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Playing the Game, Role Distance and Digital Performance

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Abstract

This paper explores the connection between the conventions of the live role-based performance of process drama and the mediated performance of online role-playing video games. Both activities allow participants to 'become somebody else'. Both deal with the identity shifts possible within imagined environments. This mutability of identity provides a metaphor for considering the episodic nature of in-role performance and out-of-role reflection in both drama and video games. Using the massively multiplayer online role-playing (MMORP) game *EverQuest* as a case study, this paper examines digital performance and its relationship to the dramatic conventions of role distance and role protection. It also examines the common learning outcomes that could usefully be explored between process drama and video games.

Extrait

Cet article explore la connexion entre les conventions de la performance basée sur le rôle *live* du procédé d'art dramatique, et la performance par l'intermédiaire d'un media, l'internet, avec les jeux de rôle. Ces deux activités permettent aux participants de 'devenir quelqu'un d'autre'. Toutes deux traitent des changements d'identité possibles à l'intérieur d'environnements imaginés. Cette mutabilité d'identité fournit une métaphore pour considérer la nature épisodique de la performance en tant que personnage et de la réflexion hors personnage, à la fois dans l'art dramatique et les jeux vidéo. Utilisant le jeu de rôle *Everquest* pour multi joueurs auquel participent des milliers d'internautes comme étude de cas, cet article examine la performance digitale et sa relation avec les conventions d'art dramatique de distance du rôle et de protection du rôle. Il examine également les résultats d'apprentissage commun qui pourraient être explorés entre le procédé d'art dramatique et les jeux vidéo.

Resumen

Este documento examina la conexión entre las convenciones de la actuación sobre una tragedia por la representación de papeles basados en la vida real y la actuación en-línea de los juegos de videos. Ambas actividades permiten a los participantes 'convertirse en otra persona'. Ambas tratan con los posibles cambios de identidad dentro de entornos imaginados Esta mutabilidad de identidad provee una metáfora para considerar la naturaleza episódica de la actuación dentro del papel y la reflexión fuera de él; en tanto el drama como los juegos de videos. Usando como un caso de estudio a *Everquest* un juego de enormes proporciones que comprende una multitud de jugadores representando papeles en línea a fin de estudiar la actuación digital y su relación con las convenciones dramáticas de representaciones a distancia y la protección de las representaciones. También estudia el resultado común del aprendizaje el cual puede ser explorado de manera útil entre el proceso del drama y los juegos de videos.

Authors' biographies

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Process drama and digital role

Process drama is a form of improvised role-based drama with a history that goes back to the middle of the twentieth century. It draws on the earlier educational drama work of Haseman (1991), Heathcote (1991), O'Neill (1995), Bolton (1999), Howell and Heap (2001) and many others. It is a form of improvised drama, situated in a specific context, which develops a performed dramatic narrative without a script or an external audience. It is lived at life-rate and operates from a discovery-at-this-moment basis rather than being memory-based (Howell and Heap: 7) The narrative, tensions and drama unfold in time and space through action, reaction and interaction without the use of a pre-written textual script.

This dramatic form has parallels with the developing digital 'interactive drama' within the field of gaming described by Ryan (1997), McGonigal (2003), Laurel (1991) and Mateas (2004). In this computer game-based dramatic form, the player assumes the role of a first-person character in a dramatic story who becomes part of and influences the narrative action through interaction with virtual characters. Both process drama, with its role-based performance conventions, and digital game-based performance, with its filmic conventions, depend on the assumption of a form of role identification for success.

The concept of adopting a dramatic role and a separate identity has also been widely incorporated into everyday culture, from Goffman's use of frame analysis (1974) to Goleman's notion of emotional intelligence (1995). It has been picked up by education, management training and business, as well as computer studies (Turkle 1995). It is also a central concept in the analysis of digital environments such as virtual reality spaces, online chat rooms and video games (Ryan 2001).

There appears to be some similarity between the conventions of the live role-based performance of process drama and the mediated performance within role-playing video games that could usefully be explored in terms of identity and learning outcomes. This focus on role-taking and ambiguous or multiple identities is a staple of cyberculture debates, postmodernist thought, popular visual culture and the current theoretical fascination with 'the body'. Ryan notes the popularisation of the view that we own not simply a physical body, but also virtual bodies — or body images — which either 'clothe, expand, interpret, hide, or replace the physical body, and which we constantly create, project, animate, and present to others' through the developing digital culture (2001: 306).

Consider the following two statements by influential exponents from the fields of educational drama and video game-based learning respectively. First, Dorothy Heathcote:

I am concerned in my teaching, with the difference in reality between the real world where we seem to 'really exist' and the 'as if' world where we can exist at will. I do live but I may also say, 'If it were like this, this is how I would live'. It is the nature of my teaching to create reflective elements within the existence of reality. (Heathcote 1991: 104)

Second, James Paul Gee:

they [video games] situate meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experience to solve problems that reflect on the intricacies of design of imagined worlds and the design of both real and imagined worlds and the design of both real and imagined social relationships and identities in the modern world (Gee 2003: 48).

As these practitioners point out, both process drama and video games deal with the shifts in identity formations that are possible within an imagined or virtual environment. This playing with identity is particularly evident in the way that the presentation of the self in the online environment is presented as mutable and capable of growth and increase in status. In process drama, the exploration of the relationship between identity and power is a defining characteristic of the form (Carroll 1988). This experimentation with identity and power expressed within the parameters of a video game or a process drama session may challenge traditional notions of a central or essential identity — especially in the context of race, class and gender through the adoption of alternative dramatic roles.

The mutability or 'morphing' of a constantly reinvented identity provides a new metaphor for connecting the episodic nature of in-role performance and out-of-role reflection in both drama and video games. These social constructivist notions emphasise the spatial and temporal locatedness of identity (Hall 2000). Rather than being fixed, identities are seen as 'necessary fictions' (Weeks 1995), or as 'points of

temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us' (Hall 2000).

Role and identity

The concept of enacted role and temporary identity, so thoroughly explored within the process drama field by Heathcote (1991), Boal (1995), Bolton (1999) and many others, could usefully be applied here to provide an analysis of the dramatic role possibilities of multiple identity play within the drama and the interactive games environments. The closeness of performance elements within both fields can be seen as an adaptation of dramatic role to the changing cultural forms being generated by gaming platforms, interactive networks and developing online digital media.

The field of identity formation that both drama and video games encompass means they are uniquely positioned to grapple with this issue in a cultural climate of increasing openness and identity relativism. Process drama is able to provide a positive idea of the place of the individual in poststructuralist thought by providing drama conventions that negotiate constantly shifting identities. Within process drama, the participant can be seen as a subject-in-process, capable of agency, role differentiation and integration within a range of environments, both digital and dramatically enacted, that in some way replicate the multi-modal discourse of that long-standing semiotic signing system, the theatre.

As Heathcote says: 'The theatre is the art form that is totally based in sign.' (1991: 169) In the past, a single mode (usually text or icon) of communication was the only form available in the digital world (Carroll 2002). However, digital technology has now made it possible for one person to be engaged in all aspects of multimodal immersion and production. In the past, this character immersion was usually the preserve of the trained actor or the participants in role-based process drama.

As a number of authors have argued (for example, Turkle 1995: 184), such role-based digital involvement may not be all fun and games — there may also be important identity work going on as there is within process drama role-taking. In the past, such role immersion was preceded by extensive training, in the case of actors, to clarify the distinctions between identity and role. In the case of untrained individuals, directors or skilled teacher/facilitators provided guidance in process drama. Within video games, the induction may be limited to the cinematic cut-scenes and introductory narrative.

Turkle's argument suggests that, while some individuals may use cyberspace to express dysfunctional offline selves, most use the digital domain to exercise and experiment with what might be considered truer identities. Maybe it is here that the first collaborations of the digital world and drama classroom could occur.

However, other cybercultural critics have been less optimistic. Rather than any kind of radical performance, Nakamura (2000) suggests that this identity tourism involves the act of playing the fantasy Other, which reaffirms rather than challenges real-life (RL) stereotypes. This seems to be the case with the gender boundaries in *EverQuest*, *Diablo* and other online games.

Open texts : A case study of *EverQuest*

Whatever the pros and cons of this more radical 'stepping into another's shoes' (Heathcote 1969), the connection between the conventions of process drama and immersive digital role-playing is even stronger when considered in terms of semiotic production. Because both forms exhibit the multimodal 'open text' that Eco (1989) describes as characteristic of contemporary communication, they are both oriented towards the semiotic action of production. As Kress (2003) points out, the screen is now the dominant site of texts; it is the site which shapes the imagination of the current generation around communication.

As Eco (1989) puts it, the author (or composer, artist, playwright, instructor, game designer) offers a work to be completed by the reader (or listener, viewer, performer, student, player), such that 'the common factor is a mutability which is always deployed within the specific limits of a given taste, or of predetermined formal tendencies' (1989: 20). In this manner, a work can be offered as a 'plastic artifact' which can be shaped and manipulated by its audience, but which still operates within the world intended by the author (Eco, 1989). In particular, Eco defines a subcategory of open work — the 'work in movement' — which Aarseth (1997) suggests is the closest link to interactive media forms because it is built upon unplanned or incomplete structural elements, allowing a process of mutual construction to occur (1997: 51).

An environment where the conventions of the open text forms of both process drama and video games can be compared is Sony Online's *EverQuest* (<http://eqlive.station.sony.com>). This is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). Thousands of players can be active at the same time,

and they can share the same game world in real time. The world of *EverQuest* is a 3D graphical environment populated by players' avatars in the form of various races (humans, elves, gnomes) or even beasts. These characters take on roles such as ranger, druid, wizard or warrior. The combinations of races and roles produce game characters with different skills in a range of areas from combat to magic, and healing to crafts. Players may simply explore the vast game world and deal with the events and characters that they encounter, or they can engage with various quests or missions that are part of the game design. Players can communicate via text-based chat tools built into the game interface, and they may form alliances to tackle a quest as a group by pooling specialist skills and abilities. Social interaction, either as ad hoc encounters or more formally structured as questing parties or guilds, is part of the game's appeal.

The texts of both process drama and video games demand constant interpretation and articulation. As Gee (2003: 11) points out, in role-playing games you can design your own character, and the same is true for process drama. Both forms exhibit the episodic form that alternates in-role behaviour with out of role activity. For example, within the video game *Diablo*, after completing a task in character role, the player as player returns to the armory to buy upgraded weapons before returning to role performance with enhanced powers.

Within drama, there is the alternation of in-role enactment and out-of-role negotiation along with research, discussion and planning. Table 1 matches some of the obvious similarities that exist between these two forms.

Table 1: Comparison of process drama and video games

<i>Process drama</i>	<i>Video games</i>
Group narrative orientation	Video intro/cinematic cut-scenes
Teacher-in-role	Instructions from superior, helper, etc.
Discussion of role attributes	Selecting role attributes
In-role, attitudinal drama	In-role, playing
Out-of-role research	Handbook, cheats, history
Exercise focus	Speed challenges, custom games
Building role via costume, props	Inventory and attribute-building
In-role, character	In-role, experienced character
Discussion, debrief	Online chat, web user groups

When entering the dramatic frame in both process drama and video games, 'a willing suspension of disbelief' (Coleridge 1907) is established. In the case of drama, this is through the negotiated agreement of the participants and the formalising of this agreement by the facilitator, often using narrative as a focus. Video games have a similar formal narrative expressed in cut-scenes and narrative overlay, which establish the dramatic world. Often instruction or guidance is provided by characters within the narrative and dramatic frame of the game. This function operates as teacher-in-role in drama, and commonly as a superior (as in rank or status) or helper in video games. There are also out-of-role tasks that occur that are nevertheless part of the activity, such as selecting role attributes or engaging in research. As well as these activities, there are different levels of playing involvement in both dramatic forms as well as out-of-frame discussion.

Role distance and role protection

Clearly, the concept of the dramatic frame is operating in video games such as *EverQuest*, where the player is engaging 'as if' the situation is real (Goffman 1974), but where a range of conventions vary levels of protection for the player. The player can 'toggle' between a close identification with their character and a observer/learner perspective that is more distant and willing to experiment at extreme levels in order to discover how to operate within the game environment. Often, as is the case with *EverQuest*, novice players suffer little or no penalty for failure in the early stages of a game.

This penalty-free behaviour reflects what psychologist Eric Erikson (1968) has called a psychosocial moratorium, which James Gee (2003: 62) succinctly sums up as 'a learning space in which the learner can take risks where real world consequences are lowered'. Within *EverQuest*, high-risk behaviour is sometimes rewarded at the early skill levels. For example, one of the authors learnt to take advantage of the 'respawning' that occurs when a character dies, such that if he got lost or trapped in a difficult location he would deliberately kill off his character (e.g. by drowning or attacking a much stronger foe). His character would then be returned to a familiar location without major penalty — that is, without loss of treasure and equipment. Similarly, he learnt that attacking creatures of similar or higher skill level was a risky enterprise, but even if only occasionally successful in these battles, the player can accumulate experience points much more quickly as a reward for defeating a strong foe. While learning to play, 'death' is an inconvenient but acceptable penalty for pushing the boundaries of the game.

In process drama, this concept has come to be known independently as 'role protection', where the personal distance from the consequences of actually being in the event have been elaborated and structured for different learning outcomes. This role protection or psychosocial moratorium can be seen in a metaphorical way as an interface that frames the dramatic and performative event. In earlier times, this 'frame' was seen as a picture frame or proscenium arch framing the action. More commonly today, it is the screen frame of the computer that performs such a function.

This frame acts as a border separating the images and events from those in real life. The participant enters this framed world with a mutable identity based on parameters of the performance role available to them. By focusing attention on the performative actions within the frame, it clearly delineates the difference between real life and the representation of reality we call role-based video games or process drama. This is the 'as if' device which provides the dramatic role protection that allows the participants to enter the space of enactment.

This performance form is composed of two elements: first, there is the nature of the conventions operating on the screen or within the drama; second, there is a level of role protection or role distance present that allows the adoption of a new identity within the penalty-free area of the dramatic frame. Figure 1 shows these elements in a less metaphorical way.

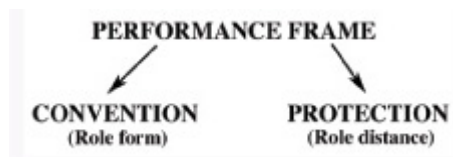


Figure 1: Elements of the performance frame

The conventions operate as creative forms for both video games and process drama by developing non-naturalistic ways of presenting material and adapting roles within the performance frame. Within process drama, this covers a range of positions including attitudinal role, signed role and character performance, as well as more abstract forms such as effigy, portrait, statue and narrative voice (Neelands 1990).

Within video games, the player has a similar range of positions from first-person shooter to central character, controller and interactive performer. These conventions are built into the performance frame and provide the structure for the fictional social world to exist.

There is also the protection of role distance that allows the psychosocial moratorium to operate for the participants within the performance frame. Within stand-alone video games, it is the penalty-free nature of the interaction that allows the character to constantly learn by mistakes. However, while providing high levels of role distance and role protection, stand-alone video games are still able to allow participants to experience the performance frame from alternate positions. For example, within the real-time strategy game *Starcraft*, the player can control any of three different species — Terran, Protos or Zerg — each with its own unique goals, technologies and abilities. Within massively multiplayer online games like *EverQuest*, the penalties associated with avatar death may be much closer to those of interactive process drama than non-networked or single-player games.

In a more metaphorical way, the 'performance laptop' in Figure 2 illustrates these points. The laptop frame provides the space and performance conventions for a distanced performance, and operates for both drama and video games.



Figure 2: The 'performance laptop', illustrating role distance and role protection

The player/performer always has the option to select from a range of distance and protection conventions. The most obvious position is immersion in the action of unstructured first-person participation. This full role, 'first-person shooter' (FPS) position, while providing high levels of involvement and activity, is one that provides minimal levels of protection for the participants. Within video games, FPS game forms are often based on reflex action and physical controller skills, and depend on an ever-growing body count of increasingly ferocious adversaries for success. In other, more quest-based, video games such as Nintendo's *Zelda* series, the first-person view is more open and problem-based, and much closer to the drama concept of full role.

Within process drama, first-person full role and immersion in the event are usually the culmination rather than the starting point of any improvisational drama. First-person 'in-the-event' drama requires a background understanding of the context and high levels of group trust to operate in a situation with minimal role protection.

If this minimal role distance is overly confronting, then within both drama and video games the participant/player can choose a greater role distance and stand back from the action by the assumption of an attitudinal role. This maximally distanced role requires only the agreement of the player to take on an attitude of a character in the drama for it to operate. An *EverQuest* player could choose to ignore the 'connected' aspects of the game, avoiding communication with other players and pursuing their own intra-game pursuits, such as mapping the game world. They could imbue their character with a desire to observe the game world, rather than interact with it.

At a role distance closer to the action, the player can become a central character by 'signing' the role they have adopted through costume, name, career path or some other attribute. They can actively engage other human players, adopting a particular tone in their text-based 'conversations' in order to convey a deeper sense of their role. At the Role Distance level closest to being-in-the-event the player can assume a full role and become part of the unfolding narrative action. The Role Distance chosen is always variable, and the player can 'toggle' between levels of involvement in a video game through changes of camera perspective. Sometimes this is for strategic reasons to get a larger picture of what is happening but sometimes it is because the emotional closeness of the action becomes overwhelming.

As noted earlier, in terms of Role Protection, this first-person full role is the most emotionally exposed position. However the player may choose to maintain a full role but stand back somewhat from the moment of unstructured participation by becoming a guide for the character, or an author of the narrative. In *EverQuest*, a player can choose to 'hire' other players to complete a difficult or dangerous task, rather than attempting it themselves. Similarly, a player can choose to develop their character as a service provider (for example healer, tailor, fletcher, blacksmith, minstrel) to other players rather than participating in the game's pre-designed quests. These roles are often presented as non-player characters (software-controlled agents), but human players can take on these roles if they desire.

Similarly, within process drama the teacher/facilitator may shift the role distance of the participants in a group enactment if the level of role protection does not provide enough artistic distance from the dramatic intensity of the event.

Both performance forms, unlike real life, mean that the participants are not trapped in the present moment of unstructured participation. The performance frame for both drama and video games allows the participants to structure the protection of role distance that is appropriate for their needs.

The performance frame, the conventions and the levels of protection are shown in a metaphorical way in Figure 2. All the levels of protection and varieties of convention are available in any piece of work.

Of course, the ultimate protection for both drama and video games is to exit the performance frame altogether, and this episodic quality is part of the dramatic form — most games feature a pause function. However, the combination of role protection and role distance from the focus event provides the dramatic structure that protects the participants in their dramatic involvement with the narrative.

All varieties of role distance are performative — and distanced roles are often used in drama though less so in video games. With drama, participants feel more protected and work with more conviction if they are framed at some distance from the moment of real-time enactment. If too much is at stake, the role distance is often too close for an exploration of the situation, and the performance frame becomes blurred while the belief in the convention and protection of the role is lost. Within video game genres, role distance varies. In first-person shooter forms, the visual rush of imminent destruction often drives the action. In other quest-based games, a more reflective position is available.

Player perspective, role distance and role protection

One way to explore how the dramatic conventions of role distance and role protection apply in video games like *EverQuest* is to consider the screen views available to the player. Following a video game convention of equating player perspectives and role distance with 'camera views', the player can cycle through the options to choose to view the game from different angles, and also zoom in or out and pan left and right using keyboard commands. Table 2 outlines the camera views offered in *EverQuest*.

Table 2: The camera views in *EverQuest*

<i>Description</i>	<i>View</i>	<i>Camera position</i>
First-person (default)	Straight ahead	Player cannot see character
Overhead (rotating)	From above	Rotates as character turns
Rear (rotating)	From rear	Rotates and stays behind the character
Overhead (fixed)	From above	Does not rotate as character turns
Rear (fixed)	From rear	Does not rotate as character turns

In practice, the authors found that playing the game comfortably and efficiently required a constant process of toggling between the first-person view, a view from over the shoulder of the avatar, and a distant third-person view. The 'ideal' view depended on the task being performed. For example, the authors found a first-person view good for navigating through corridors in pursuit of another character, while switching to a third-person view was sometimes necessary in a melee fight to ensure the avatar wasn't being attacked from behind.

As noted earlier in Figure 2, a first-person perspective in terms of both role protection and role distance is the most likely to equate with a sense of being within the action; it is 'as if' you are the character. First-person view is the most 'real' perspective available in this game, and in others like it. Indeed, the 'first-person shooter' is recognised as a game genre in itself, modelled on neo-classics such as *Doom*, *Quake* and *Unreal*. It is the perspective that most places the player within the 'skin' of the character avatar. In this view, the world is seen through the character's eyes. The point of view afforded the player in video games is often discussed in terms of 'immersion' — the degree in which the player is drawn into the mediated 'reality' of the game environment.

Other camera positions offered in *EverQuest*, as listed in Table 2, present options for varying degrees of role distance and protection as outlined in Figure 2. Whenever the player is in role, standing apart from the action and looking down on their avatar, this role distance brings highly affective subjective elements into the social relationship being negotiated (Kress 2003: 118). The player is always in control of the role distance they choose. It is their desire for engagement that dictates how close to the naturalistic frame of total involvement they will go. These conventions exist as a visual genre which is similar in form to the illustrations that exist within a multimodal text as outlined by Gunter Kress in *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2003: 118). The distance and positioning of the viewer in any visual text, video game or drama are always critical to their role position. Like many games, *EverQuest* allows the player to quickly toggle or cycle through camera positions using keyboard commands. In this manner, role distance can be changed more quickly and more often than is usually the case with process drama.

Figure 3 illustrates the third-person view in *EverQuest*. Here the authors (in the guise of their character

Elviss the Ranger) have been attacked from behind by a Restless Skeleton (a computer-controlled character). The authors have toggled from first-person to third-person perspective to quickly gain a sense of the melee. In terms of role distance, this is a mid-range engagement that is in the action, but not too close for comfort. Being able to assess the situation and plan a response in third-person view is less distressing than reacting to an attack from a seemingly invisible enemy in first-person view.



Figure 3: Third-person (rear rotating) view in EverQuest . Attacked from behind, the authors have adopted this perspective/role distance to identify their foe and plan a response.

It is also important to note that *EverQuest* intrinsically acknowledges that sometimes players want to shift to other role frames during the game. One of the communication modes afforded in the game is known as 'out of character' chatting. By typing in 'ooc' mode, a player speaks out of character to all nearby players. The game instructions describe this facility as being 'for speaking out of the context of the game and your character'. An odd but amusing example of this is shown in the transcript of text-based conversation below, in which the character of Bareback comments out of character about Elviss' name:

Bareback says out of character: Love me tender, love me sweet.

Elviss: Do you like my hair?

Bareback: Yes I do.

Elviss: I would like my shoes to be blue Suede.

Bareback: That would be cool.

This ability to toggle social interactions instantly and explicitly in and out of character clearly allows for shifts in role protection. This exchange equates to the role protection frame of critic, who can interpret and comment on the action. This level of spectatorship is highly protected and a long way from first-person involvement. Indeed, it is often the functional aspects of gameplay that afford the ability to alter levels of role protection. The player can choose to be in the action as a first-person participant or, as noted above, they can switch to a more protected role of critic by choosing to communicate out of character.

An even more protected position is that of the artist customising their experience. In *EverQuest*, this is typified by the function of allocating accumulated skill points to selected areas to enhance a character's ability. In this mode, the character is not perceived as an avatar, but as a table of skills and abilities that can be favoured or ignored depending on how the player wishes to shape their experience. In video and computer games more generally, this high level of role protection is found in the practice of modifying the game code, or in creating new game levels or scenarios using software tools and programming skills.

Process drama, video games and learning

In learning terms, Eskelinen (2001) makes a critical distinction between the sort of learning exhibited by both process drama and video games, and that of engaging in traditional text-based learning. He makes the point that the dominant mode of learning in literature, mainstream theatre and film is interpretative, while in games and process drama it is configurative. He says:

In art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret whereas in games we have to interpret in order to configure, and proceed from the beginning to the winning of some other situation. (Eskelinen 2001: 2)

This type of learning is directly applicable to the ergodic learning pathwork that Aarseth describes in *Cybertext* (1997). He describes a phenomenon whereby the player, or user, of a text is a closely integrated figure in the construction of a semiotic sequence. They construct the text by their input into the given elements. He argues that traditional texts require little input from the reader, apart from eye movements and page turning. He contrasts this with dramatic texts that require nontrivial effort to construct and traverse them, such as interactive fiction, process drama or video games. Aarseth uses the Greek words *ergon* (work) and *hodos* (path) to describe these as *ergodic* texts (1997: 1–2). Within process drama, the participants construct the narrative from the experiential moments of immersion within the negotiated group devised world. This is a very different experience from actors performing a written text or the theatrical experience of being members of an audience participating in the unfolding of a written text.

Similarly, within video games during the process of playing — say, for example, *EverQuest* — the participants are engaged in the construction of an individual and unique screen-based semiotic structure. This consists of a selective configuration of the game elements and their own player choices, and produces a unique improvised lived environment. The wide-ranging variable expression of meaning built into such a non-linear game text should not be confused with the semantic ambiguity of linear print-based texts, which allow for different reader interpretation of a preset format. The game world of *EverQuest* is constructed through an individual player's work and exists as a unique artefact, and hence is an ergodic text as Aarseth defines it.

Of particular interest is how closely learning concepts drawn from process drama, such as understanding role distance and role protection (Carroll 1986), apply to video games learning. For example, by initially ignoring a game's manual, most players appear to have a learning experience that closely mirrors the process of experiential learning that occurs in role-based process drama (Carroll and Cameron 2003). In the role-playing video game *EverQuest*, a player's continued interaction with game elements and tasks is rewarded with points for experience. A new player practices martial skills by killing rats, skeletons and other creatures that conveniently exist in plague proportions on the introductory levels. By becoming successful at these tasks, the character is eventually promoted to a higher skill level. Each time a character is promoted, the player can distribute a small amount of experience points among a range of character skills and attributes. In this way, the player can shape the character's growing expertise in or knowledge of certain areas.

EverQuest's promotion system also allows for a penalty-free learning zone for the player. Until a character is promoted to a skill level of 10, they can die and be regenerated largely without loss. They will be returned to a safe location, and will keep whatever items they were carrying at the time. However, once a character achieves level 10 experience, it becomes necessary for the player to locate their 'corpse' in order to recover those items. If the character has died in a particularly awkward location, recovery may not be possible. This can be a significant penalty in a game that relies heavily on the collecting of powerful weapons, useful tools, valuable objects and magical items. Maintaining this inventory can be an expensive pursuit, both in terms of accumulating the game wealth to purchase or pursue these items, and literally in terms of the subscription costs to play the game long enough to develop a character's worth.

Restricting the risks for characters below level 10 experience allows new or less able players to indulge in high-risk behaviour while at the same time being protected by their role distance from deep identification with the character so that his or her potential danger becomes a positive learning experience. The authors have noted a similar process at work when learning to play other video games, such as their introduction to *Resident Evil — Code: Veronica X* that frequently involved gruesome deaths for their avatar Claire, the character representation of the player, until their skills and strategies improved (Cameron and Carroll 2004).

Conclusion

There is already considerable discourse on the developing forms of digital 'interactive drama'. This paper contributes to that discussion by suggesting a theoretical connection between the conventions of live role-based performance of process drama, and the mediated performance of online role-playing video games. It is clear that a central element of both process drama and multiplayer online video games is their ability to allow participants/players to 'step into somebody else's shoes'. Both forms contain role distance and role protection conventions that allow a fluid 'toggling' between close active engagement within the unstructured moments of the event, and a more protected observation or reflection on the experience. In video games, this toggling can be as instant as a keyboard press to switch the on-screen viewing perspective.

The authors' experience of learning to play *EverQuest* demonstrates the increasing closeness of performance elements within both fields. Process drama's appeal in the educational setting is its ability to provide a protected means of experiencing and curriculum learning from an experiential position. The mutability of digital identities, as realised in online games, provides a similar penalty-free opportunity for exploring social relationships, identities and experiences 'as if' the player is somebody else. Switching in and out of (or between) characters, or toggling distance between first-person participation and third-person observation, provide mechanisms by which the participant/player can reflect on and adjust their involvement in the events they are a part of.

The challenge inherent in this digital gaming form is to explore how this connection might be further applied in fields such as education, where — at least within Western culture — young people's concepts of performance, role and individual identity have already been changed by an increasingly mediated world. The ability to manipulate or 'edit' identity is a concept already assimilated into the digital world-view of many young learners. As more video game-based resources for the classroom emerge, it becomes increasingly important to incorporate artistic notions of role distance and role protection in their development. This may also help to address the 'moral panic' reactions to the use of games in classroom learning.

A continuing discussion between educators and especially process drama specialists and game designers on how best to connect these new learning and identity conventions to artistic form and curriculum content would seem worth having.

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