

Preface and Ac- knowledg- ments

Something begins when I read the books of Terry Pratchett. He has the gift of weaving together networks of Fantasy¹ and reality, entertainment and cultural criticism, intellect, wit and sexiness, in a seemingly effortless mix that makes me laugh – and *think*. The best creations are blends of concepts that we do not expect to be compatible, but someone imagined them to be so anyway. The best forms of leisure, education, and work are those that provide an encounter with great people, as well as with yourself.

Everything starts somewhere, although many physicists disagree. But many people have always been dimly aware of the problem with the start of things. They wonder aloud how the snowplough driver gets to work, or how the makers of dictionaries look up the spelling of words. Yet there is the constant desire to find some point in the twisting, knotting, raveling nets of space-time on which a metaphorical finger can be put to indicate that here, here, is the point where it all began... (Pratchett 1996, 11)

Today, we no longer understand meeting yourself as meeting your “true identity” but finding out where you are situated, which roles you play, and which roles you can play, to imagine who we can become. In one of his most cited passages, “All the world’s a stage,” Shakespeare compared the world to a stage and life to a play. As sociologist Erving Goffman noted in furthering the metaphor, those roles are not masks, all those roles combined are us. We are not only the actors, we can also be the audience. In each situation, in each social interaction, we play a different role, as identity is a construct, an ongoing process that can both be playful and serious, but one that always involves power relations.

While we gained consensus over this concept of identity, the world became wired into a global information network. Simultaneously, Fantasy role-playing games emerged as a leisure activity in which players consciously play with roles.

One of the most popular online role playing games, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), is a mishmash between Fantasy and reality, a mix between romantic neo-medievalism and high-tech culture. While players dwell as elves, gnomes, and orcs in worlds of

¹ “Fantasy” as a genre is capitalized in order to distinguish between the Fantasy genre and fantasy in terms of the imaginary.

make-believe, they are both going with the flow of an imaginary character and world, as well as building an active out-of-character social network that stretches out over different social groups, nationalities, and time zones. Players are simultaneously escaping, questioning, and constructing their selves and the world.

This may sound paradoxical and confusing from a dualistic perspective. But if we listen to the growing field of network science and stop putting everything in opposing boxes and start to look for connections, what is it that we see then? Science is also about blending concepts that we may not expect to be compatible at first sight. Yet, with a combination of reason and imagination, we can learn to understand the patterns that connect it all. Fantasy role-play is my leisure, work, and education, it's where I encounter great people as well as the many roles that make me. Meanwhile, I gained a nickname or two and wrote a thesis.

Writing this thesis was like writing a travelogue. While playing and researching it was not yet a story. Only later, looking at the window of my word processor, I could look over all my experiences and shape them into a meaningful whole. This meaningful whole, which we call scholarship, stories, and anecdotes, has a temporary beginning and an ending. These stories could begin at any number of times and places in the "twisting, knotting, raveling nets of space-time". But if I had to make a list of places to put down some "metaphorical fingers" to indicate where this thesis started, then it would look something like this...

*Something began*² when I was walking down the streets of San Jose in California together with a group of Dutch game designers, educators, and researchers. It was March 2006 and the town was once again the stage for the yearly *Game Developers Conference*. To me, San Jose represents American suburbia. This is Silicon Valley, the place where Fantasy, magic, and technology were woven seamlessly together from the 1970s onwards. Colorful but worn-out wooden houses with romantic verandas stand next to huge offices, the mirrored windows of which reflect the midday sun and streetlights in the evening. Although the streets do have sidewalks, the wide grid of the town is clearly meant for driving

² The first parts of each paragraph have been rudely stolen and modified from Mr. Terry Pratchett (*Hogfather*, 1996), I hope he forgives me as everything has to start somewhere.

instead of walking. Out of the blue, one of the game designers asked me to which high school I had gone. On the streets of this American suburbia, we rediscovered our common ground: suddenly I recognized his name and face – he had been one of the three boys in high school who had introduced me to the first Fantasy role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*.

It had been a year earlier when my green-haired gnome character Yara burped rudely in the face of the older-looking gnome who had just handed her a muffin. It was February 2005, and a friend (playing a female night elf) and I were running through the snow-covered lands Dun Morogh, Azeroth, which can be found inside the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. It was the start of many hours of online role-play.

And earlier still, when I was studying history in Utrecht. The favorite hobby of one of my fellow students was playing and gamemastering Fantasy role-playing games. He took me to a game shop called *The Cave*, which could be found in one of the cellars by the wharves of the medieval inner city of Utrecht. During my studies, the cellar by the wharf became my second home. It was the place where I would read my history books and write my papers while in between chatting with the many gamers who came into the shop. At night I would meet with friends in cramped and candlelit student rooms to socialize and play pen and paper role-playing games.

And earlier still, when I visited the *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* that took place in the park in front of my father's office. I was ten and, together with my father, I made my way through the maze of old and colorful circus tents that housed the traveling theater festival. I was dazzled by the performances that were going on not only in the tents but also on the street: there were jugglers, opera singers, actors, and the smell of oriental food. I told myself that later – when I was grown up – this was where I wanted to be. *The Boulevard of Broken Dreams* would later become the traveling theater festival known as *De Parade*. Years later, along with friends, I would design and act in a theater production for this very same festival which was based on live-action role-play.

And much, much, earlier than that, when I was six and flying over the schoolyard of my public school. Each break, my best friend and I would go up to the take-off area – a small brick wall that fenced off the schoolyard. We climbed on top of it and took off. Together we pretended to fly over the village where we lived, looking down on the little houses, cars, and people.

In order of appearance the people in the anecdotes are: Richard van Tol, Zuraida Buter, Jørgen Støvne, Martijn Adelmund, the Wai Toe Ki-crew and Otto-Chris Holterman. I am very grateful for my encounters with them, as they inspired me to develop the ideas for this thesis. Over the last two years Zuraida and Jørgen travelled with me through the lands of Azeroth and academic research in various guises. Their brilliant role-play, jokes and clever insights made me laugh, cry and think. You're the best!

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