

Arachne challenges Minerva: The Spinning-out of Long Narrative in *World of Warcraft* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

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In Ovid's epic poem *Metamorphoses* (completed around 8 A.D.), a mortal woman named Arachne challenges Minerva, the goddess of warriors, crafts and wisdom, to a duel. Fuelled by hubris, Arachne proclaims that she can weave a tapestry of far superior quality than any produced by the proud goddess. The two set about the task, their 'labour lightened by pleasure' (2004, 212). Minerva depicts her defeat of Neptune in a dispute over a claim on a city¹; the other gods 'look on in amazement' while she is crowned by victory (2004, 213). Surrounding the central image are four smaller vignettes showing contests between mortals and gods: in each the mortal is punished for their audacity. Arachne's tapestry takes as its main subject matter the seduction of Europa by Jove in the guise of a bull; 'the bull and the sea were convincingly real' (2004, 215). Other mortal women seduced by the gods are also shown (Leda, Asterie, Antiope, Danae, Erigon – plus others, the list of seductions depicted is long). Such was Arachne's skill, '...not even the goddess of Envy could criticize weaving like that' (2004, 216).

¹ What would become known as Athens after Minerva's Greek name Athena.

Minerva is thrown into a furious rage: she 'ripped up the picture betraying the gods' misdemeanors' (2004, 216), struck Arachne several times on the head and transformed her into a spider, condemned forever to weave.

This story can be regarded as expressing two opposing approaches to conceiving long narrative in epic poetry. Minerva's characterizes through her tapestry the heroic epic mode where violence is masked by derring-do, the gods are noble and majestic and their behaviour predictable, making for a fixed and rule-based world order. Because of its structured simplicity, it is easy to imagine what her work looks like. Arachne's depiction, by contrast, is distinctly 'unepic'. Her treatment of the gods is disdainful and they appear feckless; the subject matter provides a critical comment on the lack of agency afforded to mortals who become playthings for the gods. The tapestry itself is chaotic, with transformative elements, indeed so much so that it becomes difficult to picture her tapestry as it is so complex and multi-threaded. Woven into Arachne's tapestry is the view of Ovid's poetic contemporaries that the classical heroic epic form was stultified, had an outmoded view of the gods as forcefully real rather than personifications and which diminished human agency (indeed it has been claimed that *Metamorphosis* marks the transition from myth as religious in function to myth as literature). And, as suits my purpose in this essay, it may be said that Arachne's tapestry emblemizes the way that *Metamorphoses* itself transforms the values, conventions and concomitant world-view of the established epic form.

Using the duel between Arachne and Minerva as an interpretational frame, the object of this chapter is to explore ways in which two recent 'epic' texts, the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (2005-present), weave their particular long narratives. Resulting perhaps from the way that contemporary popular culture's romance with the heroic is very often tempered by a relativized and liberal world-view, each can be said to have both Arachnian and Minervan qualities. Read within these terms, it becomes possible to identify how these epic

texts share certain formal and structural characteristics. Yet some significant differences also emerge. It is important to account for both. The long narratives of these texts are shaped and engage us differently in a number of respects in accord with the particular properties of their media platforms (television and computer-based game).

Weaving World, Form and Narrative

Long narrative is not a new phenomenon: epic poetry is one of the oldest literary forms with ancient examples such as *Gilgamesh*, of which twelve stone tablets written between 669-653BC comprise the fullest existing example, and *The Odyssey*, said to have been written down in 800-600BC. Both these examples appear to be a collection of products of an oral tradition rationalized through single authorship into a unified and linear story (the latter is not the case with *Metamorphosis* which can be described as episodic in form). The epic format has stood the test of time, demonstrating continued cultural value: *Nibelungenlied* is a widely-known medieval example as is *Beowulf*, later examples include John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), its sequel *Paradise Regained* (1671) and John Keats' *Hyperion* (1818). Each use deliberately the scope, metre and length of the traditional epic form to lend gravity to their subject matter (if rejecting in some cases their pagan grounding). Prose-based epics appeared during the medieval period and in this category we might include, as a recent entry into the canon, JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (originally published in three volumes in 1954 and 1955) and, through a modernist frame, Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Long narrative is not the sole preserve of 'high' myth-based literature, however. Aspects of the epic—thematic and structural—find their way into fantasy-based long narratives that populate recent CGI-informed media. In *World of Warcraft* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* the heroic aspects of the epic are nonetheless co-present and often juxtaposed with the quotidian sometimes to dramatic and/or comic effect.

Beginning with the serialised fiction in magazines and newspapers of the 19th century and consolidated later in comic books and the 'new' popular media of cinema, radio and television, and after shedding its ties in many cases with the heroic and archaic myth, the long narrative accrued a new lease of vigorous life in the domain of the popular. In what might seem very distant from the epic poem, soap opera and serials provide perhaps the most widely consumed long narratives—the trend extending into literary series like JK Rowling's Harry Potter (the first of which was published in 1997). It is pertinent here to understand something of the serial form as it will inform my investigation of the similarities and differences between the structure, delivery and use of long narrative in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *World of Warcraft*. Glen Creeber (2004) argues that the television series has moved from the tendency to have one coherent story within any one episode to a mode that resembles more the practice established in soap opera where story arcs stretch across multiple episodes. Michael Z. Newman has said that the practice of retaining some story coherence within an episode has not disappeared however because it works to retain a more casual audience for shows, important for advertising revenues. As such, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* uses a combination of both. There are long story arcs, spanning a whole season or even beyond, but many episodes have discrete, self-contained, story lines. This show spanned seven seasons, with most seasons running to 22 episodes. As the show became assured of a committed audience, and to encourage loyalty, increasingly longer story arcs appeared that gave greater scope for character and 'world' development. The shift becomes apparent in season three with developments arising from the increasingly conflicted relationship between the good and bad slayers: Buffy and Faith.

The transition to character-based long narrative in television series did not occur in isolation, and should be regarded in the context of a more widespread trend to embrace long narrative in popular culture (the reasons for which are discussed below). Included within this trend is the emergence of long narrative in fantasy-based role-playing videogames as well as examples from other genres of

videogames. Unlike soap opera, many videogames and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* draw on some core aspects of the epic form which inform their particular engagement with long narrative. Dovetailing with the more obvious presence of heroic deeds and supernatural entities, it was the invocation in those ancient tales of a fantasy 'world' that provides a key for unlocking the way these later texts construct, deliver and make use of long narrative.

It is a common attribute of fantasy fiction that story events take place in a developed world rather than simply in a setting. For fans 'world'² needs no definition, which probably means that its collective meaning accumulates as an individual becomes more knowledgeable about the genre. A fictional world is governed often by a set of organising features that afford it a specific character and coherence (world as 'gestalt', because of its unifying function). These organising features might be geographical, temporal, social, political, cultural, technological (magic included where it is used in practical and agentic sense), metaphysical, historical or 'racial' (meaning the categories of living beings found in the world).

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is set in the real³ world but augments it on the basis that magic and the supernatural exist; various hell dimensions are co-present with the seemingly 'normal' real world of which most humans are happily unaware. As such the show's world is defined primarily by its fantastical metaphysics, much in the manner of Classical myth. Other worlds are far less wedded to the real world, at least in visual terms. While there are seas and continents, lakes and forests, towns and villages, *World of Warcraft's* cartoonish

² In science fiction and role-play circles a fictional 'world' is often termed the 'verse', short for universe.

³ The real world is perhaps too uncomplicated a term to use here in an unqualified way, given that our experience of the 'real' world can be considered 'virtual' and fantasmatic (because of the way that 'seeing' the world is mediated by the brain and eye). I refer the reader to Michel Foucault's paper 'Heterotopia' where he makes this point. I use the term here however in a structuralist sense, the 'real world' being marked off from 'fictional' worlds which are, at least ostensibly, meant to be consumed as entertaining fancy. At the same time it is crucial to acknowledge that virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life* have very real social and economic dimensions.

graphical qualities and pervasive fantastical mise-en-scene means that it is not meant to be taken as the world that we inhabit in everyday life. The particular character of these two screen-based worlds is a composite of a range of defining fantastical and familiar features that are underpinned by the different ways these are realised in formal and media-specific terms.

Within fantasy-based fiction the character of a 'world' is bound intimately to long narrative. This is the case with both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *World of Warcraft*, although the delivery and structure of their narratives are rendered quite differently. Core to this is the fact that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is designed to be consumed as television and *World of Warcraft* as an online game (with rules and a set of winning conditions) and social space in which players have agency and presence. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is set in Sunnydale, a mid-sized Californian town, and in the (then) present day. As well as the usual features one would expect of a town of this type--a Mall, a club where the gang hangs out, a school, suburbs etc, Sunnydale is situated on a 'hellmouth', a portal to a hell dimension that, although mostly closed, attracts all manner of demonic beings, vampires, magic-users and supernatural events. (There are other hellmouths around the world, including one in Cleveland and there are any number of hell dimensions; *World of Warcraft* also has hell dimensions, the Twisting Nether and Outland.) In using as the basis for its world a type of magic realism (magic exists in what viewers are asked to take as the real world), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is able to mix together elements that are strongly coded generically as fantasy (gothic set pieces, heroic 'to the death' battles, vampires etc) with aspects of the real, quotidian world (everyday problems of being a high school teenager particularly relationships with others and the frequent use of distinctly unepic, humorous, speech: 'I'm totally her arch-nemesis'). This mixture emblemises the Arachnian way that this show transforms and hybridises diverse genres (soap, horror, serial) and the way that supernatural forces transform and change the world and its characters. The weaving of the supernatural, the epic and the quotidian supplements this, defining the world and generating potentialities for a

range of possible storylines and dramatic tensions. There are two main, if interrelated, aspects that propagate the show's longer and more complex story arcs: the development of characters as they go through life changes and their participation in the battle against evil forces (which at times bring about all kinds of moral and social dilemmas).

Due to its serial, televisual format, and in an attempt to garner prime-time status, narrative is core to the structure of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and it is delivered in a mainly linear fashion (although there are techniques of repetition employed to cue new or casual watchers into the current state of affairs: the 'previously on Buffy the Vampire Slayer' sequence that appears at the start of some episodes for example). As I have already noted, each episode usually has some kind of self-contained storyline; usually Buffy, the 'chosen one', and her friends have to deal with some kind of supernatural threat to the human world. In 'Phases', from Season Two, a werewolf has appeared in Sunnydale. The 'scooby gang', Buffy and her close friends, set about discovering the human identity of the werewolf. It turns out that this threat to humanity is the otherwise benign new boyfriend (Oz) of one of the central characters (Willow). There is resolution at the end of the episode as we discover the identity of the werewolf, and, along the way Buffy manages to get the better of a thoughtless rogue werewolf hunter, but the events that occur are nonetheless stitched into a much longer story arc around interpersonal relationships and personal transformation. The latter constitutes a primary overarching thematic concern: the experience of life changes on identity and relationships. The presence of werewolves and vampires emblemise the transformation theme, couched as they are within a horror-genre frame where exaggerated bodily changes are rendered as horrifyingly extreme and spectacular. In placing character development so centrally in the show's long story arcs, the type of long narrative found in soap opera is coopted. Also, the werewolf transformation is supported and given logical credence by the particular metaphysics of the show's world.

As a game within which players can make choices about what they do, narrative does not take centre stage in *World of Warcraft* as it does in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. But as a world with a well-developed multi-threaded history there are a number of ways in which the game makes use of long narrative and these are bound intimately into the state of affairs of the game's world as experienced by the player and in turn tied into core gameplay activities. Within the burgeoning field of academic-based games studies there has been much debate about the credence of regarding games in terms of story. Various critics have argued that narrative in digital games is secondary to gameplay⁴. While the story context of many games is faint or indistinct, the Warcraft franchise has an expansive, epic-scaled story-line that has accumulated across a number of games. Long, thick narratives are common in role-playing games, while in other game genres storylines are simply expositional, with the emphasis placed far more on ratcheting-up scores or kills.

Even with its provision of a complex and expansive storyline players of *World of Warcraft* may choose not to engage with it any closer than is absolutely necessary and even for those very invested in piecing it together, engagement with localised tasks-in-hand—perhaps concentrating their efforts on getting a sequence of key presses in the right order or on organising their team—may well overshadow at least temporarily all else (see King and Krzywinska, 2006: 59-75). Nonetheless a great deal of story is available to *World of Warcraft* players even if it is delivered in often fragmented ways. This is evident in the 'making-of' DVD that came with the Burning Crusade 'collectors' expansion set (2007). The team of designers interviewed spoke of the story-line of the game and how this informed the design of the game's world and gameplay features. On the team is an 'historian' of the world, responsible for maintaining the 'Warcraft' bible; this documents the narratives that underlie each of the game's races and the overarching game story and sub-stories. Whether a player chooses to engage

⁴ See Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (eds.) (2004) *First Person*, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006) *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders* and Marie-Laure Ryan (2006) *Avatars of Story* for a fuller account of the nature of this debate.

with the game's story or not, the development of the game-story provides the guiding logic for the design. This includes the gameplay tasks offered. One of the game's designers spoke of the way that they had to check the content of quests given in the Burning Crusade's Hellfire region with the game's creative director to ensure that they dovetailed with the main story. As we can see, storylines generated in this fashion become more than simply a style guide.

Unlike *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, where viewers might miss episodes or begin watching somewhere other than episode one, season one, the player of *World of Warcraft* always begins at the beginning of the game; a factor that affects the structure and delivery of narrative. When a player loads the game software onto their computer for the first time, a cinematic plays that gives some background to the world's state of affairs is imparted through voice-over. It begins 'Four years have passed since the mortal races stood together against the might of the Burning Legion. The tenuous peace forged in a time of desperation is fading...'.⁵ This exposition works with material developed in the previous Warcraft games and contextualises what players are to do in the world. It helps to define their character and locates them within a matrix of competing claims, on an epic scale, that have led up to the current state of affairs. Story, presented as history and realised using what some players may recognise to be the rhetorical style of classical myth, offers *potential* meanings to the activities that players are presented with necessary if they are able to progress through and within the game.

In addition to the initial exposition, the creation of every new character by a player is accompanied on first entry into the game world by a further voice-over that broadly outlines something of the history of their race. When creating a Blood Elf, the player is told that the Blood Elves are an ancient race that five years ago lost their connection to powerful arcane magics because of an

⁵ This cinematic is also available to be played at any time via the sign-in screen and a further cinematic was added with the addition of the 'Burning Crusade' expansion in January 2007.

invasion into their lands by the Undead scourge and its leader Arthas, who destroyed the Sunwell (the power source of much of their magic). Once the expository cut-scene ends, the player receives a quest, delivered as scripted text, that tells them something about the power that has been lost and the effect of this on the creatures of the land--who are now no longer under Blood Elf control. Further information about the race and their fight to regain power is given through the preprogrammed speech assigned to characters, the quests a player encounters in their homelands, overheard conversations--often happened upon while exploring the land and doing quests, and importantly inscribed into geographic features of the game (of which more later). A vast array of narrative threads make up the world and its history⁶. These are presented in multiple ways, some tie very obviously to the overarching narrative arc but others are more localised (a lost trinket perhaps that must be found to kick start a stalled romance) and some give more information about aspects of a player's race (there are 10 in the game) or class (mage, rogue, priest etc that dictate the abilities assigned to a character). The game's overarching *given* narrative knits the condition of the world with the tasks afforded to and abilities of the player-character.

If we are to to gain a fuller picture of the complex and Arachnian ways that long narrative is present in the game and experienced through gameplay, it is also important to take into account what Lisabeth Klastrup calls the player's *lived-story* (2003).⁷ The experience of playing the game is, she argues, 'tellable' in story terms (and there are websites devoted to player stories). This story is

⁶ While the game's history should be regarded as a long narrative arc it is also important to acknowledge that it has some characteristics of a simulation. This in the sense that the game's history is composed of complex, webbed interactions as well as through the emergent social interactions and economies of the game. However the player's story is exempt from the canonical storyline material. Story provides the 'bones' of the world and simulation might be understood as the 'live' experience. The combination of narrative with simulation, in a broad sense, is what contributes to the game's epic qualities: the presence of a *given* long narrative and because players can't affect the game world other than in a superficial way means that this game is not a simulation in a pure sense, as might be said of *EVE Online* where there are few rules and restrictions and provides supported opportunities for players to create and grow their own stories on top of the basic material (My thanks to Douglas Brown for suggesting this example).

⁷ <http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/papers/Klastrup.pdf> p106 Accessed 14/02/07

composed of what player-characters have done in the game world and unlike the given narrative is emergent through what player-characters do in the game and what players bring to that. We might extend this notion to become the *player-character's story*. Their activities are framed by the game itself in narrative terms, quests operate in this way particularly. The items collected and worn by players are also testimony to the player-character's story as these are important signifiers to other players and shape their regard of those they meet. Items won in difficult situations when players have reached the higher levels of the game, termed 'epic' (or epixx as it is often written), tell a tale to onlookers and speak thereby of the player-character's long personal story arc.

It is in the commercial interest of this subscriber-based game to keep players playing for long periods of time; expansion packs that give long-term players new things to do is part of this strategy and thereby extends the length of both the game's given narrative and, potentially, the emergent player-character narrative.

Narrative and generic context, the chains of cause and effect, and the way that gameplay is designed around progression, are likely to lead to players understanding their experience as a story. The longer a player sticks with the game, and becomes increasingly knowledgeable about the state of affairs of the world, the more likely they are to experience the game and their own experience of being-in-the-gameworld⁸ as a form of long narrative (indeed playing the game might also become part of a player's own life story). For those people who choose to actively role-play (there are servers available dedicated to role-play), it is common for them to have worked out their own back-story, where they come from, what experiences they have had that shape their character's identity and status. Player-made backstories are in most cases generated through contextual cues provided by the game world and role-players are perhaps the players most likely to understand their experience of playing (in) the game as a long narrative. Not all players will exhibit such levels of engagement with the game-story,

⁸ For a discussion of 'being-in-the-gameworld' see King and Krzywinska (2006).

however, and the game is designed to accommodate a whole range of playing styles and interests.

As a massively multiplayer game it is important not to lose sight of the fact that this is a highly social world. Worldness in the context of this game is not just what is programmed into the game but is also propagated through the interaction of players with each other, which is encouraged in various ways. Given the length of time that many people play the game, strong bonds are often formed through the friend and guild system (player-run sub-communities that often stay in close contact and which have community websites). High level epic items, for example, are only won in group raids in ‘instances’⁹ that can involve 40 players. Instances are dotted across the game world and function as locations cut-off from the persistent world (although tied explicitly into the game’s given narrative). Within these players are offered what the game’s website describes as ‘a more personal experience exploring, adventuring, or completing quests in your own private dungeon’¹⁰. Organising large groups of players of diverse ages and backgrounds so they each know what to do in an instance is a managerial challenge and therefore often undertaken in guilds. It is likely that it will take at least several attempts to complete the instance successfully. Sharing such strong experiences and the added sense of agency afforded by group action helps knit players together as a community. The collective experience of achieving success for the first time in a high level instance is likely to be remembered, becoming part of a guild’s hi/story.

As a virtual world within which players have agency and interact with the game and each other, *World of Warcraft* is more complex technically and has more work to do to create a sense of world than the non-interactive and augmented real-world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This has an impact on the structure and

⁹ In *World of Warcraft* thousands of people play on the same server at the same time. Instances or dungeons permit a party of players to quest or raid in a designated, limited space that is replicated on servers so that multiple groups can do the quests in an instance without hindrance from others.

¹⁰ <http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/basics/instancing.html>

delivery of long narrative. Viewers of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* do not have to act, and act with increasing skill competency, in the world to uncover the story-line, nor do they have to go about the quotidian business of chatting to friends, 'grinding' gold and items to be able to increase agency. In the show story is paramount. It is delivered in a transparent and mainly linear manner, and in this the show can be deemed Minervan. The given, predetermined long narrative of *World of Warcraft*, by contrast, is delivered in a more piecemeal and non-linear fashion, many components of which have to be read into the organisation and content of the world. The given long narrative is not intended to be easily grasped, instead it is designed to be pieced together through the course of multiple activities and close readings of quest and other textual features. As with Arachne's tapestry, long narrative in *World of Warcraft* is more than simply the story of heroic deeds, it is multi-dimensional with very complex chains of cause and effect that resonate through the world on an epic scale. Player-characters are born into an pre-existing historical framework that determines who they are in terms of their race and, importantly, frames what they are impelled by the game to do to progress. Players can choose whether to engage and pay close heed to the given story or not. This may depend on what the player themselves bring to the game. They can remain uninterested in the given story but nonetheless play in an extremely engaged way. Even if the player ignores (his)story, their character is nonetheless highly determined by it. This demonstrates a significant difference between the way that television serials and games are structured and engaged with in terms of their stories: it is extremely unlikely that viewers uninterested in the storylines of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would remain viewers for very long.

Geography and Long Narrative

The geography of the world is much less important to the construction and delivery of long narrative in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* than it is to *World of Warcraft*. The latter is far more obviously a 'world' in geographical terms than the former. There are though some aspects of the show's geography that contribute

to the generation of narrative. The presence of a Hellmouth, located beneath the school's library, is core to the generation of sustained storylines (proximity to the Hellmouth is the reason why the Master, an uber-vampire, is resident in Sunnydale, which provides the main story arc for Season One for example). The juxtaposition of othered, liminal spaces (often presented in gothic terms: crypts, hell dimensions and the graveyard, as well as those episodes that look back to the past of vampires like Spike, Drusilla and Angel or the ex-demon turned teenager Anya) with familiar domestic spaces (the scooby gang's homes, the school and later the university) provides the impetus for some of the storylines relating to events and character arcs. Such geographic juxtapositions tie into the tensions that inform the long narrative of the show and provide the means of counterposing for dramatic effect epic qualities—heroic deeds, saving the world, manicheanism, with those of a more quotidian nature. The hell dimensions remain off screen and are largely implied, lending room for the viewer's imagination to come into play.

Reference to ancient books to gain knowledge of such spaces is a neat device to get around the expense of realising such realms in visual terms. Such devices enable the show to stay in both the present and the 'real' world but still divulge information that allows viewers to piece together the logic of the buffyverse, including its framing metaphysical dimensions (deliberately and appropriately left 'occulted', creating engima and affording a dramatic atmosphere of uncertainty).. We learn that demons once ruled the earth and some of these who have not quite adjusted to a quieter existence seek once again dominion¹¹. In terms of narrative, this has obvious Minervan qualities as it leads to heroic deeds. This is also the case with *World of Warcraft* and in both fights have an structural intergrity, a formulaic quality, of their own that sets them somewhat aside from the main narrative (even though they are contextualised by it, a property of epic and action narratives generally). But, for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* it is character

¹¹ I have explored the mythological rhetoric of the game elsewhere 'Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests, and Backstories: World Creation and Rhetorics of Myth in *World of Warcraft*' (2006)

development rather than fighting and defeating evil that is core to the making of the show's long narrative. Through their encounters with the supernatural the characters struggle with agency, personal relationships, power and the lack of, identity, moral relativity and ambiguity. These are Arachnian qualities. What we see of the 'world' of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in geographic terms is economical rather than extravagant. It is not designed to be 'read' closely, as is the case in *World of Warcraft* where it has stronger narrative imparting properties and where you must read terrain to be successful in combat, but instead to support the core narrative focus on the dramatic interplay between supernatural metaphysics and everyday life.

The geography of *World of Warcraft* makes a strong contribution to the sense of the game space as a world and it is very closely connected to the world's history as long narrative. This is partly because the landscape itself is one of the primary ways that the game communicates the state of affairs to players. In order to progress through the game, players must travel through the game's geography. The game's quest system is designed to promote travel to new areas by directing the player towards certain tasks. The game's geographical features of the world carry aspects of narrative. These features percolate down into a given zone's non-player character population and the style of its landscape, into player-versus-player objectives, into the types of story arcs offered and into the language of the text used to deliver quests.



Figure 1. A map of the zones that make up Outland, the continent that expands the 'World' of Warcraft to three continents and made available with the 'Burning Crusade' expansion.

The world's map shows three continents each divided into zones. Each zone has specific characteristics: Stranglethorn Vale is a jungle populated with tigers, panthers and aggressive trolls; Gadgetzan is desert region with a goblin-run town; The Barrens is savannah with an Orc encampment; Felwood is a dank, moss-shrouded forest where the trees themselves have become corrupted and aggressive. These are just a few of the many zones that make up the world yet the game's varied landscapes does more than provide visual pleasure. They speak of culture and history. Ruined temples and decaying forests once loved and nurtured signify the fall of the Night Elf race due to over-weaning ambition. Silvermoon City, the home of the Blood Elves, is partly in ruin after the race was decimated by the demonic Scourge and they lost the magic that held up their buildings. The other part of the City is left intact. Its opulent architecture and red

and gold colour scheme speaks of the Blood Elves' love of material luxury, justifying thereby the race's affinity with the profession of jewelcrafting (Figure 2). Every race in the game has suffered, either through their own folly, or, in the case of the Orcs, due to being enslaved by demons of the Burning Legion from which they are now free. This story line informs the differences between the triumphalist architecture of the Orcs' territory in Hellfire Peninsula in their original homeland of Draenor, now known as Outland, and the more humble and makeshift architecture of the Orc city Orgimmar, their new capital. More generally, the factional or racial ownership of zones is established in some cases, in others contested, and this is an example of the way that the long story of the game provides impetus for gameplay and further rationalizes the player-versus-player¹² component of the game that players can choose to take up. A strong example of the way that story and geography are tied together explicitly, is found when players are offered a quest in the city of Shattrath in Outlands: a guide shows the player around the city explaining the historical events that lead to the city being divided into hostile factions.

¹² Players can elect to fight and 'kill' player-characters of the opposite faction rather than non-player-characters or monsters controlled by the game. Some servers are dedicated to such play (known as PvP servers), whereas players have to elect to participate in fighting another on Player-versus-Environment or Role-Play servers.



Figure 2 Silvermoon City – the opulent home of the power-hungry, vain and materialist Blood Elves.

The narrative dimensions inherent in the game's geography and architecture lends greater depth of meaning to the experience of being in the world. As with Arachne's tapestry narrative is not delivered linearly but in fragmented, diffused, multiple and, at times, subtle ways. Narrative may not always be to the fore for players, however. Engagement varies from depending on the task in hand, the player's tastes and investments in the game and even on mood. While players can choose to rush their way through *World of Warcraft*, focused intently on gaining levels and skills, this was not possible with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* when it appeared on television. Viewers of the show had to wait for new seasons and episodes to be made and aired. It is also likely that some viewers of comparable ages to the characters 'grew up' with the show over its seven year

run. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* often dovetailed fantasy elements with more realistic and potent ones, including, for example, the move from school to university, the making and breaking of romantic relationships and friendships and the death of Buffy's mother. In this sense the show is potentially able to mesh with viewers' life events in a way that *World of Warcraft* cannot.

While both falling into the category of epic-based fantasy fiction, the worlds of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *World of Warcraft* are realised and structured in quite different ways. In the latter worldness is very much to the foreground and there is a strong sense of synergy between world, in the fullest sense, audio-visual presentation, social interaction and long narrative. Here, the world makes stories, the stories make the world. Representations tell stories and stories guide the logic of representations. This mode of constructing long narrative can be considered Arachnian--each plane working together which places a strong emphasis on transformation, refractivity and the intricacies of web-world-making. Worldness is important to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* but because of the character-centred narrative, it is more of setting or premise than of itself generative of narrative.

Persistence v Seriality

One of the primary distinctions between *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *World of Warcraft* that affects the structure and delivery of long narrative lies between persistence and seriality. *World of Warcraft*, like most massively multiplayer games, is persistent and real-time. This means that the world continues to exist when a player leaves the game and it is a feature that is particular to online games. That the game is delivered in real-time does not mean however that the game is linear and nor does it have complete temporal continuity: players can kill the dragon Onyxia over and over again--just because a group of players kill her once doesn't alter the gameworld itself other than temporarily. Onyxia respawns according to a set pattern and because she is found in an 'instance' (see footnote 9), several groups can kill her independently and don't have to compete. In this

the temporal pattern of the game is at times recursive. Persistence is also an ideal state and there are often interruptions due to technical issues.

Serial formats are structured episodically, which promote the presence of certain temporal and linear conventions. Due to the constraints of televisual scheduling, series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are limited to 40 minute episodes and various strategies are used to accommodate this. A viewer may watch the show back-to-back on DVD or video but this does not affect the imposition of a 40 minute episode duration and a range of other features connected to its televisual context that shape the formal structure of each episode. Newman argues that a 'a strong dose of episodic unity mitigates any textual instability caused by serialized aperture. Without this unity, casual viewers are less likely to watch' (2006: 20). A commercial imperative drives this: to maximise the audience means that casual and committed viewers must be catered for. *World of Warcraft* is also designed to cater for both casual and committed players (it is the MMORPG credited with making the format friendly for casual players, testified to perhaps by the fact it has drawn more players than any other MMORPG), but it is not limited to structuring events into regular length episodes.

The episodic nature of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, along with the use of frequent ellipses, might appear to create temporal disjunctions. Instead these become integral to the show's structural grammar to which regular television series viewers have become habituated. This means that all the events that occur are tailored to suit best the economical and apparently seamless delivery of storylines. *World of Warcraft* uses no ellipses whatever as this would disrupt the player's sense of 'being' in a real-time persistent world. The episode and season format of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* affects profoundly the shape of the narrative-- each builds up and ends with a climax, even though some threads might be left hanging to be taken up in the new season. This sets up the narrative-based expectation that Buffy and the gang will defeat the 'big bad' (a term that equates to the 'boss' that appears often in games) even if it takes a whole season to do

so. Resolution of tension and conflict provides one of the pleasures offered by most popular narratives, although the time that is afforded by the length of a season enables pleasures relating to character development and the build up to resolution. By contrast, while players of *World of Warcraft* might expect to be successful in a raid, quest or fight, there is no guarantee that this will happen. Conditions must be right and the player is expected to judge those conditions, aided by interface statistics and by reading the world's terrain. If a player judges badly then they will 'lose' in that situation. Players are invited to learn from that experience. This underlies the quality of agency that is instrumental to *World of Warcraft* as a game. Resolution has to be won and is not a given as it often is in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This also provides a clue to the way that the game is structured, which informs gameplay as well as the design and delivery of long narrative.

Newman says that television serials 'parcel' the delivery of story in ways that encourage viewer interest. Serials 'organize their stories into rather short segments, often less than two minutes in length. Viewers might call these scenes, but writers call them "beats" and they are television's most basic storytelling unit' (2006: 17). This makes for a fast pace which is thought to keep viewers hooked into events and not change channel. The beat format is largely evident in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, although longer scenes do occur particularly in the later seasons. Ellipses and crosscutting result from the (in part industrial) requirement to speed up events, thereby creating a strong sense of drama and forward movement. Advert breaks also affect the pacing of the show – with high points preceding breaks to encourage the return of viewers (the break points are most apparent when the show is watched on DVD).

World of Warcraft has rather different modes of keeping player's interest, although story elements and gameplay are certainly 'parcelled' and have episodic features. Gaining levels, items and money are very clear forms of positive feedback that encourage a player to stay in the world. The desire to view

more content as it is added and fulfill the stipulations attached to gaining success is another motivator. 'Grinding' for items or levels can prove an exhaustively repetitive business, however. Such laborious and often time-consuming activities conducted in real time often retard the delivery of the given narrative, although they can be regarded as forming part of the player-character story. This makes for a very different pacing to the lively beat structure of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* where ellipses are often in play. The given narrative of the game operates more as a context for action than a core motivation for play which allows it to be stretched out over a longer timescale. Because narrative is not the primary driver to keeping the player hooked in, as it is with show, the game needs to reward play by creating a strong sense of progression.

To retain the interest of players, there are therefore a number of ways that the game structures the player's experience that have some equivalence to the beats and episodes of television serials. Each time a player gains experience from killing a monster it is shown incrementally in the user interface. This can be regarded as a type of beat. Also every hit a player lands on a monster is shown, the beating given to a monster, and vice versa, is segmented into a beat. This is also the case with increases to certain skills through acts performed. Each time a level is gained, new quests, use of items and skills become available. This structure can be regarded as episodic. These examples do not relate directly to the given narrative, but resonate with the player-character's story. Quest chains can also be regarded in terms of episodic segmentation. In this case they do often deliver incrementally given narrative content. Fights or quests can also be regarded in themselves as mini-narratives that provide a sense of rhythm and expectation (will you prevail over your enemy? or find that required item?). Fights are longer in many cases than in the show, tailored to level and situation, but they too have some structural similarity as they can be regarded as being parceled into beats, knots of hostiles are often spaced out to allow players bite off only what they can manage to defeat with relative comfort.

Repetition is also found in both texts, meaning that narrative isn't fully progressive, although to different degrees. In the show, repetition is used in various ways to cue viewers into events and character developments. This might mean references in dialogue to past events that have led up to the current situation, or through less narratively cued dialogue that encapsulates a character's state of mind. The use of montage sequences at the start of each show acts as a reminder of events that lead up to that current situation. Repetition in *World of Warcraft* more pervasive however. It is centred on becoming more skillful and acquisition rather than better acquainting players with the given narrative. It might mean going back and fighting again the monsters that just got the better of you, or going back multiple times to the same instance with a group or raid to gain useful items for party or guild members.

Retaining the interest of players relies at least in part on setting clear goals for the player, narrative coherence plays second fiddle unlike with the show. The reinforcement of progression and agency in the game is one of the way that this world can be said to be Minervan. As Minerva shows in her tapestry there are rules that must be obeyed, rules that govern the condition of being in the world of gods and heroes. Judge those conditions, work with them, and success will be had. Perhaps this gets to the root of how games like this provide pleasure. In *World of Warcraft* skill and good judgement always lead to just rewards. It is a highly predictable, statistically-based world in a technical sense (luck is factored into the internal dice system when hitting mobs for example, but plays a relatively small role). Social interaction helps ameliorate this—human behaviour being less predictable than computers. This is very unlike the capricious and uncertain nature of the real world. Player-characters and monsters all have levels, for example if a player's character is of a substantially higher level than the monster they are fighting and they are careful not to attract the interest of other monsters in error, they are highly likely in most circumstances to win out. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as with the real world, no such predictable and transparent conditions exist. This gives room for more complex, situation-based and

problematic issues to come to the fore (even if we expect Buffy to triumph eventually, which accords with the 'laws' of prime-time television narrative). In *World of Warcraft* character transformation is mechanical and is signified ludically through predetermined increases in the progress bar (although it might be the case that encounters with other players might lead to personal transformation). In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* character transformation is far deeper and multifaceted, thereby Arachnian. A player might gain a sense of agency through winning an epic sword, which might get the approval of guild friends and help the player-character to progress more quickly, but it is not a transformation that speaks very deeply of existential matters. It is in essence something that seems more related to the limited satisfactions of acquisition-based consumer culture than deep personal change or struggle between conflicting desires, as can be said to be the case with the main characters at the core of the long narrative in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Player-centred choices are present in *World of Warcraft*, however. Some of these are hard-wired into the game mechanics. The player can choose to assign their character's 'Talent' points (gained when you achieve a new level) to shape the abilities of the character. More profoundly, a player is asked to make moral choices in their dealings with other players and it is here that more complex aspects emerge. But the nature of a persistent world means a player is likely to reap as they sow: if you choose not to play in a group-friendly way then others are unlikely to want to play with you again.

While the persistent real-time and game format of *World of Warcraft* lends room to build given narrative complexity on a truly epic scale and provides the context for the player-character long narrative, the statistic-based features of the game and the fact that the given story-arc is dispersed temporally and structurally, means that the type of emotional and psychological complexity that we gain through the narrative of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is only achieved through the investments and choices made by the player in their character. In this sense

emotional and psychological complexity is potential and emergent rather than inherent in the given narrative. While a viewer also has to have some investment in the show to make its stories and character arcs meaningful, the show demands less work and time on the part of the viewer. The show's televisual format—the demand to make the story 'pacey' and the demands of episodic form and coherency—does mean that there is less room for narrative to become truly epic in scale. Here the narrative is not woven through multiple perspectives as it is in *World of Warcraft*. In the latter case playing only one character will only achieve a partial view of the whole story, which can encourage players to create differently raced characters if they are to gain a broader view of the expansive and multithreaded narrative scope inherent in the game.

Convergence

The entertainment industries has of late embraced world-based fiction and this is because the format lends itself extremely well to multi-authored, cross-media franchises. Worlds like *Warcraft* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* become, as Henry Jenkins (2006) has said, playgrounds for numerous artists and writers. Worlds offer up a recognisable brand that can be used to produce a whole range of different products. *World of Warcraft* comes as an addition to a previously established world found in the real-time strategy games *Warcraft* (the first appearing in 1994) and there are now multiple spin-off products, including collectors items, novels, a card game, a board game, and other related merchandise. The television serial *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has canonical status within a whole range of spin-off products and since the much lamented demise of the show such material has kept the buffyverse spinning for fans. These include the TV show *Angel* which in running concurrently with season four of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* often keyed into narrative events in the 'parent' show, plus three videogames, a board game, a 'Top-Trumps' card game, two table-top roleplaying systems, a host of novellas and comics, a huge number of fan and slash fictions published on the web and a range of merchandising (bags, T-shirts, plastic figures etc). Each of these tie into and broaden the scope of the world that was

set up in the 'parent' television show. World-based long narratives encourage fan-type consumption that goes beyond the canonical text.

While shows that encouraged this type of consumption used to be considered 'cultish' and marginal to mainstream popular culture they are now becoming central (*Dr Who* and *The Lord of the Rings* for example). This dovetails all too neatly with greater industrial and technological convergence, which depends increasingly on formulating devices to create long-stay audiences/consumers who will spend money to remain in contact with their preferred 'world'. Long narrative is, within the context of a world, made in the mould of much older types of epic texts, have therefore found a renewed and diverse lease of life.

Conclusion: From Epic to Epixx

I want to end with an overview of the Minervan and Arachnian features of these two epic texts. *World of Warcraft* is mainly Minervan in its world. It is rule-based, has predictable sets of cause and effect that are well-suited to generating compelling and contextualised gameplay. At base it is a fixed and programmed world albeit that the social dimension of the game and the choices that players make lend them a sense of agency and presence within it. Player-characters are set up as heroes doing what will benefit their race and faction. They undertake heroic deeds with predictable outcomes, if conditions are well-judged. The predetermined rhetoric that informs the game is mythological and thereby epic (even if players fail to achieve tasks or rail against their heroic status through speech or action).

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is largely Arachnian through the obscured and enigmatic metaphysics that define its world. As such this is a highly unpredictable world in which emotions, identities, relationships and moral meanings are thematically in flux. Fluidity and relativity are symptomatic and generational of long narrative, even if temporary resolutions are found. While Buffy herself is made somewhat in the mould of hero and is the prime enactor within the show, it

is the fallout and problems of this heroic status on her life and relationships with others that provides the show with much of its (melo)dramatic tension. The interlacing of these elements is Arachnian. The way that the show uses yet undermines the heroics of classical epics by addressing power relations and transformation bears thematic comparison to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

World of Warcraft is mainly Arachnian at the level of narrative. Narrative is dispersed, perspectival, multi-levelled and non-linear. What the player does in the world does not affect the base level of events and as such a recursive temporality is often in play.. In this the game story does not have a structure that compares with the forward progression of most mainstream narratives (although various techniques are employed to help mask the recursive and static nature of the world and its story). What is perhaps most Arachnian is the way that micro narratives (player-character stories, quests, localised race-based stories etc) are set within an overarching, relativized multithreaded historical situation. Lastly, the fact that the given long story arc is optional, dispersed and demands work and interest to uncover it, suggests a very different mode of handling narrative than has occurred in any other fiction-based media form. In this sense the game can be compared with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which, in its highly episodic and multithreaded form, offered a new way of telling and structuring long narrative.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is largely Minervan at the level of narrative structure. It is delivered in linear form. Even though people do come back from the dead, bosses tend to stay dead once killed with due diligence. Buffy and the gang don't kill enemies multiple times for example, like some players of *World of Warcraft* are likely to do with for example the dragon Onyxia. Each season has an end boss which is instrumental in organising the trajectory of each season's narrative arc. The show takes largely the viewpoint of the Buffy gang, with Buffy at the centre of most things. It does not offer multiple, relativised viewpoints of the world and its history, depending on the class and race of the character played, as is the case with *World of Warcraft*. You can't choose to take the view of one of the

vampires, for example, unless the show chooses to depict that for a core narrative purpose. Narrative rules all the show's events which is part and parcel of the particularities, constraints and opportunities offered by the televisual, formal and industrial context in which the show appears. The pay-off for the Minervan and centralised narrative structure of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is that oppositions and resolutions are played through in coherent and tightly-knit way. This is not the case with the sprawling and disparate narrative structure of *World of Warcraft*.

Long narrative plays an important, if scaled, role in both *World of Warcraft* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Although there are some generic, thematic and structural points of convergence and both make use of features that can be regarded as Arachnian and Minveran, long narrative is nonetheless spun in accordance with the specific affordances and expectations offered by their foundational media.

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