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**MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE
PLAYING GAMES AND THE DOCUMENTARY
GENRE: SIMULATIONS OF REALITY?**

by

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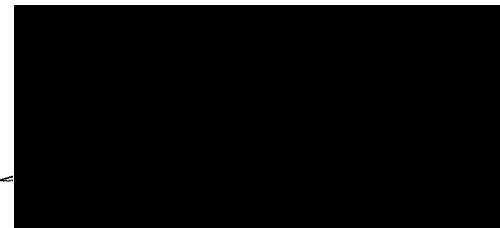
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Introduction

The world of *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* (MMORPGs) and the genre of documentary filmmaking, although seemingly disconnected, can be described as mutual 'simulations of reality.' This paper will investigate themes present in both genres, with particular attention paid to the intersection between reality and fiction. Furthermore, this paper will explore the notions of hyperreality present in my documentary, *True Gamer* (2017) investigating the subject of online role-playing games and those who engage with them, highlighting the factors that motivate play. The MMORPGs, of the late 20th and early 21st-century act as a reflection of current culture, providing an intriguing insight into the 'post-modern condition' through the echoing of contemporary societal anxieties. Moreover, the documentary genre in its very essence echoes culture and humanity, with documentaries very often made with the intention of exposing to the masses a certain situation or subject. The medium of the documentary is a form of representation; an opportunity to expose spectators to a real-life situation or phenomenon they may never have been aware of previously. MMORPGs are video games that exist in a persistent state world and are frequented by thousands or in some cases, millions of players simultaneously. These fantastical, role-playing games blend reality and fiction into both their storylines and aesthetic, and as MMORPGs are perpetually evolving, even while one player may be absent from the game, events are still transpiring across the world that may have an impact on the gamer when they resume play. Over recent years, the popularity of *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game's* (MMORPG) has spiked significantly with the likes of *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest* proving most popular. In this paper, the concept of the 'hyperreal' will be addressed concerning its place in the gaming world, exploring the writings of various philosophers including Jean Baudrillard and Michael Foucault. This paper will explore human beings innate desire for a sense of 'reality' in a world clouded by simulations and the way in which online games stand as imitations of reality. In comparison to the hyperreality of the online gaming world, this paper will address the hyperreal present in the documentary genre, including the role of the director in framing a particular subject or situation and the way in which such a

process can influence an audience of a particular opinion. The documentary genre is traditionally built upon the understanding that real life subjects are depicted in an unbiased manner. However one may argue the opposite. Furthermore, with sub-genres including 'gonzo' documentary that deliberately blend fiction and reality a growing trend, the idea of the customary impartial documentary has been turned on its head, calling upon a greater audience participation in deciphering 'truth.' With this in mind, I will be observing my practice as a documentary filmmaker and the ability I as director have in influencing an audience of a particular opinion or stance, particularly whilst producing *True Gamer* (2017) as a part of my Honours project. This paper will address my work and the aspects of hyperreality evident throughout the film, regarding its content and form. Furthermore, this paper will explore the way in which early fantasy writers including *Lord of the Rings* author, J.R.R Tolkien have morphed and shaped the online gaming world. The notion of 'escapism,' present in Tolkien's novels, is considered to be a significant aspect of online gaming and is concerned with the overlap of fiction and reality. MMORPGs provide gamers with an opportunity to immerse themselves into a fantasy world that draws upon particular aspects of reality while simultaneously defying all rational thought, a concept explored by philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Moreover, this paper will explore the factors fueling gaming addiction, 'community' in the gaming world and the vital role of communication and interaction with fellow players in MMORPGs.

Chapter 1- The 'Hyperreal'

The hyperreal of the virtual world and the documentary genre

The term 'hyperreality' as explored by philosopher Jean Baudrillard in his paper *Simulation and Simulacra* (1981), can be defined as an inability to distinguish between that which is real and that which is simply a simulation of reality, an issue of prevalence in our current technologically advanced, postmodern society. The "postmodern paradigm"¹ as explored by Kaplan and Haenlein in *The Fairyland of*

¹ Andreas M. Kaplan & Michael Haenlein, *The Fairyland of Second Life: Virtual Social Worlds and How to Use Them*, (Business Horizons, Volume 52, Issue 6, November-December, 2009), pg. 564

Second Life: Virtual Social Worlds and How to Use Them (2009), was born out of the late 1960s and 70s and marked a significant turning point in philosophy, with the likes of Baudrillard, Umberto Eco and Michael Foucault leading the pack. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, science was primarily concerned with uncovering universal truths and was later branded as the period of Modernism. However in time, the movement was questioned, and "evolutions such as nuclear weapons and environmental pollution led to a revolt against the authority reflected in the rules of the establishment, and ultimately marked the beginning of postmodernism,"² a movement defined by scepticism and antagonism towards generalisations. Postmodernists argue that we as a society have entered a new era beyond the 'Modern,' claiming that 'truth' is non-existent. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud are considered to be three of the most influential instigators of the postmodern movement, despite Marx's position as a Modernist. A product of postmodern thought is the idea of the 'hyperreal;' the assumption that all aspects of reality are at some point constructed or simulated, therefore suggesting that it is possible to build a world or situation that is "more real than real."³ This concept stands as a reflection of the current age, as 'hyperrealities' do not "assume that everyone shares the same reality, but instead simulate alternative realities in which users can perform activities they would be unable or unwilling to do in real life,"⁴ with the likes of Disneyland and Las Vegas examples of this rationality in the physical realm, a theme explored by Baudrillard.

The concept most imperative to hyperreality are the 'simulation and the simulacra.' The term 'simulation' meaning the blending of reality with fiction and as defined by Baudrillard, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality; a hyperreal."⁵ Furthermore, the 'simulacrum' denoting a copy without an original, with philosopher Gilles Deleuze describing the simulacrum as "...an image without resemblance."⁶ Baudrillard, in his paper *Simulation and Simulacra* (1981), describes the four 'phases of the image,' from representation to simulacrum, with the last of the four having "no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum." Many theorists including Baudrillard have drawn a link between the sequence of the simulacra to the

² Kaplan & Haenlein, *The Fairyland of Second Life: Virtual Social Worlds and How to Use Them*, 2009, pg. 564

³ Ibid., pg. 564.

⁴ Ibid., pg. 564.

⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), pg. 7

⁶ Gilles Deleuze & Rosalind Krauss, *Plato and the Simulacrum* (October Journal, Volume 27, Winter, 1983), pg. 7

rise of hyperreality, with contemporary society described by Baudrillard as being devoid of all aspects of reality, a complete simulation. As discussed by Nicholas Oberly in the article *Reality, Hyperreality* (2013) "...certain historical contingencies allow for the wide-scale reproduction of simulacra so that the simulations of reality replace the real, producing a giant simulacrum completely disconnected from an earlier reality; this simulacrum is hyperreality."⁷ Although numerous theorists have labelled various historical events liable for the rise of hyperreality, common themes include the rise of capitalism and consumerism. As defined by the Oxford English dictionary, reality is "the quality of being real or having an actual existence," and to exist as having "place in the domain of reality." These definitions of reality are "wholly circular, a set of signifiers reflecting back at each other lacking the grounding necessary to render meaning."⁸ As the author explains, "almost all words and signs are only able to refer back towards the internal exchange of other signs in order to produce a theoretical anchor. The slippage of reality, its elusiveness encountered even in a basic search for a definition, is an element of the hyperreal – a condition in which the distinction between the 'real' and the imaginary implodes."⁹

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard speaks of the dichotomy that exists between simulation and representation, stating that representation is born out of the principle of the "equivalence of the sign and of the real,"¹⁰ as opposed to simulation, which "envelops the edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum."¹¹ In the article *Fighting Hyperreality with Hyperreality* (2007), the author Eva Kingsepp speaks of the current age stating, "We are lost in something like a void, with no history, and as it seems no future; stuck in an endless hunt both for distraction and diversion, for consolation and something to cling to that can be of comfort in our distress."¹² Likewise, Baudrillard paints a rather austere image of this current age, suggesting that contemporary society has lost touch entirely with every aspect of reality, relying instead upon symbols and signs as a substitute for the 'real.' Baudrillard maintains that the postmodern world has "lost something very important: its connection to

⁷ Nicholas Oberly, *Reality, Hyperreality* (The University of Chicago, Theories of Media, Winter 2013), pg. 11

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 8

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1981), pg. 13

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 6

¹² Kingsepp, *Fighting Hyperreality with Hyperreality*, 2007, pg. 367

reality, to history, and the possibility of transcendence."¹³ As examined in *Fighting Hyperreality with Hyperreality* (2007), Kingsepp asserts that "there is a basic loss of referentials, as what surrounds us to an ever-increasing extent consists of pure form with no content, hyperrealities that leave nothing to the imagination. Obviously, this is a very severe existential problem and its implications are quite discomfoting."¹⁴ While discussing the virtual world the author states, "this is what is important to Baudrillard- it might be close to reality, or rather hyperreal, and your feelings are authentic (because you have them), but it is not reality. Therefore, this can never be anything but a second level-experience, a substitute for a reality that is lost to us; although for us, it takes the place of reality."¹⁵ According to Kingsepp, in the gaming world reality has been substituted for mere simulations of the 'real,' and as we rely entirely upon our observations, when reality is absent we are left longing for truth.

The documentary genre, like the world of online role-playing games, is highly concerned with Baudrillard's theory of the 'hyperreal.' Traditionally, documentary and narrative films exist as two detached genres. However, the "battle of truth"¹⁶ as examined in *Tracing the Truth Within the Blurring Borders of Fiction and Documentary* (2011), is not concerned with the dissimilarity between the documentary and the fictional film, instead it can be said that both genres attempt to convince audiences of a particular position. Traditionally, it is thought that within the documentary genre exist two types of filmmaking, direct cinema and cinéma vérité. Originating in the late 1950s, direct cinema insinuated a 'fly on the wall' approach to filmmaking and was largely concerned with both subject and spectators being unaware of the presence of the camera. Cinéma vérité on the other hand, usually involves interaction between filmmaker and subject and in some cases stylized sets. Filmmakers associated with the movement argued that the presence of camera and director is the most effective way to reveal 'truth.' The intention of direct cinema was to objectively represent what the filmmaker was witnessing, presenting a neutral, impartial account of a particular event or subject with the director the catalyst of the situation. However, the opposite may also be argued as the role of a filmmaker is to

¹³ Eva Kingsepp, *Fighting Hyperreality with Hyperreality* (Sage Journals, Volume 2, Issue 4, 2007) pg. 367

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 367

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 367

¹⁶ Hulya Onal & Meral Ozcina, *Tracing the Truth Within the Blurring Borders of Fiction and Documentary* (Journal of Yasar University, 2011), pg. 14

frame and 'direct' a subject or situation, and as soon as an individual's agenda is introduced into the representation of a subject, the work becomes a prejudiced reflection of an authentic event, a simulation of reality. Baudrillard's theory of simulation and furthermore his writings on the hyperreal is reflected within the genre of the documentary. Despite a filmmaker's intention, a documentary is fundamentally a shadow of reality, a copy of a copy.

As detailed in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), Stuart Hall observes the medium of the documentary as a means of representation, continuing to address the notion of 'truth' associated with the documentary genre, similar to the photograph. There is an innate sense of "...being both here now, looking at the image and there, then, looking at what the image represents or evokes,"¹⁷ that an audience experiences when exposed to a documentation of a situation. A documentary is a subjective, recorded version of an everyday event or situation, and whether it is intentional or not, is often influenced by the director's own personal experiences and opinions. As stated in *Leni Riefenstahl; The Seduction of a Genius* (2007), "...every decision about what the cameras should or should not record, about the nature of a take, the editing and the music, inevitably implies a particular perspective on the event in the film... The real questions are: in what way is it documentary, and what does it document?"¹⁸ In essence, the director retains the ability to highlight or represent whatever he or she deems noteworthy, resulting in a "mixture of emotion and information."¹⁹ Fundamentally, subjectivity is introduced as soon as the filmmaker decides how the every day should be presented, despite how objectively the director intends to approach the situation.

In recent years, the sub-genre of 'gonzo' documentary has risen in popularity, calling upon greater audience participation in deciphering truth and challenging traditional notions of cinema. An example of a 'gonzo' documentary that blurred the lines between reality and fiction and furthermore implored spectators to query the authenticity of the work is artist Huck Botko's series of short documentaries produced in the 1990s. Each work begins with the director explaining to the camera his failed relationship with a different member of his family. Botko continues on to explain that for each showcased family member, he would be baking them a particular type of

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1997) pg. 85

¹⁸ Bach, *Leni Riefenstahl; The Seduction of a Genius* (2007) pg. 65

¹⁹ Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), pg. 83

dessert as a 'gift.' Botko proceeds to make the desserts, whether it be a baked Alaska or a cheesecake, yet deliberately tampers with each desert as a form of his own karma for the wrongs inflicted upon him by each family member. For example, in the short, title *Baked Alaska* (1997), Botko happens upon road kill while travelling to his mothers home in Yosemite National Park, stopping on the side of the road to scrape remnants of the rotting animal into the bowl he will be using to bake the desert for his mother. The camera continues to role as the filmmaker presents the desert to his mother who proceeds to consume the gift. It is unclear as to whether or not what the audience is viewing is genuine or not, however, the works sparked outrage amongst critics and audiences alike. In the subsequent years, many theories have arisen, with some choosing to believe that Botko simply replaced the deserts with untainted sweets once the camera had stopped rolling. However, the filmmaker has neither confirmed nor denied these rumours. Although shot in a documentary style, *Baked Alaska* (1997) raises questions regarding legitimacy, disrupting the role of spectator and calling upon audiences to decipher truth. Botko's collection of documentaries as a whole pushes the boundaries of cinema and undoubtedly draws upon the concept of hyperreality in the documentary genre.



Figure 1. Film still from *Baked Alaska* (1997)



Figure 2. Film still from *Baked Alaska* (1997)

Concerned with spectatorship and authenticity, 'gonzo' documentaries, or "hyperreal narratives"²⁰ as explored by Stefan Popescu in his paper *Digital Media and the Emergence of Contemporary Film Subgenres* (2013), call upon audiences to decipher truth in the information being conveyed to them, challenging traditional ideas of audience participation in cinema.²¹ Gonzo documentaries challenge traditional cinematic notions with the storytelling transpiring "among the audience rather than from the author; it's the rumours, myths and little bits of other narratives *rhizomatically* spread over a compressed time and space that we put together and form our own narratives from."²² Moreover, the 'gonzo' documentary signifies an age when one can completely regulate one's own image through social media, "allowing us to re-write our own narratives, cultural mythologies and become the characters in our own representation of reality to an endless audience."²³ Casey Affleck's, *I'm Still Here* (2010) is an example of a gonzo film that muddles the distinction between reality and fantasy, as well as touching upon themes of representation of self while operating out of the traditional documentary format. Set in contemporary America, the film documents the announcement of Hollywood actor, Joaquin Phoenix's retirement from acting and follows the subsequent months as the celebrity pursues a new career as a rap artist. A critique of scripted television shows and their ability to fool audiences of their authenticity, the work is an impressive example of a 'hyperreal narrative.' Throughout production, Phoenix remained in character for all public appearances, successfully fooling critics and spectators. It was not until after the film's release that Affleck and Phoenix announced the staged nature of the film. *I'm Still Here*, successfully questioned the authenticity of the documentary genre, challenging the traditional role of the spectator by calling upon audiences to discern truth. As a 'gonzo' documentary, the work "is a clear comment on the "real" in postmodern society, 'a direct result of the immediacy of digital media and the ability to constantly re-image/re-imagine our subjective selves as a general process of social and cultural interaction."²⁴ It is evident that the distinctions that once existed between reality and fiction, especially in the online social realm are no longer clear, with the ability to alter the perception of oneself a feasible reality. This concept is reflective of not only the documentary genre but furthermore the virtual world, with

²⁰ Stefan Popescu, *Digital Media and the Emergence of Contemporary Film Subgenres*, (Journal of Media Arts Culture, Volume 10 Number 1, 2013), pg. 6

²¹ Ibid., pg. 7

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., pg. 11

²⁴ Ibid.

the creation of avatars and characters closely linked to this idea, providing an opportunity to rewrite one's own identity.



Figure 3. Film still from *I'm Still Here* (2010).

Kristoffer Borgli's *Drib* (2017) is another example of a contemporary 'hyperreal narrative,' showcasing a deliberate overlapping of reality and fantasy in an attempt to challenge audiences in their understanding of truth. The film introduces spectators to Norwegian performance artist Amir Asgharnejad who orchestrated a number of viral videos in which he antagonised random people on the street and consequently suffered severe beatings as a result. In 2014, Asgharnejad was approached by an American energy drink company who hired the artist to replicate his hostile fights as a part of a outlandish ad campaign. However, the proposal had not been fully approved by the advertising agency and furthermore, the agency was unaware that each of Asgharnejad's fights had been staged with all of the assailants paid for their participation. Eventually the campaign was cancelled, however Asgharnejad along with 'mockumentary' filmmaker, Borgli decided to recreate the events by producing a scripted, non-fiction film. With Asgharnejad playing himself in a scripted movie about his own real-life experiences, the work plays with the concept of blended reality and fiction, calling upon a higher level of audience participation in deciphering truth.



Figure 4. Film still of *Drib* (2017)

The fragile balance that exists between subjectivity and objectivity in the documentary genre is a concern of my own as a documentary filmmaker. Regarding my own practice, I as the director have a profound influence on the way in which my subjects are framed and perceived by the audience, mainly as I produce my observational documentary, *True Gamer* (2017) as a part of my Honours year. *True Gamer* (2017) is concerned with the world of *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* and those who engage with them. I have intended to construct a purely, objective work, however as discussed previously in this paper, the lines between fiction and reality are at risk of intersecting due to not only the subject matter but the medium itself. As examined earlier, the genre of documentary filmmaking is traditionally concerned with ideas of authenticity and observation. However, the orchestration of a scene, the way in which a subject is framed, the footage that is included in the final cut of the film and the leading questions that are put to a subject all alter the legitimacy of a documentary in some way or another. As director, I have carefully chosen my subjects, framed the space in which interviews have been conducted, and pieced together footage to construct an engaging documentary. My work does not overtly play with the line that exists between fantasy and reality like the films of gonzo directors. However, it can be said that *True Gamer* (2017) is still very much concerned with notions of hyperreality as explored by

Baudrillard. As examined, the very nature of an observational documentary, being a recording of a true-life event renders it a biased depiction, a simulation of reality.

In conclusion, the documentary film genre and the realm of *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* (MMORPGs), are both decidedly concerned with notions of simulation and hyperreality as explored by Baudrillard. It can be argued that the documentary traditionally thought of as a medium of truth is, in fact, a shadow of reality and despite the intentions of the filmmaker will undoubtedly contain some essence of bias. Furthermore, with the rise of the gonzo genre, customary ideas of spectatorship in film are being questioned, with the intersection between fiction and reality being played upon. Moreover, MMORPGs blend aspects of reality with fantasy to construct secondary worlds; enhanced 'simulations' of real life. The next chapter of this paper, *Online Gaming as Escapist Fantasy*, will explore the impact of the fantasy genre on MMORPGs, with the virtual providing an opportunity for escape from the 'real' world.

Chapter 2- Online Gaming as Escapist Fantasy

Suspending disbelief and the disenchantment of the world

Like the 'real world,' online worlds are shared by a multitude of players, inhabiting the virtual space simultaneously. These 'persistent' worlds continue to exist twenty-four hours a day and furthermore promote a unique social structure, economy and ecology that evolves and changes over time.²⁵ *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* (MMORPG) are computer-based, simulated environments, known for their "peculiar combination of designed "escapist fantasy" and emergent "social realism."²⁶ These video games allow individuals through self-created digital

²⁵ Aupers, *Better Than the Real World: On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games* (2007), pg. 19

²⁶ Constance A. Steinkuehler & Dmitri Williams, *Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as "Third Places"* (Journal of Computer Mediated Communication Volume 11, Issue 4, July, 2016), pg. 6

characters or "avatars"²⁷, to interact with one another. It is imperative to note the direct link between *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* (MMORPGs) and the *Multi-User Dungeons* (MUDs) of the 1970s and 80s. Before the invention of the term MMORPG, games of this nature were merely referred to as graphical MUDs as despite being almost entirely text-based, MUDs involved roleplaying, combat amongst players and online chat. One of the first and most famous MMORPG to emerge was the game *Ultima Online* developed by Origin Systems in 1997, a fantasy role-playing game set in the universe, *Ultima*. The first 'persistent' online game, *Ultima Online* was created as a social experiment, having to overcome issues previously unheard of including the technical challenge of the games multiplayer nature. Furthermore, the task of making players feel as if they were the centre of attention similar to their previous experience in single player games was now a reality. *Ultima Online* paved the way for a whole new genre of online gaming, with Sony's *EverQuest*, released in 1999. The first commercially successful MMORPG to utilise a three-dimensional game engine, *Everquest* has had a significant influence on subsequent releases over the past eighteen years.

At their core, *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* are profoundly inspired by the fantasy genre and in particular the works of authors including 20th-century novelist and poet, J.R.R Tolkien. Tolkien was the first to dissect the thesis of a "willing suspension of disbelief,"²⁸ defined by the eighteenth-century philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a readiness to abandon one's critical faculties, to seek truth in that which is deemed unbelievable; a sacrifice of logic for the sake of enjoyment. The term was coined in 1817 when Coleridge suggested that if a writer could combine "human interest and a semblance of truth"²⁹ with a fantastic tale, the reader would ultimately suspend judgment regarding the unlikelihood of the story. The phrase came to be used more loosely in the late 20th century, suggesting that the burden of 'suspending disbelief' was the responsibility of the reader rather than the author. According to Tolkien, the author's position is to not only create a work of fiction but rather construct realistic 'secondary worlds.' With more than 93% of

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 8

²⁸ Stef Aupers, *Better Than the Real World: On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games* (Degruyter, Volume 48, Issue 3-4, January, 2007), pg. 13

²⁹ Ibid., pg. 4

MMORPG's based on the fantasy genre and the work of Tolkien,³⁰ it can be said that role playing games transform "passive consumers into active inhabitants."³¹

As stated in the journal article, *Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as "Third Places"* (2016), "In a setting of wizards and elves, dwarfs and knights, people save for homes, create basket indices of the trading market, build relationships of status and solidarity, and worry about crime."³² Often these avatars bear no resemblance to the player's real-life identity, thus allowing the player a safe space to engage with individuals "without entangling obligations and repercussions: it is the so-called "magic circle" of the game."³³ Virtual worlds are designed to reflect reality, which in turn may encourage players to view the online domain as 'real' places or 'real' worlds where they live parallel lives."³⁴ The appeal lies with the answers provided in the virtual that are not apparent in the 'real' world. As stated by Aupers in *Better Than the Real World: On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games* (2007), "Although its content should break with reality (and therefore be appealing), its form, structure and detail should be 'derived from reality' and reflect 'the inner consistency of reality.' Paradoxically then, a convincing fantasy world should be based on science, technique and an imitation of real world principles."³⁵

As affirmed by Aupers and Houtman, in *Reality Sucks: On Alienation and Cybergnosis*, (2005) "...cyberspace simply cannot be compared to real-life physical space, because the absence of gravity, time, and place produces almost unlimited opportunities: You enter a completely different world. The rules of that world are much more malleable than the rules of this particular world."³⁶ Furthermore, the authors continue to describe the virtual space as an "otherworldly experience."³⁷ As a result, players may begin to find themselves in elevated, god-like positions as one is required to wholly construct their own world, character, and rules to live by, for "when

³⁰ Aupers, *Better Than the Real World: On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games*, pg. 18

³¹ Ibid.

³² Steinkuehler & Williams, *Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as "Third Places"* (2016), pg. 18

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Aupers, *Better Than the Real World: On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games* (2007), pg. 23

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Stef Aupers & Dick Houtman, *Reality Sucks: On Alienation and Cybergnosis*, (Concilium: International Journal of Theology, 2005), pg. 11

³⁷ Ibid., pg. 12

you pop into cyberspace there is nothing there unless you bring it in. You have to be the magical agent, the god, in that environment for anything to happen.”³⁸ In the digital world, the restrictions of gravity and geography are virtually non-existent. The highly successful and widely played MMORPG, *World of Warcraft* promotes a sense of enticing escapism with the games biography reading, “*a world awaits ... Descend into the World of Warcraft and join thousands of mighty heroes in an online world of myth, magic and limitless adventure [...]. An infinity of experiences await. So what are you waiting for? If you’ve ever felt like you wanted to step out of yourself, your life, into one that was full of fantasy and adventure – virtual worlds offer you this opportunity...*”



Figure 5: Screen grab of *World of Warcraft* game.

Philosopher Max Weber is known as a founding architect of modern social science alongside the likes of Karl Marx. Weber’s 18th-century thesis on the ‘disenchantment of the world,’ was concerned with the state of humanity as a result of the Enlightenment, following the dismissal of religion and superstition, due to the rise of modern scientific theory. Weber’s concept of ‘disenchantment’ was concerned with the opposition that exists between science and religion in contemporary society. The

³⁸Aupers & Houtman, *Reality Sucks: On Alienation and Cybergnosis*, 2005, pg. 34

basis of Weber's argument was that the Christian ethics of the sixteenth century signified the decline of "pre-modern forms of religion such as mysticism, polytheism, animism and, above all, magic."³⁹ Furthermore, the rise of science and technology indicated the second phase in the evolution of 'disenchantment' in the modern world. Despite the advantages of progression in science and technology, it can be argued that with the evolution of scientific knowledge comes an understanding that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces," with all questions answerable through calculated thought. According to philosopher Michael Foucault however, the Enlightenment did not signify progress but instead was merely another apparatus of power and knowledge. Foucault is famous for theorising that what human beings deem as Western growth is just another form of domination and control, as we replace one experience of reality with another, with knowledge and truth a kind of power.

In the 1960s and 70s technology and spirituality were perceived as being counter-cultural, "driven by a desire to escape modern society and increase one's own independence and liberty,"⁴⁰ as discussed by Aupers and Houtman in *'Reality Sucks: On Alienation and Cybergnosis*. Progressively, technology is being perceived as far more liberating than isolating with societal expectations to be blamed for alienation. The yearning for self-spirituality must be accompanied by the rejection of social institutions, with "everything that is enforced or imposed by another party that opposes one's natural behaviour"⁴¹ to be vetoed. With the rejection of role expectations and the move towards liberation and freedom, the world of cyberspace is becoming far more desirable. According to Aupers in *Better Than the Real World* (2007), it is understandable that more and more people in the modern world are seeking answers in the New Age movement, and furthermore the world of online gaming where "a disenchanted society is exchanged for an enchanted one."⁴² The online gaming world, complete with avatars, dreamlike creatures, elves and dragons essentially exist as a diversion from reality, a space where one can adopt whatever form they desire, something unfeasible in the 'real' world. As stated by Aupers, "... a significant number of people think of Norrath [the world of Ever-quest] as their main place of residence, they treat the game world as their life world." From this

³⁹ Aupers, *Better Than the Real World: On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games* (2007), pg 22

⁴⁰ Aupers & Houtman, *Reality Sucks: On Alienation and Cybergnosis*, 2005, pg. 18

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Aupers, *Better Than the Real World: On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games* (2007), pg. 28

perspective, players are hardly 'suspending disbelief' when visiting these parallel fantasy worlds. Most players do not perceive the online worlds as fiction but as real places: they think of it as real places; they talk about it as real places and act in conformity with these convictions."⁴³ Online worlds are so desired as they provide experiences and explanations to life that do not exist in the 'real' world.

In conclusion, it can be said that avid gamers and those engaging with MMORPGs on a regular basis are at risk of becoming caught somewhere between that which is real and that which is simulated. In some cases, 'real life' is viewed as unsatisfactory and alienating. However, within these 'secondary worlds' one may elect to be whomever they desire, with online role-playing games posing no limitations to the imagination. The following chapter of this paper, *The Appeal of the Virtual* will address the motivating factors behind online role-playing and the vital role of communication and interaction within the gaming world.

Chapter 3- The Appeal of the Virtual

Factors Motivating MMORPG Addiction

As discussed previously, *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* (MMORPGs) exist as 'secondary worlds,' providing a space for social interaction within the cyber domain. Being accessible directly from one's room makes MMORPGs all the more appealing as they accommodate for individual schedules; providing a safe space for players to explore a whole new world of social interactions, relationships and environments. Typically, online gamers are perceived as "socially negative"⁴⁴ and the demographic "remains firmly within a youth subculture,"⁴⁵ however, research has shown gaming to be spread across a variety of ages, with a large proportion of online gamers over the age of forty. As stated in *Breaking the*

⁴³ Aupers, *Better Than the Real World: On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games* (2007), pg. 17

⁴⁴ Mark D. Griffiths, Mark N.O. Davies, and Darren Chappell, *Breaking the Stereotype: The Case of Online Gaming* (Cyber Psychology & Behavior, Volume 6, Issue 1, July, 2004), pg. 3

⁴⁵ Ibid., pg. 5

Stereotype: The Case of Online Gaming (2004), the “stereo-type of the typical online player being a socially withdrawn young male with limited sex role identity appears to be misplaced.”⁴⁶ In contemporary society, online gaming is no longer seen to be exclusively part of youth culture but rather a far more mainstream activity. Moreover, MMORPGs encourage, and in many ways, require that players interact socially with each other, feeding the universal human need for interpersonal connections.

There are certain aspects of *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* that promote addiction in users. MMORPGs have no pre-defined ends, meaning there is no ultimate end goal. With expansion packs being released every couple of years, players are continuously provided with new areas for exploration, new tasks to complete and new characters to develop, making for a highly addictive gaming genre. Furthermore, in the case of role-playing games, rewards are set on variable schedules. Players can never be sure of how long it will take to receive a substantial award; sometimes it may only take one attempt, the next it may take ten. This model of reward schedule encourages players to engage in the game for a far more extended period, with slot machines operating under the same principle of variable ratio schedules. Furthermore, when commencing a new MMORPG, a player’s character begins at a fundamental level with primary attributes in the arena of experience, strength, intelligence and powers. At the outset, it may take very little time for a player to reach the next level of play, promoting a sense of immediate reward. However, with each consecutive level, more play-time is required to progress in the game. By this point, however, the player has adapted to the superior effort necessary to complete quests and gain rewards. Furthermore, MMORPGs require a long-term commitment from players, with sessions lasting for several hours.

Often, MMORPGs are associated with anti-social behaviour; however, it is important to note the vital role communication amongst participants plays in such games. Text-based interaction is not limited to just one channel but multiple, simultaneous ones, both public and private. Discussion proves incredibly crucial to “navigate the virtual world’s diverse challenges but is the very fodder from which individuals create and maintain relationships of status and solidarity and, in part, in-game community and cultural norms.”⁴⁷ As stated in *Social Interactions in Massively Multiplayer Online*

⁴⁶ Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell, *Breaking the Stereotype: The Case of Online Gaming*, pg. 3

⁴⁷ Aupers, *Reality Sucks: On Alienation and Cybergnosis*, 2005, pg. 19

Role Playing Gamers (2007), "MMORPGs are very (virtually) socially interactive, but little social interaction in the real world is needed when playing them..."⁴⁸ The *Multi-User Dungeons* (MUDs) of the 1970s and 80s were the first example of online social interaction, allowing a wide variety of people to meet and interact amidst a fairly unique and complex online environment. However, with the introduction of MMORPGs, a rather large proportion of the population now can intermingle with one another at any point in the day from any part of the globe, with designers purposefully building these games to revolve around social interaction and communication between users. As stated by Cole and Griffiths in, *Social Interactions in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Gamers* (2007), "the social nature of most recent games has important consequences for their design,"⁴⁹ continuing to state, "designers want to promote interactions among the players, as they recognise that these encounters are essential to the success of their virtual worlds."⁵⁰ According to Michael Foucault, the identity of power and knowledge also contains a philosophical meaning, in the sense that what counts as knowledge always depends on social relations. Foucault concludes that knowledge is ever produced and communicated socially, a vital aspect of online role-playing games. Activities including avatar development and combat are already present in single player games, as "not all participants in a multiplayer environment are here to socialise."⁵¹ However, as the authors continue to explain, what proves most successful about MMORPGs is the concept of a shared experience due to, "the collaborative nature of most activities" and furthermore, "the reward of being socialised into a community of gamers and acquiring a reputation within it."⁵² In the case of *EverQuest*, the missions users are required to complete to progress in the game, are purposefully created to be virtually impossible to achieve as an individual, and therefore only achievable with the help of one or multiple other players.

MMORPGs can be considered as some of the most sociable arenas in the online world, taking the form of a narrative heavy, fantasy worlds with "their own unique, and often highly sophisticated, virtual-cultural structures and practices- in which users

⁴⁸ Helena Cole & Mark D. Griffiths, *Social Interactions in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Gamers* (Cyber Psychology and Behaviour, Volume 10, Issue 4, August, 2007), pg. 575

⁴⁹ Cole & Griffiths, *Social Interactions in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Gamers*, 2007, pg. 20

⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 21

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., pg. 23

are required to work with each other to cope with the rigours of virtual existence.”⁵³ As stated in *Social Interactions in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Gamers (2007)*, “virtual gaming may allow players to express themselves in ways they may not feel comfortable doing in real life because of their appearance, gender, sexuality and age. MMORPGs offer a place where teamwork, encouragement and fun can be experienced.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, MMORPGs encourage the forging of “friendships and personal empowerment”⁵⁵ due to consistent interactions with groups and individuals. Players are required to cooperate with other users to complete tasks as missions call for a variety of characters with different skills, teaching the importance of teamwork. MMORPGs are spaces that allow users to experiment with aspects of the material world in the virtual domain, with real-life emotions and events such as wars, betrayal, friendship, romance, marriages and funerals transpiring in the cyber world. Furthermore, the desire for wealth and power in the real world are also present in video games. As stated by Nic Crowe in the article, *MMORPGs, Young People and Fantasy Based Social Play*, “as one amasses more virtual wealth (by spending more time playing and completing tasks), the virtual wealth translates into greater power, control, respect, influence, status, and purchasing power - which are obviously very seductive pursuits.”⁵⁶

Regarding my work, *True Gamer (2017)* the desire for an ‘escape’ into a secondary world is evident. Throughout the documentary, each subject outlines the reasons as to why they became invested in the world of *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games*, and the factors that fostered their addiction. One subject explains that aspects of the real world frightened him, yet within the safe confines of the online gaming world, he could express himself in whichever way he chose. Furthermore, themes of alienation in the ‘real world’, the desire for connection with likeminded people and the thrill of competition and reward are present throughout the film. *True Gamer (2017)*, is an interesting insight into the effect of the ‘hyperreal’ on ones psyche, with the world of fantasy sometimes a far more liberating place to reside. Evident in *True Gamer (2017)*, factors motivating play are far and varied,

⁵³ Nic Crowe, “It’s Like My Life but More, and Better!”— *Playing with the Cathaby Shark Girls: MMORPGs, Young People and Fantasy-Based Social Play*, (International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, Volume 16, 2011) pg 205

⁵⁴ Cole & Griffiths, *Social Interactions in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Gamers*, 2007, pg. 45

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Crowe, “It’s Like My Life but More, and Better!”— *Playing with the Cathaby Shark Girls: MMORPGs, Young People and Fantasy-Based Social Play*, 2011, pg. 206

however as discussed previously in this paper, the very nature of the genre being a fusion of both fantasy and reality is perhaps the biggest draw card of the MMORPG.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the realm of online role-playing games and the documentary film genre, although dissimilar in their form, are both concerned with notions of the 'hyperreal.' As discussed by philosopher Jean Baudrillard, postmodern society is struggling to identify truth in a world bombarded by copies of the 'real.' Mere simulations of actuality, *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games* and the documentary genre can only ever exist as a shadow of the 'real.' The world of MMORPGs is a continually shifting organism, finding its origins in the escapist fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien and technologically evolving from the *Multi-User Dungeon* (MUD) games of the 1970s and 80s. Online role-playing games uniquely combine aspects of reality with fantasy, resulting in immersive secondary worlds. In addition, the documentary genre, like the virtual world is highly concerned with notions of 'hyperreality' and 'simulation' as theorised by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Supposing that a documentary cannot be objective, and furthermore due to its very nature being a recorded version of an event, it can be concluded that a documentary is in essence, a simulation of the 'real,' possessing the ability to influence audiences of a particular stance on a subject or situation. Moreover, 'hyperreal narratives' or 'gonzo' documentaries explore the blurred lines existing between reality and fiction; highlighting the role of both filmmaker and spectator in conveying and deciphering authenticity. For myself, as a filmmaker, this is point of concern as I produce an observational documentary, *True Gamer* (2017) a perceptive insight into the 'hyperreal' of the online gaming world. Although my intention is to produce an impartial account of the lives of various online gamers, it is imperative to note that the moment an individual, namely the filmmaker, influences the depiction of a subject or situation; the work undoubtedly transforms into a biased reflection of an event, a unification of both reality and fiction. As discussed previously

in this paper, it can be concluded that the virtual, existing as a shadow of 'reality,' provides opportunities and answers unachievable in the 'real' world. With the prospect of endless exploration at one's fingertips and the ability to construct one's very own world from scratch, it is no wonder gamers habitually adopt god-like positions in their constructed 'secondary worlds.' Online domains such as Norrath of the game *EverQuest* or the Warcraft Universe of *World of Warcraft* prove exceptionally appealing in the sense that they are not restricted by geography, time and gravity. As examined earlier in this paper, online role-playing games, like the genre of fantasy literature provide an otherworldly experience, calling upon users to 'suspend disbelief,' a concept explored by philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge. MMORPGs act as an enhanced version of reality, combining both that which we know to be real and aspects of fantasy. As a result, users are called upon to oppose incredulity and engage with the online realm. Concerning the writings of philosopher Max Weber, it can be concluded that the online realm lies in opposition to the idea of the 'disenchantment of the world,' as the virtual provides answers not possible through calculation and science. It may be concluded then, that the motivation for gaming and perhaps the catalyst for gaming addiction is a result of one's desire to escape from the 'real world.' MMORPGs feature a particularly unique social structure that is reliant on user interaction for progression in the game. The encouragement of collaboration between gamers promotes a particular type of online culture, contradicting the typical solitary, socially awkward gamer stereotype. Online gaming allows an alternative to face-to-face interaction, encouraging the forging of relationships through less conventional means.

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