creating and developing a character but also different kinds of ‘practice grounds’ in which the players can try out their characters and the possibilities for creating dramatic action. Other computer games have similar tutorials that teach the player how to play along within the interactive fiction.

In *Ultima Online* this practice runs through several phases: After having created her character the player goes through a tutorial in which she gets to know the game’s interface and gameplay. The player is taught how to operate her character and how to interact with other characters and so on. Having used a template to create the character the player is offered a tutorial suited for the specific type of character chosen by the player: A warrior learns how to fight and kill, a magician learns how to make potions and cast spells and so on. Next phase is inside the fiction world itself: Here the newbie player starts out in the town of Haven, which – as the name indicates – is a safe-haven for inexperienced players. Here the player can get a lot of help from tutoring NPCs and at the same time not risk being attacked by monsters, killed or exposed to other kinds of disaster that would make it difficult to get into the game. Last step of this ladder of experience is a status as ‘young character’, which the newbie player gets when leaving Haven and which implies that the character can not be harmed by other characters, attacked by monsters and so on. The player grows out of this status when she has gained a certain level of experience and has learned how to participate in the creation of dramatic storylines within the world of the game.

The collective story-producing processes in *Ultima Online* bare similarities to the improvisational processes of the theatre rehearsal. But unlike the rehearsal, which collective process of creating dramatic material and dramaturgical structures has a finished performance (a fixed story) as its primary goal, in *Ultima Online* the process of story-creation is a goal in itself and is what constitutes the interactive and emergent fiction. An important part of what makes the game fascinating is that the player both on her own and in collaboration with other players gets to ‘possess’ the fiction and to be participant in its development and in experimenting with the possible ways in which the story-lines and the characters may evolve. The creative dimension of a MMORPG is constituted partly by players working together within the fiction framework and partly by players who outside the fiction (and out of character) discuss the possibilities for changes and new story-lines inside the game’s fiction and who exchange experiences and stories on the multitude of websites surrounding the game or by using the game’s chat channel. This kind of complex player activity both in character and out of character is an important part of what makes the game fascinating and is encouraged by the game designers in the sense that great missions in the upper experience levels of the game necessitates that players make their characters join forces in clans and guilds. As Lisbeth Klastrup points out, “the *characteristics* of a given *world* may be defined respectively in the cross between *aesthetics* and *structure* (the world’s appearance, its design as fiction universe and game system) and the *social dimension* (the social text emerging from the encountering of the users of the world centered on the use of it) (Klastrup 2004, p.239, my translation).

The open theatre that resembles interactive and play-centric fictions and the particular mode of reception found in a game like *Ultima Online* is radically different from more traditional forms of theatre performances, which are performed in front of and sepa-

rated from an audience, who still share the same physical time and space. Here the basic model described by theatre theoretician Eric Bentley (1964) is: A plays B while C watches. Figure 3 displays this model but has taken into account that most performance contain more than one actor (here: D playing E) and that the dramatic fiction is constituted by the interaction between these actors and their characters (see Szatkowski 1989, p.28).

The smaller frame displays the dramatic fiction, which may be constituted in various ways: It may be a closed dramatic structure that only appears as representation. The actors A and D is totally hidden behind their characters B and

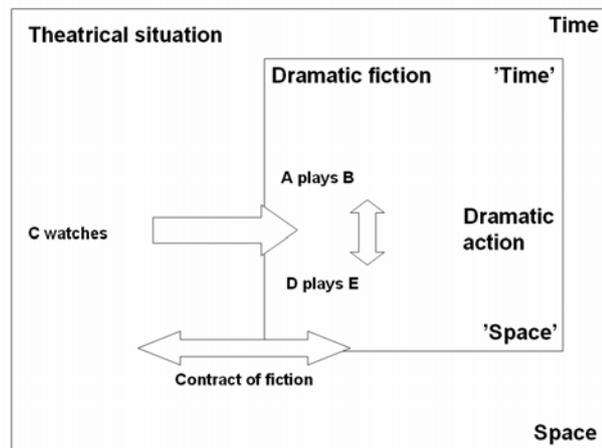


Figure 2 Basic theatrical communication

E, which engage in an often linear and causal-logical fiction that presents itself as some kind of reality even though the spectator C qua the larger frame in the model – the theatrical situation – as well as the *contract of fiction* is well aware that what goes on is ‘just theatre’. But it may also be more open structures in which the fiction appears as fragmented and self-commenting and in which the actors may step out of their characters to comment upon them or to appear as ‘themselves’ so that de line between actor and character is blurred. But the constant in this system is C watching from a position outside the dramatic framework (as well as the dramatic time and space).

In *the open theatre* however there is no C watching, just participants operating both outside and inside the framework of the dramatic fiction (see Figure 4). This is a kind of theatre in which

the participants can be actively engaged in creating a piece of drama as actors, playwrights, directors, set designers and so on in an improvisational story-producing process. This implies a unique contract of fiction: The participant plays roles, that is: fictitious characters, in a shared time/space-continuum, which is both fiction and physical reality at the same time. The theatrical situation and its contract of fiction determine rules of conduct: The participants are partaking in a special type of theatrical communication that

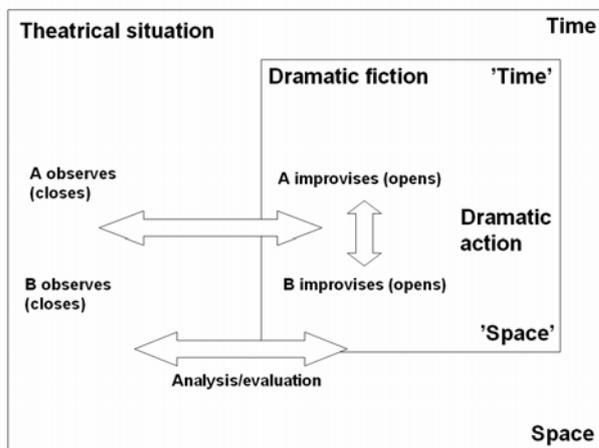


Figure 3 The open theatre

e.g. has improvisational role-play as its modus operandi.

Within this framework two positions are established between which the participants oscillate. In one position the participants engage in developing the fiction,

that is: the dramatic story-lines that emerges and evolves when the participants' characters interact with each other. This takes place within the framework of the fiction. In the other position the participants analyze and negotiate the dramatic development and make choices concerning how the fiction may evolve and change next. This takes place outside the fiction framework. It may be said that while the participants situated inside the fiction (and *in* character) is opening the fiction and testing its possibilities, situated outside the fiction (and out of character) they evaluate and make decisions and thus perform operative closures, which are determining in which direction the fiction may develop next. And this double existence or double perspective is – as stated earlier – also at stake in games like *Ultima Online*. As is the case with the participants in *the open theatre*, the players of *Ultima Online* are

not immersed in the fiction all together: At the same time as they play their roles in the game's fiction and thus partake in creating it they have to observe and interpret the fiction. They have to understand the rules of the game, to learn how to operate its interface and in other ways deal analytical with the dramaturgy of the game's fiction and thus act both inside and outside the fiction's framework. In online multiplayer games like *Ultima Online* a lot of game activity takes place 'out of character' where players exchange experiences, give each others good advice and discuss the game world as well as its rules: "The players themselves have no problems stepping out of and into the reality of the game and appear in a position in which they e.g. pretend to be a magician inside the world and respectively in a position in which they discuss some of the "bugs" that may appear in relation to this magician's activities (e.g. a spell that does not work as it uses to). [...] In an online world you can discuss the functions that creates the fiction and at the same time be a part of this fiction" (Klastrup 2004, p.241-242, my translation).

In this respect *the open theatre* as a model for computer game fictions differs from the theatre model described by Brenda Laurel in *Computer as Theatre* (1991). She describes a system where the 'spectators' "march up onto the stage and become various characters, altering the action by what they say and do in their roles" (op.cit., p.16) but in which all rules, principles and "technical magic that supports the [dramatic] representation, as in the theatre, is behind the scenes" (op.cit., p.15). The problem however is that when the audience becomes participants within the framework of the dramatic fiction, the techniques of the theatre and its poetic devices come to play an important role. The spectator is not supposed just to get seduced by the fiction but to play a role in the dramatic development and in this sense partake in its creation, which is why knowledge and skills in the fields of acting, set design, dramaturgy, all of the 'hard- and software' that Laurel wishes

to keep invisible for the participants are crucial for there to be any participatory play at all.

## THE PLAYER'S POSITIONS AND DOUBLE PERSPECTIVE

Marie-Laure Ryan (2001b) has elaborated on the four types of interactivity described by Espen Aarseth in his cybertext book (1997, p.62-65). She formulates four different positions for the player to inhabit when encountering an interactive fiction: The player can either 1) operate inside the fictitious world and with the use of a character (an avatar) explore this world, 2) operate inside the fictitious world and with the use of a character influence this world, 3) operate outside the fictitious world and from this position explore this world, and 4) operate outside the fictitious world and from this position influence this world. In position 2 and 4 the player is invited to become a part of the fiction in an ontological sense in so far that she has become an influential agent in the very being of the fiction. Thus these four positions describe respectively an internal-exploratory, an internal-ontological, an external-exploratory and an external-ontological mode of interactivity. Though we may find interactive fictions and virtual worlds that may employ just one of these four player positions and interactivity modes (examples may respectively be a visit to the internet version of art museum Louvre, a 1<sup>st</sup> person shooter like *Doom*, a hypertext fiction like *Afternoon* by Michael Joyce, and a strategy game like *SimCity*), these four positions and modes may also be regarded as different aspects of the complexity of reception and role-play in interactive and play-centric fictions. They may describe the characteristics of the player's double perspective mentioned earlier: The player has to operate as an agent and as an interpreter both inside and outside the fiction. This seems to be what

Ceilia Pearce is talking about when she states that a play-centric fiction both functions in an *experiential* mode in which the fiction evolves as a result of the ‘conflict’ embedded in the fiction and the way this ‘conflict’ is being played out and experienced by the player and in a *performative* mode in which the fiction is perceived and interpreted during the game and as an integrated part of the game. The performative aspect is constituted by the fact that the player’s reception and interpretations is making the fiction and thus the game evolve in the sense that the interpretations constantly makes re-entries into the fiction as what enables further actions made by the player. The interpretation is thus not separated from the fiction but integrated into it in the way same way as is the case with *the open work* described by Umberto Eco: The reception of the work makes the work come into being.

When engaging in a computer game, which includes an interactive fiction, the player is in this sense partaking in the creation of this fiction by interpreting it and the rules governing it and by acting and reacting according to this interpretation. In this sense there is always a double perspective at work when the player engages in an interactive fiction, which becomes even more evident when looking at online role-playing games like *Ultima Online*, which combines a *meta-story* and a *story-system* as described earlier.

In the external player position the player engages in training herself in order to play the game. When fictions invites the recipient inside the dramatic story-structure and gives her the responsibility for making the fiction evolve, the fiction must – as stated earlier – make sure that the player acquires some understanding of the dramaturgical principles and of how to build up characters, structures for dramatic actions and story-lines. These skills can not be taken for granted. As Danish game designer Michael Valeur (2004) points out, most people are lousy storytellers. Creating a

good and appealing fiction takes skills, which the interactive fiction need to make sure that the player acquires. Making sure that the player gets the imperative story-creating tools (the proper use of interface, navigating the character in the game world, use of weapons and other in-game artifacts) is part of good game design and is why many games (as demonstrated with *Ultima Online*) are equipped with practice grounds while others have long introductory sequences or voluminous manuals.

I will elaborate some more on the player's double perspective and the different positions which the player may inhabit when engaging in an interactive and play-centric fiction. There are two types of montage simultaneously at work in theatre performances (Cf. Ruffini 1986) and which may also be found in the types of computer games described in this essay. On the one hand there is a vertical montage (or *mise-en-scene*), which is constituted by the various visual elements offered to the eye of the recipient; landscapes, buildings, interiors, characters, clothing, lighting and so on. In computer games this type of montage is even more complex in so far that it also is constituted by different interface features like displays showing score, lives, ammunition and health left, maps of the game world etc. (see Figure 5). In *Ultima Online* this montage includes partly a window displaying the game world (Britannia) itself in which the player navigates her character, partly a list of different skills, belongings and experience points possessed by the character and also the 'paper doll' that functions as a tool for further character development.

On the other hand there is a horizontal montage in which the fictitious sequences of actions and events follow each other on a time line. This montage is constituted by the player-characters navigation in the fictitious world of the game and the actions the player makes herself or actions being done to her and events she may experience. Thus the horizontal montage to a great extent is

created by the player herself but is controlled and framed by the interactive structure and player-position included in the game's rules, which the player has to understand and relate to in order to create the montage of actions and events on the horizontal axis.

Even though Jesper Juul in his phd-dissertation *Half-Real. Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2004) describes computer games as both a system of rules and as fiction in that “playing a video game is to be engaged in the



Figure 4 Vertical montage in *Ultima Online*

interaction with some real rules *while* imagining a fictional world” (Juul 2004, p.2), and he suggests that this two-faced characteristic is unique for computer games, rules are not only found in games and play-centric fictions. Even classic, closed and static non-interactive fiction set up rules for the reader or spectator concerning how the fiction should be perceived. Umberto Eco (1979) labels the strategic rules governing the reading of a text *Model Reader*, which is not a particular real-life reader, but a set of reader-competences that the text anticipates and the reader must meet these anticipations in order to produce the best reading. In theatre performance such rules of reception are usually summed up in the concept *contract of fiction*, which determines the communication taking place between performance and spectator and includes a basic framework for understanding what is going on, for instance that what is taking place on stage is fiction and not reality, what genre this particular fiction belongs to and so on. But – as Juul demonstrates – in computer games this contract of fiction is not

limited to regulating the possible interpretations made by the spectator, but includes rules governing how the player may interact with the game and its fiction and is as such imperative in order to make it possible for the player to play the game at all. The player must understand the interface and gameplay in order to get a satisfactory game experience. And when looking at the game's fiction and how it may be 'read', it is important to be aware of these rules because they are an implemented part of this 'reading'. When we analyze a game's interactive fiction we analyze a dynamic structure that evolves as we analyze and interpret it. We analyze our own actions according to the rules of the game and to our positions as players in the game universe and according to the game characters we operate as well as we analyze the story (or stories) emerging from our actions. And what makes this analysis the more complex is that our interpretations constantly and recursively re-enter the game itself as new starting points for further dramatic action and development.

Perhaps the double perspective of the computer game player can be explained by using the idea of the double consciousness at play in children's role-play and in improvisational drama in which the participants are situated both inside the creative process and at the same time apply a meta-perspective on this process, that is an understanding of actions made and events created in the process as fiction: English drama teacher Gavin Bolton (1984) demonstrates how participants in an improvisation are able to maintain a spectator-position even when in the middle of the improvisatory creative process. Bolton boils this complex mode of improvisatory role-play down to the following formula: *I am making it happen to me*. Danish theatre theoreticians Niels Lehmann and Janek Szatkowski have brought Bolton's thoughts into the realm of computer games and added to the understanding of the complexity of role-play in interactive and play-centric fictions by pinpointing the double-identity of the role-player constituted by the player and her alter

ego, the character, and thus they divide the *I* and the *Me* in Bolton's formula into a *real I* and a *fictitious 'I'* and a *real Me* and a *fictitious 'Me'* making the formula go like: "I, as a character, am making it happen to my character and me" (Lehmann and Szatkowski 2004, p.82), which is graphically displayed in Figure 6 (op.cit., p.83).

Here the *real I* describes the player's position outside the game's fictitious world at the level of interface, so to speak. By operating this interface and by relating to her player-character and to the interactive framework, which al-

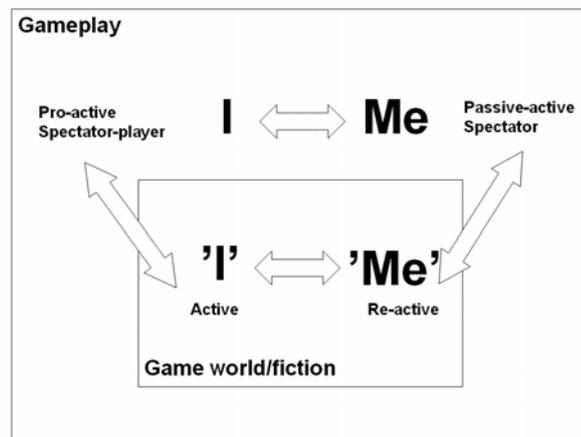


Figure 5 The player's double identity

lows her to make choices and perform actions, the player makes the interactive fiction unfold and evolve. Even though a computer-mediated fiction never is so open-ended as the theatre improvisation we may claim that the player in the position as *real I* not only acts according to various dramatic events and situations occurring inside the interactive fiction but also that she is partaking in the making of the fiction in so far that she is making something happen with and to her character. The *real I* puts on the role of a spectator-actor and a pro-active mode of play. On the opposite side the *real Me* is more passive as it too is situated outside the fiction but in the position of the spectator who is influenced by what takes place inside the game only on the level of perception. The *fictitious 'I'* describes the projection of the *real I* into the player-character. The *fictitious 'I'* interacts with the universe and other characters it may encounter according to the choices and possible actions offered by the fictitious world and its rules (go right, go

left, open this or that door, activate this or that machinery, shoot this or that monster and so on). *The fictitious 'I'* is less active than the *real I* in so far that it only can act and react according the dramatic story-lines and world but not influence the framework of the fiction as such. In the same way as the *fictitious 'I'* is less active than the *real I*, the *fictitious 'Me'* is less passive than the *real Me*. In the computer game this is due to the fact the *fictitious 'Me'* has to respond to things happening to the character. While the *real Me* just watches passively, the *fictitious 'Me'* has to act when exposed to this or that.

In relation to Ryan's four player positions mentioned earlier they may be superimposed onto the double-perspective and double-identity of the role-player demonstrated here. As such an external-exploratory as well as an external-ontological mode of interactivity relates to the *real I* in so far that they describe systems in which the player is situated outside the fictitious world and from this position either traverses the often fragmented, complex and multi-threaded structure of this world or she influences the world by taking on the role of some kind of demiurg that creates different kinds of fictitious systems while both the external-ontological and internal-ontological mode relates to the *fictitious I*, that is the player's position within the fictitious world in which she may be limited to use her character only to explore the characteristics of the fiction or she may be able to play an influencing role in the dramatic story-line.

The point is that in a game like *Ultima Online* all these positions are at work but in an even more complex way (see Figure 7). The player partly acts outside the fiction operating the interface and using the different tools embedded in the gameplay in order to develop her character, build

houses, ships and so on, and she operates inside the fiction with her character. But the player may also step out of character and engage in conversation with other players using the game's chat-channel. As such the player appears as *real I* also inside the framework of the fiction. Partly the player can engage in creation of fiction outside the fictitious world of the game itself: *Ultima Online* is surrounded by thousands of websites dedicated to different *Ultima Online*-clans and -guilds where players write their own *Ultima Online*-sagas and exchange interesting stories experienced in the game.

This complexity result in various fluctuations between the *real* and the *fictitious* world: In 1998 the character Lord Teclis met the character Lady Amber in a small tailor shop in *Ultima Online* village Britain. The encounter led to a romance and the marriage between the two characters. This romantic relationship between two fictitious characters urged the two players behind the characters to make contact in 'the real world' and to get acquainted (but not romantically involved though) despite the fact that one was living in the US and the other in the UK. This kind of double story in which the fictitious love story between two fictitious characters

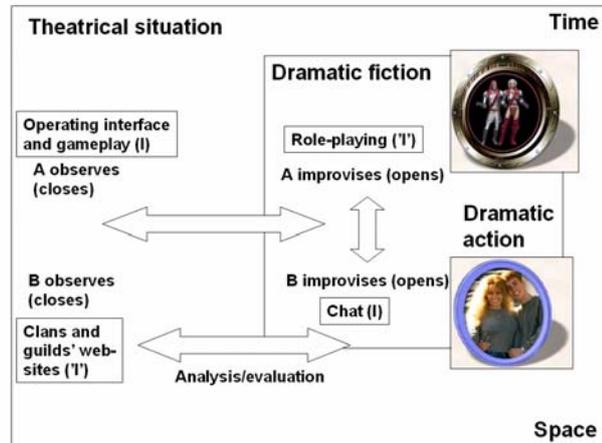


Figure 6 Complex communication in *Ultima Online*

(two *fictitious I's*) mirrors the story of a friendship between to real-life players (two *real I's*) clearly demonstrates the complexity of reception and role-play in an interactive fiction as complex as the one found in *Ultima Online* (the story of Lord Teclis and Lady Amber can be read at the official *Ultima Online* website: <http://www.uo.com>).

## CONCLUSION

Interactive and play-centric fictions represent a new type of fiction which is dynamic and open to influence from its recipients, the players. This does not imply that the creation of fiction is handed over to the players all together. There is still a need for an effective framework as well as efficient rules to guide the player's interaction with and within the interactive and play-centric fiction and which secure some kind of progression. Interactivity is not interesting in itself but must be embedded in a game design, which makes it appealing for the player to interact, some kind of progression that creates dramatic suspense and development, which encourages the players to partake in the story-creating process: Developing the life of the player-character, gaining experience and skills, developing relation to other characters as well as to their players are all part of this necessary progression as well as is the players' possibility to embark on exiting and dangerous mission. This is why MMORPGs like *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest* needs constantly attention from their designers and also why 'customer service staff'-members are wandering "about the virtual game world assisting players, and creating narrative events, conflicts and missions for players to engage in" (Pearce 2002). They closely observe what the players are doing and develop the game, its rules and meta-stories according to these action as well as using the players both in order to develop the fiction and as reporters on

flaws and inconsistencies in the program code running the game: “A well-working online world needs to be updated and repaired constantly especially on the level of program. This is why you in a world like *EverQuest* may find a so-called “bug-report”, a feature that allows the player to report on eventual malfunctions and shortcomings *in* the world as they appear in a concrete game situation. The bug-feature is an interesting example on how you may be ‘inside’ the fiction and the same time relate to the fact that it is not ‘working’ as it should” (Klastrup 2004, p.240, my translation).

If we want to understand the complexity of dramaturgy and role-play in these types of fictitious worlds we have to examine this type of features, which is a part of the game as a system, its rules and game logic that create the interactive and play-centric framework. Using traditional concepts of fiction will not get us very far. We need to reconsider our concepts and create new ones that can relate to a type of fiction, which may resemble the type of theatre known as the *open theatre*: It is constituted by a dramatic structure containing story-lines created by characters interacting with each others and with the fictitious world over time. This structure is interactive and play-centric in the sense that its design and gameplay allow the player to put on a character and engage in these dramatic structures. The dramatic story-lines emerging in this type of fiction are a result of the players’ (inter)actions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my former colleagues and especially Niels Lehmann and Janek Szatkowski at the Dept. of Dramaturgy at the University of Aarhus for our many useful discussions on interactive dramaturgy and *the open theatre* over the years, which have produced some of the basic reflection for this essay.

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ISBN 87-91810-05-1