Semiotic and nonsemiotic MUD performance

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ABSTRACT

Using performance and theatricality as metaphors to describe MUD adventure games this paper starts out by defining a difference between 'performative' and 'theatrical' acts within MUDs. Performative acts differ from theatrical acts in that they are effecting 'real' changes to the MUD environment, thus directly influencing the game in one way or another. It is argued that to understand the performative aspects of MUDs it is necessary to separate 'acts' from 'meaning', and to pay special attention to the former in order to avoid confusing the questing process (which should be our main focus of attention) with the experience of having solved a quest.

Keywords

MUDs, acts, quests, performance, theatricality, act/meaning, performatives/constatives

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will describe two ways of viewing MUD performance: as either theatrical or performative. While the former is playing with meaning and signification, the latter can be said first and foremost to serve a nonsemiotic function in the game. [1]

I will start out by explaining how I use and understand theatricality, and its relation to the 'real world'. Then I'll turn to performance. Very briefly I'll present some of the most popular performance understandings, before I define the one I will be using in relation to theatricality. After defining my theoretical position I will show how I use the two concepts performance and theatricality to point to a difference in the ways characters perform in MUDs.

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[1] This is not to say that the performative cannot also be viewed semiotically. What I want to point to, however, is an effect of the performative that is not concerned with the communication/production of meaning.

My main object of research is an adventure oriented MUD situated at the Technical University of Berlin, TubMud. If nothing else is indicated, my examples are taken from this MUD. The principles presented in this paper will not necessarily apply to all kinds of MUDs, as there are many types, different in both structure, content and purpose. I think, however, that they could be applied to most MUDs of the adventuregamelike type.

2. THEATRICALITY & PERFORMANCE

2.1 Theatricality.

Theatricality is the process that makes it possible to transform an everyday situation into some sort of fiction: either in the theatre, done by actors; or on the bus, in the street, or at home - by me or you, as either actor or spectator. Theatricality can be to show things in a different setting than the one in which they are normally perceived. It can also be just to see things differently. It can be done intentionally, or unintentionally. A misreading can be theatrical, as it creates a breach in the perception of 'meaning'

As MUDs are textual representations of spaces, places, objects and beings, nothing is really seen in a MUD. All representations are - more or less vividly – imagined, and they are imagined differently by each player, according to his or her previous experiences inside and outside the MUD. The experiences called upon while interpreting inside the MUD we could call 'context' or 'frame'. Thus, spaces, places, objects and beings are framed differently by each and every player.

This is why MUDs should be seen as a fictional world I imagine by interacting with room-, object- and character descriptions. I know that there are real persons behind the characters, but I also know that unless I have met these people in real life, my interaction with them is more theatrical than real. I imagine them.

In this way, MUDs come close to being a theatre-for-oneself, as defined by Nicolas Evreinoff almost one hundred years ago. (Evreinoff 1927: 187-198) The theatre-for-oneself is a theatre not-for-everyone, and still everyone can experience it. It simply means to transform what we know as 'reality' into a theatre, by pretending it is staged. This change of attitude towards something familiar produces a change in perception: Signs are reloaded with potential new meaning, and it's all happening in the mind of the spectator who wilfully (or accidentally)

theatricalises the situation by "misreading" it. MUDs provide numerous possibilities for such "misreadings", as written descriptions of objects provide little information compared to seeing objects in the real world. Additionally, most MUDs are already to a certain extent "theatrically framed" by explicitly being fictitious places, situated "elsewhere".

2.2 Performance

Performance is a much more complex concept than theatricality is. Because the term is used to describe phenomena within a lot of different disciplines, there exist several different definitions of it. Thus, in sociology performance could be connected to the representations of the self, while in linguistics it is the words that perform; when someone makes a promise, for instance. In theatre studies the word 'performance' can either generally refer to the staging of something, or specifically to the form 'performance art'. When used in relation to performance art, performance means 'real', the opposite of 'theatrical'. Generally used, and in the social sciences specifically, the meaning of the term seems to be closer to 'theatricality'.

Thus, while some disciplines will use a representational performance concept, others will insist that performance is non-representation. Theorists insisting on the non-representational aspects of performance will describe performance in terms of 'physical presence', 'non-representation', or 'non-referentiality'. This is common in performance art theory, where performance is viewed as the non-representational counterpart to representational theatre. (Féral 1992; Féral 1997/1982) Also the linguistic 'performatives' are described as non-referential, meaning that they do not refer to some external reality but constitute themselves acts. (Austin 1997/1955).

When playing a MUD, all we see is writing. Rooms, objects and beings are not *really* rooms, objects and beings; they are *written representations* of rooms, objects and beings. It could therefore seem paradoxical that I want to make use of a nonsemiotic performance concept in relation to MUDs. On the other hand, it is possible to define a 'real dimension' within the limits of the game, constituted by the game and isolated from the 'real world' taking place outside of it. Although affecting me - the real person in front of the screen - only emotionally, some effects of the game will severely affect my character. This will in turn affect the way I am able to proceed with the game.

3. MUD PERFORMANCE

3.1 Emotes and predefined verbs

In many MUDs there are two different ways to simulate character action. One way is to describe the action using the emote command, the other way is simply to type certain predefined verbs like 'smile', 'jump', 'greet player' or similar, which the program will then "translate" into happening.

Example:

1) emote

> emote smiles but doesn't look very happy.

Ragnhild smiles but doesn't look very happy.

2) predefined verb

> smile

Ragnhild smiles happily.

Using the emote command the player is free to define more or less exactly how she wants the action performed. Using the predefined verbs, she must rely on what is already defined in the program. There are, however, a lot of combinations possible, as most verbs can be combined with adverbs and/or modified in other ways.

Both emotes and predefined verbs are first and foremost used to communicate with the other players, that is, they are tools for communication and for playing role-playing games. Other kinds of games are not played against the other players, but against the program. Playing against the program, the player is "communicating" with preprogrammed objects and non-player characters. This kind of "communication" will be the focus of the rest of this paper. But first, let me present the theoretical framework for this part, the 'performatives' of J.L. Austin.

3.2 The performatives of J.L. Austin

In his book *How to do Things with Words* Austin defines a certain type of utterance that he calls 'performatives'. According to Austin these utterances differ from ordinary statements in that:

A. they do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true' or 'false'; and

B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as 'just', saying something. (Austin 1997:5)

Examples of actions that are being performed this way, by the uttering of certain words under certain circumstances, could be marrying, promising or betting. By uttering 'I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow' (Austin's example), you make a bet. And this is important: you aren't just reporting it. Because you are making a bet and not merely reporting it, it makes no sense to ask whether this utterance is true or false. To be true or false a statement would have to refer to something other than itself, and as performatives aren't referring to anything, being acts and not reports, they cannot be true or false. They can however, be happily or unhappily performed, dependent on the circumstances under which they are being uttered. Not all circumstances would be appropriate for making a bet, for instance. If there are no other persons present, the words normally uttered to make a bet wouldn't have effect. The betting performance would thus be unsuccessful.

Performatives occur in MUDs too, of course. Representing fictional worlds more or less similar to the world we know, there are obviously instances of virtual marriages or of virtual betting. To take a more specific example, explaining how performatives 'work' in a MUD, consider the following: A highly ranked clan member of one of the TubMud clans will define another player as a member of her clan by typing the words 'welcome <name of player>'. Typing 'welcome <name of player>' is thus not to

make a constative or representational statement: it is to make the player a member, and the only possible way to do so too. Less obvious but not less performative are the commands with which the player moves around in the MUD. By typing 'n', or 'north', the player moves the character to the north. If there is an exit to the north, this performative will most likely be felicitous, if there isn't, or if the room to the north is open to wizards only, the character will not move north, and the performative will be infelicitous.

3.3 Theatrical emotes and performative verbs

While both the emotes and the predefined verbs from my first example will serve the communication and role-playing between the players first and foremost, some predefined verbs will work performatively too, dependent on the circumstances. The command 'welcome' is, for instance, in TubMud also functioning as a communications verb, when used by a character that has not reached the clan rank required to welcome new members. Thus, typed by the player of Edvard, an "ordinary" character, 'welcome <name of character>' will result in nothing but a message on the screens of the other player: 'Edvard welcomes you'. It's a friendly and communicative gesture, nothing more. When typed by the player of a clan leader, on the other hand, the action will have 'real' concequences: it will define the other character as a new member of the clan.

Character actions could thus be defined as more or less theatrical or performative dependent on the effects they are producing: emotional effects, affecting the player more than the character, or 'real' effects, affecting the character directly, or otherwise producing a change within the MUD world.

Emotes are normally not having any effect on the MUD environment. But as they are affecting the other players, in role-playing environments they'll typically be effecting re-actions from the other players/characters[2]. Thus, in a role-playing environment, emotes could be said to have performative effects. The same goes for the predefined verbs when these are used to communicate with the other players.

When used to communicate with objects and non-player characters, relevant predefined verbs should effect certain reactions from the object. When obvious approaches to interact with an object fail, MUDding is frustrating and boring. Extraordinary captivating room descriptions cannot, as some seem to believe, replace performativeness. Without performative interaction, the player will not only have to imagine the environment: she will have to *pretend* to be playing too.

4. QUESTING

4.1 Don Juan's promises

In her book *The Literary Speech Act,* Shoshana Felman is using Austin's performatives to analyse the Don Juan myth, based on her readings of the play *Don Juan* by Molière. Of performatives, it is the promise - or more precisely - the *broken* promise that defines and motivates the character Don Juan, and confuses and frustrates his antagonists. Felman describes the conflict between Don Juan and the others as a conflict between two orders; "the order of the act, and the order of meaning, the register of pleasure and the register of knowledge." (Felman 1983: 31)

A conflict between act and meaning is present in the activity of quest solving too. To do a quest is to search for the meaning of it. Having reached this meaning, the quest is solved. The paradox of questing is that as soon as meaning is reached, the quest stops functioning as *quest*. When meaning is found, the quest is *history*. It cannot be done again, as it is simply not the same experience to solve a puzzle quest for the second time.

In this, quests differ from ordinary, non-ergodic stories. The experience of re-reading a non-ergodic story isn't necessarily fundamentally different from the first time experience of reading it. This is because stories in general belong to the order of meaning, together with the constatives, and not to the order of the act. Quests, on the other hand, are basically performative: they belong first and foremost to the order of the act. As soon as they're solved, though, they turn into constatives. The reason quests can easily be confused with "stories" is that we are normally analysing the quest in retrospective, after we've already solved it. To ignore the performative aspect of quests this way is fundamentally to misjudge questing as a practice. Being acts before they are meaning, we must focus on the way quests *act* to understand the way they work. [3]

Felman writes: [...] Don Juan in fact does nothing but *promise the constative.* (Felman 1983: 35) This is exactly what quests are doing too, they are promising their solution, promising *meaning*. But as meaning is also the death of the quest, it is frequently breaking this promise, in order to prolong the questing experience.

4.2 Object reactions

Objects that the player finds in the quest area act as such *promises of meaning*. When the player finds a new object she will try to decode its significance in relation to the quest, to come closer to the quest's solution. To find the meaning of an object and determine its significance, the player must try out different ways of interacting with the object.

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[2] By role-playing environments I mean MUDs that are explicitly devoted to 'role-playing'. Not all MUDs are equally serious about this role-playing component. Role-playing is done in interaction with other players/characters, and not in interaction with the program. Thus, role-playing a quest would require a game master to determine the performative effects that are otherwise determined by the program. Such performative effects will, however, not be further discussed in this paper.

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[3] Espen Aarseth has a similar point regarding the relationship between narrative and ergodic discourse in general: "Once realized, the ergodically produced sequence may be regarded and narratively reproduced as a story, but not one told for the player's benefit at the time of playing." (Aarseth 1999: 35)

Compare the following three programmed responses[4] to a player's attempts of opening a box she finds in the MUD:

Example 1:
> open box
What?

Example 2:
> open box
You can't open the box!

Example 3:
> open box
The box is locked.
> unlock box
You don't possess the right key.
Etc.

In the first example, there is no preprogrammed reaction to the attempt of opening the box, and thus the program responds "What?". The second example is a little less frustrating, with a reaction that at least appears to be intentional: "You can't open the box!". In the third example, however, the reaction is more engaging: "The box is locked" suggests that there is a key to the box, and "You don't posess the right key" suggests that a key is to be found, somewhere else.

Let's suppose that all three boxes are empty. They are not containing anything the player needs in order to solve the quest. In other words, they are nothing but stage properties, pure decorations, meant to serve the ambience of the quest environment. In such cases the player should perhaps not waste too much time trying to interact with them, as this isn't bringing her closer to the quest's solution in any case.

In the two first examples the player is also finished with the box after the first attempt of opening it. Ignoring the box she will be 'closer' to the quests solution, that is, its end. The reaction in the third example, though, may lead her on a detour seeking the missing key to be able to open the box. This detour will not affect the meaning of the quest at all, as it has no significance whatsoever regarding the quest's solution. The 'meaning' of this detour is to prolong the questing experience, to produce 'meaningful action'. Thus, to see the purpose of the detour, we can't focus on the quest's solution, we must focus on the quest as act.

Felman writes: "Paradoxically, the failure to carry out the promise makes it possible to begin it again: it is because the [...] promise is not kept that it can be renewed." (Felman 1983: 40)

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[4] It's a hypothetical example, constructed by me and not taken from any MUD. All responses are typical, however, they do occur frequently.

Where the boxes from our first two examples reveal their insignificance on the player's first attempt of opening them, the third box shamelessly continues to promise. Until the player succeeds in finding the right key (or solves the quest), this (empty) box will continue to play a significant part in the game as a motivation for the player to keep on playing. When it comes to quest objects, thus, significance is not so much a question of representation, as it is question of performance. To the questing experience, it is more important how the object acts, than what it represents.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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