

Training One's Alter Ego

On the relationship between video games and mankind's urge for self-enhancement

Introduction

Ever since video games like *Home Pong* or *Adventure* set out to conquer the television sets of everyman's home back in the 1970s, the number of people routinely entering such code-based virtual worlds has multiplied numerous and the playing of video games has become a widespread cultural phenomenon co-producing today's societal situation. As a specific game genre, role-playing video games (RPGs) have always had their share of the market, never falling short of attracting a considerable audience. Tradition-rich game series like Sir Tech's *Wizardry*, Origin's *Ultima* or New World's *Might and Magic* shaped the gaming culture throughout two decades, more recently, Blizzard's *Diablo*, Bio Ware's *Baldur's Gate* and Interplay's *Fallout* set the benchmark for single-player role-playing experience.

With the appearance of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), e.g. *Ultima Online*, *Everquest* or *World of Warcraft*, software-mediated adventurism started to draw attention well beyond the boundaries of long-established player communities. Computer-based role-playing became a much-noticed matter of debate, inspiring countless journalistic reflections as well as a substantial number of scientific investigations. While it is safe to say that this growth of public interest can mainly be attributed to the large-scale dissemination of the Internet as an infrastructure, as a result of which computer game playing transformed from a primarily solitary pastime into a highly social activity bringing together millions of online gamers in virtual environments, it also holds true that the main characteristics specific to offline role-playing have survived this transition. Further, although graphics, gameplay and the possibilities for player-to-player interaction experienced major improvements over the last decades, the core of computer-mediated RPG playing remained essentially unaltered. Still it is the gradual improvement of a digital avatar, one's virtual alter ego that constitutes the basis of every binary adventure trip.

Considering sale figures¹ and estimates of active players² it seems quite clear that the video game culture in general and role-playing games in particular can no longer be treated as insignificant

¹ An extensive, platform-sensitive round-up listing the best-selling video games of all-time can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_video_games.

² Reliable estimates regarding the actual number of active video game players worldwide are hard to come by since there seems to be a lack of global-scale surveys. But, to give an example, for America, the *Entertainment Software Association* (ESA) states that 67 percent of American households play computer and video games (see http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_Essential_Facts_2010.PDF), for Europe, a consumer survey of the *Interactive Software Federation of Europe* (see http://www.isfe-eu.org/tzr/scripts/downloader2.php?filename=T003/F0013/d6/1a/3401b53qaghqd4j25b2ullin3&mime=application/pdf&originalname=ISFE_Consumersurvey2006.pdf).

byproducts of contemporary mass culture, but have to be acknowledged as integral constituents of modern-day society. It is a cardinal assumption of this research project that those video games – similar to other media products – intrinsically evoke as well as respond to certain societal and individual demands and needs. But what exactly are those demands and needs? What do gamers hope to find by immersing in alternative realities? What do they long for? And what are they being offered? Through careful employment of a multilayered research design, this paper seeks to fathom possible answers to these questions, asking what it is that drives people to dwell in computed surroundings, diligently fulfilling a myriad of predefined tasks, untiringly nurturing a polygon-build avatar.

Research Question and Hypothesis

In his book *Du musst dein Leben ändern* (Sloterdijk 2009) german philosopher Peter Sloterdijk presents a comprehensive view on what he calls a "non-spiritualistic ascetology", meaning the human trait to pursue training and practicing on one's own vital existence. Wandering through history and various socio-cultural accumulations, he coins the term of "anthropotechnique" to subsume this fleshly longing for self-referential improvement. It is the ever-enhancing individual that stands in the spotlight of his insightful observations.

Drawing on Sloterdijk's analytical framework, this paper intends to treat the notion of the continuously training individual as a possible investigative approach to understanding certain aspects of the *homo ludens* (Huizinga 2004) as well as the contemporary video game culture. Computer-based role-playing games like *Diablo*, *The Elder Scrolls* or *Fallout* confront players with the necessity to work on their avatar's abilities and skills in order to master the games challenges. It is a time-consuming process of ongoing training that incrementally strengthens the character's capabilities, eventually allowing her to withstand against an infinite variety of lurking dangers. Players are asked to spend hour after hour leveling and crafting as their avatars gradually evolve into shining heroes in a world made up of countless lines of programming code. Nevertheless, whilst training oneself in non-virtual environments is often being conceived as an unwelcome and tedious task, e.g. cramming for tests, exercising physically, or working on certain occupational skills, drilling one's digital embodiment seems to come by rather hassle-free, a welcome source of amusement worthy of one's precious free time, even though this occupation may involve demanding and strenuous activities such as the persistent working on an avatar's proficiency.

[mer_Survey_2010.pdf](#)) contents that 25.4 percent of European citizens have played video games over the course of the last 6 months.

This slightly puzzling observation leads to the assumption that video games correspond with mankind's proclaimed urge to self-enhance in a way real-life does (or can) not. If, how Sloterdijk suggests, the strive for improvement actually is an essential part of the human nature, the question emerges, why this will to train and practice unveils itself much more clearly in virtual settings than in everyday life situations³ – a sentiment that supposedly applies to a least some of the digital natives regularly immersing in processor-calculated environments.⁴ In order to dig deeper and excavate potential reasons why the entanglement with digital alter egos apparently seems to have such an appeal to the great many of computer game players, a tripartite research program was devised and carried out, the results of which might allow shedding some light on this somewhat enigmatic issue. But before further elaborating on these findings, we shall take a quick look at the specifics of the employed research structure.

Research Outline and Methodology

As stated, this paper asks for possible answers to the question why training one's digital embodiment to a growing number of people seems to be a more joyous task than working on real-life competences. Given the time and effort computer gamers willingly spend when leading an avatar to its personal best, one might wonder considering the motivational work and pressure that sometimes is required to induce only a fraction of this commitment when engaging in non-computer-mediated activities. The hypothesis was formulated that there has to be some difference between virtual and non-virtual environments, a secret ingredient that transforms the tedious toil of persistent training into a most welcome diversion. The research conducted for this paper tried to identify this ingredient through incorporation of a threefold investigative structure:

First, by meticulously contemplating on Sloterdijk's profound essay, it was tried to delineate the principal characteristics of what the German philosopher labeled a "non-spiritualistic

³ The distinction between everyday and virtual life serves an epistemological purpose only and should not be taken as a declaration of some assumed unshakeable truth. As argued in the introduction, this paper premises on the idea that computer games have become an integral part of today's societal realm, actively co-producing and co-shaping humane environments (see Akrieh and Latour 1992; Jasanoff 2004). Therefore, the dualistic notion of computer-mediated versus non-computer-mediated settings does not want to introduce the notion of two separate realities, but should rather be conceived as a pragmatic (although philosophically puny) way to address and read the complex entanglements of society's computer-pervaded present.

⁴ For a rather daunting account of compiled player data see the Suzanne Choney's *msnbc* article *Study: Average gamer is 35, fat and bummed* at http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32463904/ns/technology_and_science-games. A scientifically unbacked version of this idea has been incorporated into the *Southpark* episode *Make Love, Not Warcraft*, online available at <http://www.southparkstudios.com/guide/1008>. By citing these sources I do not intend to endorse a Postman-informed position of oversimplifying media pessimism, but only hope to give substance to the claim that in some cases video games seem to respond to a demand non-computer-mediated environments fail to content.

ascetology", thereby not only asking for the foundations but also the potential difficulties implicated in such a culture of continuous self-enhancement. The idea was to gain some knowledge regarding the core mechanisms entailed in the doings of what Sloterdijk calls the *homo repetitivus* – i.e. the human forming himself through constantly engaging in iterative operations – or the *homo artista* – who reaches a staggering level of expertise through consequent, systematic exercising. Ultimately, the findings taken from the reading of the Sloterdijkian concept had effect upon the forming of the main research question as presented above, served as a basis for a theoretical framework that gingered up the study's epistemology, functioned as a way of rereading the contemporary video game culture, and informed the questionnaire used throughout the interview sessions.

Second, an empirical investigation encompassed the examination of a particular computer game, namely Runic Games' hack-and-slay hit *Torchlight*, in order to get an impression on how leveling and questing actually is integrated into the gaming experience. This particular video game has been chosen for several reasons: On the one hand, the game was commercially very successful, embodies all the fundamental virtues of traditional hack-and-slay adventures – e.g. extensive leveling and questing –, and exhibits striking similarities to the raw model of dungeon-crawler games – Blizzard's *Diablo*. On the other hand, the game is a single-player-only RPG, excluding any player-to-player interaction. Although massively multiplayer games like the renowned *World of Warcraft* would have been a worthwhile object of study, they doubtlessly would have complicated the analysis further, for much of their fascination originates in the social structures within the game (e.g. clan-building or player-versus-player fights), an additional factor that would have obscured the aspect of training emphasized within the research project at hand. Last but not least, the game was chosen because of its manageable playing length, since with about 15 hours for the main story line and a few more hours of side quests, the game can hardly be characterized as an epic in regard to its magnitude. Methodologically, the investigation followed the Latourian notion that descriptions eventually lead to more insightful evaluations than rigid explanations do (see Latour 1999). Thus, when reflecting on the gaming experience, there was no intention of searching for an underlying "truth", a single mechanism or trait that would mysteriously transform the actually arduous task of training an avatar into an entertaining occupation. So, if it was mentioned before that this research project searches for some secret ingredient, it now becomes clear that this secret ingredient cannot be pinned to a single feature or property, but should rather be understood as a complex, entangled set of actions, a multilayered tweak to the processual logic of the training experience. In the case of the actual analysis, this means a concentration on the interplay between the computer game and the computer game player. The question is not so much *what* the gameplay specifics of a game are, but *how* those specifics are incorporated into the game and *how* they interact with the user. Therefore, when reflecting on the gaming experience, the focus laid on the complicated dynamics stretching

between human and non-human actant, asking questions such as: How does the player create her avatar and what options is she given? How is the player introduced into the virtual world and what assignments is she meant to pursue? How does the player strengthen her avatar, what are the details of this process, how long does it take, and how does the game reward the player for doing so?

Third, two semi-structured, open-ended qualitative interview were conducted. Before carrying out the interviews, a questionnaire comprised of 32 distinct questions was devised, with additional questions being formulated over course of the actual interview situation. One of the interviews was a single person interview, the other one was an interview with two respondents. All the interviewees were male since finding females with longstanding computer-related role-playing experience turned out to be rather difficult. All the interviewees were between 24 and 29 years old. The one-person-interview was staged via the communication software *Skype*, took place at two successive days and lasted roughly three hours. The two-person-interview took place in a face-to-face setting and lasted for four and a half hours. In principle, the idea of the interviews was to confront the interviewees with a fixed set of predefined questions, but also to give them the opportunity to dwell on their own thoughts or issues whenever they wanted to. All in all, roughly 40 pages were transcribed from the audio recordings, constituting a fairly rich data pool to refer to. The questions posed during the interview covered a broad range of aspects, but tried for the most part to concentrate on the issue of training and improvement procedures embedded in the game mechanics of role-playing computer games. Asking the interviewees to draw on their own gaming experience, the intention was to find some common ground, some potential indications what it is that gets a player to invest time and effort into the rearing up of a digital avatar. In general, the interviews proved to be a useful research method to substantiate some of the hypothesis formulated as a result of the previous research stages, i.e. the theoretical investigation of Sloterdijk's concept of "anthropotechnique" and the in-depth examination of the computer role-playing game *Torchlight*.

Following, I would like to present some of the findings of this threefold research approach, before fading-out the article with some conclusive statements.

Findings

I. Sloterdijk and the Tribe of ever-training Beings

To begin with, it seems advisable to note that Peter Sloterdijk's philosophical oeuvre in no way features a rigid theoretical framework. Rather, it should be considered a rereading of human history as a history of exercise, training and incessant practice. For Sloterdijk, the world is a planet of trainees (Sloterdijk 2009: 61), who continuously shape themselves through repetitious acts and

iterative performances of exercising. Therefore, the German philosopher's reflections can hardly function as an easily applicable research scheme, an eye-opening formula, or a mathematical constant (π), but should be taken as what they are – an ingenious thought impetus that may stimulate contemplation and further research. And this is exactly what happened in the case of the research project at hand. Reading Sloterdijk meant finding an original way of approaching the contemporary gaming culture intellectually. And, without giving away too much, it was almost surprising to see how well theory and empirical observations complement each other. Subsequently, I would suggest to briefly recapitulate some of the main ideas of Sloterdijk in order to have a thorough look on how they translate into the field of video gaming. By making this comparison we might come to realize that humanity as the species of the *homo repetitivus* has imagined video games as highly elaborate training centers, cybernetic machineries that coincide perfectly with mankind's urge to self-enhance:

In a nutshell, Sloterdijk labels his philosophy of the ever-training human "anthropotechnique", meaning a technique or performance that effectively *makes* the *anthropus*, the human entity. In essence, this means that by engaging in complex processes of self-referential training we not only *form* but incrementally *become* ourselves. Our being is a result of myriads of repetitions and imitations, a "muted autopoiesis" (ibid.: 604) where all actions and movements react back upon the performing actor. For Sloterdijk, human life intrinsically is exercise. Intriguingly, this way of picturing the human existence as a reciprocal process of self-enhancement corresponds impressively to how an avatar in a video role-playing game comes into being: As the storyline of such games almost always remains rather shallow, a character's true substance grounds for the most part on concrete actions and deeds, first and foremost heroic fights with hostile monstrosities. Thus, it is only through continuous leveling and questing that a character will eventually become the hero of a virtual realm. When a player starts a new game, her avatar will be on level 1, only able to perform the most basal tasks and equipped with the same poor gear all the other level 1 characters wear. At this point, the avatar is one amongst many – the same looks, the same stats, the same defenselessness. Only with time and effort will the half-backed novice turn into a respectable champion, thereby becoming a unique entity. Her fights will shape her, her items improve her, her reputation precede her. She won't look like everyone else, she won't have experienced the same as everyone else and she surely won't accept to be treated as everyone else. In most role-playing games a nobody becomes a somebody and the path to becoming a somebody almost always includes some serious monster hunting and strenuous questing. As with Sloterdijk, the inactive entity remains largely undefined, but the active being shapes herself into becoming something special. But the correlations between ascetology and gameology do not end at this point: According to Sloterdijk, an ascetologist will practice incessantly – a computer gamer training an avatar will quickly master even

the most difficult challenges; an ascetologist feels the need for self-enhancement – an avatar will outdo herself multiple times; an ascetologist senses a vertical urge – an avatar seeks to reach the top; an ascetologist aspires to accomplish the unbelievable – a fully developed avatar will eventually save an entire world. My point being: Role-playing video games function as training camps *en miniature*. They incorporate a possibility to reach all the goals ascetologists strive for. Sure, in detail Sloterdijk's concept is much more complex and diverse than that, but adapted accordingly it functions as an insightful way to reassess today's rampant video game culture. Concluding this section, I would like to comment on a few very specific arguments of Sloterdijk:

First, Sloterdijk argues that recently the difference between those who train and those who don't train has become more obvious (ibid.: 66). I hesitate to concur with that notion because ultimately there are no people who simply don't train. The basis for this counter-argument comes from Sloterdijk himself⁵:

"Im übrigen darf man selbst manifeste Dummheit nicht mehr als simples Datum nehmen: Sie wird durch ein langes Training in Lernvermeidungsoperationen erworben. Nur nach einer hartnäckig fortgesetzten Serie von Selbst-Knock-outs der Intelligenz kann sich ein Habitus zuverlässiger Stupidität stabilisieren – und sogar dieser läßt sich jederzeit durch einen Rückfall in die Nicht-Dummheit dementieren." (ibid.: 645f.)

Therefore, the question is not so much who trains and who does not, but who is training in accordance to socially-valued standards and who refrains from doing so. Presently, being a capable video game player is arguably a socially not very respected skill. Nevertheless, players incorporate most of the ascetological virtues. They constantly train and exercise, some of them very hard and enduringly. Given, they do not train so much themselves as they train a digital alter ego, but at root they seek gratification of the same urge Sloterdijk's ascetologists thrive on – the vertical tension, the wish to improve and enhance. Thus, when talking about a culture of trainees, we should not concentrate on who exercises diligently and who takes a break ever so often, but ask who practices in a way society rewards, e.g. by attributing social, cultural and fiscal capital (see Bourdieu 1977), and who chooses to delve into workout procedures that are being socially dismissed as impractical. Recently, a criminologist cited in a newspaper article⁶ stated that "in moments of success, the brain releases the mood-enhancing messenger substance Dopamine – and this happens much more often and quickly with a few clicks than it is the case with tediously acquired school knowledge." This sentiment is accurate insofar as video games tend to reward a player more frequently than non-

⁵ Yes, a philosopher without the occasional argumentative inconsistencies has always been hard to find.

⁶ Der Standard: *Computerspiele sorgen für schlechtere Schulnoten*, online available at <http://derstandard.at/1282273389492/Computerspiele-sorgen-fuer-schlechtere-Schulnoten>.

computer-mediated life ordinarily does. But what the fellow policeman overlooks is that becoming an adept player may very well be as hard and strenuous as learning algebra – what differentiates is not the level of exertion, but the way those tasks are being performed and therefore perceived. Throughout the following two sections, by looking into a specific role-playing video game and asking players about their gaming experiences, this paper will try to make out some of these processual differences and fathom why more and more people prefer to live out their wish for improvement in virtual and not in non-computer-mediated realms.

A first possible explanation to the question above could be that, and this is the second point I want to make, human rituals of training have always included the presence of unanimous entities (see Leroi-Gourhan 1980). In this regard, Sloterdijk draws on a very Latourian argument when he states that practices may function as a bridge between the dichotomic poles of culture and nature, mutually co-producing cultural and natural entities within an ever-lasting tornado of continuous performances (see Sloterdijk 2009: 25; Latour 1993). Further, if training activities are the basis of humanity and human reality can best be understood as the interplay of technosocial hybrids, then it seems quite obvious that training procedures always feature an intermingling of human and non-human actants. Accordingly, since computer and computer games have become omnipresent objects co-shaping the societal realm, it only seems consistent that humans engage in computer-mediated-settings in order to train their own or an avatar's proficiencies. If we build perfect training machineries we shouldn't wonder when people care to use them.

Thirdly and lastly, Sloterdijk makes an interesting point regarding the proclaimed ever-increasing workload of people. For him, gaining expertise is a possible way of coping with this pending overload. By actively engaging *in* work one prevents becoming dictated *by* it. I would like to pick up this argument and modify it a little bit: I think it could prove intellectually useful to read contemporary society as a network of quickly growing complexity. But since our situation has become so complex that nobody anymore can assess everything – the death of the polymath – we need certain institutions that condense reality into small, ready-to-digest appetizers. This is basically what the notion of gatekeeping in communication science tries to tell us. But if we look beyond the mass media, we might come to realize that the complexity induced crisis goes farther than what we know or not know of the world. Assumed that there is also a crisis of the training individual, how would we try to solve it? The answer is simple: By building new training authorities. Just as the mass media functions as a filter of news, modern training machineries might give back to the individual what it lost in modern-day's overly complex entanglements. If we would agree to think of video games as very elaborate training ambulances – giving life-saving dosages of exercise to the one's

looking for self-enhancement –, we might start to grasp why those inconspicuous pieces of software emit such a staggering attraction. To say it bluntly: If the structures for satisfying training experiences have gone lost in accumulations of contemporary societies, people will turn towards alternative sources for self-fulfillment, and video games might just do the trick.

It seems that with video games a mighty contender for the people's attention has entered the stage. Following, we shall take a closer look at this contestant and find out what he does better than his competitors. Therefore, we will leave the theoretical assessments behind us for a while and concentrate fully on a dense description of a particular gaming experience.

II. Approaching the Dungeon

After installing *Torchlight* on a computer, booting it for the first time and choosing to commence a new game, we may make our decision between one of three distinct character classes: a male warrior, whose expertise lies in hand-to-hand combat, a female ranger, who is an excellent marksman and uses traps to confuse and debilitate her foes, and a male alchemist, who channels some mysterious energy allowing him to attack his foes from afar. Also, we may decide on a pet, either a cat or a dog, that will accompany the hero throughout the entire game. For a role-playing game – even one based on a simplistic hack-and-slay gameplay as in the case of *Torchlight* – a choice between only three different character classes can be considered sub-standard, since similar games often come with much more complex character options, sometimes making the initial character creation a game on its own. This means that in *Torchlight* the player is not permitted to design the avatar according to his own wishes, but must take what she is offered; certainly no quality that encourage a deeper identification with the character. After choosing and naming the future hero – for a most basic gaming experience I decided on playing a warrior, naming him "Actant" and choosing a dog called "Mediator" as his companion – we may commence the game. Clicking on the start button a text is read to us meant to give a first idea about who we are and what is going on in the world of *Torchlight*:

"I have always been a wanderer. I have roamed these lands for as long as I can remember, but my blades always lead me back to conflict.

When I heard of the evils befalling Torchlight, I returned from the wilderness. Tales of madness – townsfolk slain, or missing... and a darkness, rising from the deep. It was inevitable that I was drawn to this place – my blades would not be still. So, I made the long journey.

I arrived at sunset, and while things at first seemed simple, I did not know then the shadows I would face, and the terrible power gathering far below the surface.

I would discover them in time..."

Essentially, when commencing the game, this is all the information the player gets. Even for a hack-and-slay game this storyline is very thin. After the short textual introduction, we find ourselves at the entrance of a small village – *Torchlight* – that – according to what we have gathered from the introductory text – has a problem with evil powers forming in the shadows of what lies below the surface. We briefly speak to some people: an enchanter, who may cast spells on the avatar's equipment; a traveler, who can combine certain items, making them even more powerful; a merchant, who sells health and mana potions, weapons and armors. Overall, there are about 10 NPCs (non-player characters) scattered all over the town, who might help us by giving us quests, improving our equipment or letting us trade with them. Amongst the first assignments we get are the following: A mage named Syl will pay us to find and protect her companion Brink. Vasman, a scholar of rare stones, asks us to find a piece of Gleaming Ember in the mines. Trill, a somewhat archaic-looking robot, has asked us to fight and slay a foe called Varkasser. At the beginning, those simple and linear quests are essentially the only example for a storyline included in the game. Later on, a more stringent narrative will unfold, but in regard to complexity, this storyline will win no Pulitzer price either. In order to solve any of the quests, we have to enter the mines of *Torchlight* where we will spend the most part of our journey hunting monsters and gathering items. After setting foot into the dungeon, we immediately get attacked by large spiders and strange, bluish Gollum-like creatures. Basically, to slay these monstrosities, all we have to do is approach them by pointing the mouse cursor at them and pressing the left or right mouse button. If our health or mana gets low, we drink a potion by pressing certain buttons on the keyboard or clicking at onscreen symbols using the mouse. While by default the left mouse button will trigger a straight forward attack, the right mouse button will induce a stronger, more complex attack that will cause additional damage to our enemies. For each enemy we defeat and every quest we solve, we get a certain amount of experience points. Having gathered enough of such points, we will reach a new character level, making our avatar stronger by distributing stat points to the character's attributes – such as strength, dexterity, magic and defense – and by spending skill points for special abilities like *slash attack*, an attack mode that will harm multiple foes at the same time, *soul rend*, a spell that will unleash a powerful energy blade that will attack monsters, or *shadow armor*, a spell that summons a phantasm which also will battle against nearby foes. In principle, this is what happens for the 12-20 hours until we will have mastered most of the game's challenges. As we push deeper into the dungeon, our avatar quickly gains strength and his skills become more devastating. Unfortunately, our enemies become larger, more devious and overall much more dangerous, too. From time to time we solve a quest and travel back to town using a town portal scroll, but for the most part we just crawl deeper and deeper into the dungeon and confront ever stronger, ever more frightening

enemies. There is also a journal that tracks our progress: After about four hours into the game we have explored 17 levels, solved 25 quests, defeated 3266 monsters, gathered 47711 pieces of gold and took 13718 steps. At this point, the hero's expertise had reached level 18. After 15 hours of playtime the statistics read as follows: 35 levels explored, 42 quests solved, 7456 monsters killed, 162918 gold coins gathered, 33373 steps taken. Our avatar had reached level 31.

So far, I described some of the fundamental proceedings of *Torchlight* in order to give an impression of the dynamics of the game. As it should have become clear, the game rules are very easy to grasp, not to say trivial: We slay monsters, solve quests, gather items and equipment, strengthen our avatar and keep on doing so in a basically infinite loop. But, if all is so repetitive, just more of the same, why do people keep playing? And why is playing conceived as being fun and not cumbersome work? As a result of the gaming experience, I have compiled a list of points I think could in part explain the appeal of the game. As mentioned before, these attributes or secret ingredients are not meant to represent some unshakeable truth, but should be read as mutable pieces of a complex puzzle that, if done well, may lead to a motivating gaming experience:

First, the gaming loop is not infinite. Everyone who has played through a RPG before knows that there is always some final enemy, some last foe to defeat. Accordingly, in *Torchlight* there is a final boss fight at floor 35. After this fight, the player has accomplished the main goals of the game and may, without remorse, stop playing the game. He may also start playing on another difficulty level or wander into the infinite dungeon, but what is important is that just after roughly 15 hours, the avatar will have fulfilled his legacy of becoming the town's savior. The player will then have lived through a satisfying narration of heroism that rewards him for all his efforts by allowing him to slay the final foe and liberating the townsfolk from all pending dangers.

Also, the way to achieving the game's goals is paved with loads of motivational factors and encouragements techniques: For example, there is the leveling system that will allow the player to improve an avatar's abilities on a regular basis by spending stat points and skill points. In the beginning of the game, level-ups occur rather often, later on, the number of defeated enemies necessary to gain a level will increase dramatically. Nevertheless, the player can plan a gaming session with the intention of raising his character's level a few stages. Further, the player will find a broad variety of items along the way. Not all of these items are equally easy to find. For example, in *Torchlight*, the equipment is divided into distinct classes: There are normal, enchanted, rare, unique, and set items. While you will often stumble upon normal and enchanted items, finding specific rare, unique or set items will be a much more time-consuming task. To many players, as we will see in the next section of this paper, the hunt for such unusual items is what keeps them going. Another feature that makes a dungeon crawler's heart beat faster are the different enemy types. Amongst

the over 7000 monsters Actant has slain while roaming through the endless darkness of *Torchlight* there was a huge number of rather weak enemies, cannon fodder so to speak, but, apart from these unchallenging foes, there were some stronger, more resourceful enemies that would let my warrior break out in sweat. Additionally, there was also a small group of immensely powerful, deviant monstrosities, whose defeat would require canny strategies and sophisticated tactics. While the more basic enemies only ask for rapid clicking on the mouse buttons, the stronger foes demand for a more versatile approach, thereby changing the rhythm of the game, spicing up the fights, making them more fun. A last feature that makes the repetitive task of hacking and slaying more varied are the visually distinct environments: We start of in a bluish dungeon system that is clustered with stalactites and impressive rock formations. Later, we travel through a castle-like structure, pass jungle-resembling layers and work through a hellish, lava-filled environments. If the game designers have done their job well, every layer should foster an even more dooming, even more godforsaken atmosphere than the one before. Thereby, the idea is to create a visual arc of suspense that would climax when we confront the archnemesis of the game.

Finally, I would like to elaborate on some less obvious characteristics that make for an enjoyable gaming experience: First, as mentioned before, there is the manifold rewarding system that makes sure playtime will almost always translate into immediate success. Within just a few hours, a player will be able to tune his character into a fearsome war machine that is physically strong, well equipped, and has many skills at her disposal. Theoretically speaking, computer games that incorporate such a dynamic of continuous accomplishment can be conceived as miniature training-programs that never fail to commend the trainee on her achievements. Also, *Torchlight* in particular and many similar RPGs are very forgiving games. If you take care, your avatar won't have to cross the Jordan very often. If it happens nevertheless, your punishment won't be rigorous. In *Torchlight*, after dying by losing all your health points, you will have three options: resurrect at the sight you were killed and lose some experience points and fame, resurrect at the entrance to the floor, but lose gold, or resurrect in town and lose nothing at all. While losing experience points may be a small inconvenience, losing a few coins shouldn't trouble anyone and resurrecting in town means in most cases spending two or three additional minutes to reach the place you faded out of existence. Therefore, the game encourages you to take some risks because even if you fail you won't lose much. During the interview sessions the interviewees at one point stated that to them this allowing for mistakes was a main attraction of computer games. While in real-life you would always have to carefully assess your deeds, in gaming environments, you will be allowed to take risks or even do something stupid without suffering severe consequences. If a game would punish you too strictly, this could seriously reduce the fun-factor. Lastly, an important feature seems to be the possibility to become superior to all your foes. In *Torchlight*, when an enemy is stronger than you,

you might just go off to level at some other site and come back later – fully reinvigorated – to once and for all make clear who the true master of the dungeon is. This idea also came up during the interview sessions when one of the interviewees stated that if a fight was too challenging and he would have to withdraw, he simply would go off training his avatar until he was so strong that the previously difficult fight would have become a walk in the park. Therefore, a satisfying video game should always give its player the possibility to stay ahead of his enemies by investing time and effort into a character's proficiency.⁷

By drawing on a concrete example, this section was meant to highlight some of the fundamental dynamics a game designer would have to think about when creating a RPG game. As indicated before, those specifics should not be regarded as fixed norms or rules but as variable pieces of a complex composition (Latour 2010). Only if the melody of this composition performs beautifully, the game will be a blast. But lets turn to the last part of the research project and have a look what the actual verterans have to say.

III. Asking the Players

As stated, two interviews were conducted with an overall of three interviewees sharing their thoughts. While all of the interviewees had extensive experience with computer-based role-playing gaming, two of them even were game developers themselves, although mostly working on online strategy games, not role-playing adventures. Subsequently, I would like to elaborate briefly on some of the most noteworthy findings of the two interview sessions:

First, answering the question how long they have had experience in playing video games, all of them answered that they had handheld consoles (Nintendo *Gameboys*) when they were very young. They all got their first computer when they were around 12 to 13 years old, i.e. in the second or third year of secondary school. Two of them imagined themselves as frequent players of computer games, also role-playing computer games, only one stated that his big time playing computer games was already well behind him, but that he would still play a game from time to time.

All of them were familiar with the phenomenon of leveling and questing as a fundamental characteristic of computer-bound role-playing, being an integral constituent of traditional turn-based RPGs as well as of more action-orientated hack-and-slay games and massively multiplayer online role-playing games. When asked to bring up some examples, they were easily able to do so, naming games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Gothic*, *Morrowind* or *Diablo*.

⁷ An example for a game where this went terribly wrong is *Morrowind* where enemies would adjust to the avatar's level. So, if a character was level 10 and the opponent level 12, coming back after gaining some levels would only mean that the enemy would have become stronger too, so that the balance of power would have remained unaltered.

They all agreed that questing, leveling and the hunt for items were important, if not the most important components of software-based role-playing. One interviewee even contended that offline role-playing was all about creating an addictive gaming principle and dipping it into some random fantasy world. While storyline, gameplay and graphics may all very well be crucial cornerstones of a well-performing video game, improving the characters abilities and leading the avatar against ever-stronger foes is the real core of a classical role-playing adventure. The interviewee elucidated that if story, presentation, handling and accessibility were the wrapping of a present, then character development was the real gift to be found inside the present.

Asked whether they thought the occupation of questing, leveling, etc. could be described as a repetitive task, they all approved, but added that it should be an important goal of the game developers to design reoccurring assignments as diverse and manifold as possible. They couldn't think of a role-playing game where such repetitive tasks weren't essential to the build-up of the game. Thus, done well, iterations can be an asset, not only a drawback.

Queried whether they enjoyed caring for an avatar, they answered that if the quality of the gaming experience sufficed, they did. Asked why they liked to train their avatars, they mentioned a variety of reasons: One respondent said that it was a matter of satisfying the ego. One always wants to reach the next level and therefore keeps on playing. Another interviewee added that he likes to train in order to become stronger than his enemies. Finishing them off with ease would give him pleasure, especially if the same foe gave him troubles earlier, thereby incorporating a payback mentality difficult to attain in real-life. They all concluded that it is an essential wish when engaging in computer games to gain strength in order to be superior to everyone else within the virtual realm. Hence, the wish for superiority seems to be a fundamental reason for engaging in computer-based role-playing. Further, one of the interviewees answered the question in more theoretical terms, stating that leveling and questing are tasks that go along with the wish to have "more, more, more"; thus, for him, there was a capitalistic notion inscribed into the founding mechanisms of gaming. Finally, they all agreed that the interplay of demand and satisfaction of demand was essential to the task of character development.

Asked whether they could identify with their avatars, they answered in very different ways: One person said that for him the relationship of a player to his avatar was more or less like a parent-child relationship. Another interviewee stated that to him an avatar would really become his very own alter ego with whom he could fully identify. If the avatar would get into trouble so, imaginatively, would he. In relation to this, another important issue was that the chosen perspective, i.e. first-person or third-person-perspective, seems to impinge on the way a player conceives his relationship to the avatar.

Questioned whether they experienced role-playing games as work or vacation-time, they answered that for them it was work, but work made endurable, since computer-games frequently reward players for their efforts. Also, in accordance with this thought, the two computer programmers added that this philosophy of handing-out rewards was one of their major concerns when working on their own games. They were aware that in order to keep gamers playing it is necessary to frequently give them a feedback of success, tapping the shoulder of the player, telling him "how great he is".

Further, asked whether they thought that computer-games could convey a similar amount of gratification as real-life can/does, e.g. through not-mediated-achievements like intellectual, economical or social success, one answered that not even sexual intercourse could provide him with the same amount of gratification as computer games do. The others weren't quite as euphoric, but stressed that the feeling of satisfaction occurs much more often in virtual worlds than in non-computer-mediated settings.⁸

Finally, asked whether they liked games to be of complex nature they answered that they liked their games to be as manifold as possible. One interviewee stated that the more complex a game was, the more immersed he would get. Another respondent added that complexity and a huge open world to discover were essential to him. They all concluded that complexity was important to them, but that the player should have the choice whether or not he/she would like to engage in that complexity. Thus, complexity yes, but only by choice.

There are many more ideas to stress upon and the given examples remain partly at the surface of what is to be found within those transcripts, but I would like to round-up the deliberations at this point by making some concluding annotations.

Conclusions

I do not intend to repeat all points and arguments I have made so far, but I do want to sum up some essential notions that I think could be deemed as the result of this study. Unquestionably, results are always preliminary, but I think that the following five points have been backed rather thoroughly through theoretical considerations, phenomenological observations, and interview data:

⁸ Lately, the importance of well-performing game reward systems has attracted greater awareness throughout the field of game studies. For example, the *International Journal of Computer Game Research* has issued a call for papers for a special issue under the title "Game Reward Systems", set for publication this autumn (see <http://gamestudies.org>).

First, computer games provide clear goals and the prospect that these goals can eventually be achieved. Thus, the time that is invested into the playing of a game will almost certainly result in game-related success.

Second, well-programmed computer games create worlds that are – to a certain extent – controllable and understandable. What happens within those worlds is – again to a certain degree – expectable and foreseeable, a trait that has maybe gone lost in today's overly complex non-mediated "real" world.

Third, computer-games incorporate elaborate gratification-techniques. Most games praise the player often and loudly, so that the feedback for achievements becomes much more direct than outside of game-related narratives.

Fourth, by not overly punishing the player for failures or mistakes, games allow for much more risky actions than the non-mediated world does. So, in the most extreme case, while dying within a computer game would mean pressing the "load" button to reload the game, dying in real life on the other hand would mean a permanent game over.

Fifth, by including instructive narratives and story-elements into the gameplay, computer-games allow for dramatized experiences that often lack in non-virtual settings.

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