Narrative Play in Perennial Games

Comprehensive Exam - Computational Media

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1 Introduction

I still remember the day the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj opened[1]. It lagged unbelievably much. There were so many players, gathered in a space not intended for that congestion. My friends and I had no idea what we were doing. We were underlevelled, unprepared. We just came to look around, join the spectacle. And then these skyscraper-tall Anubises waltz around with skulls next to their health bars and flatten us all. And then the server crashed.

We, however, were not deterred. We all jumped on a different server and made new characters, all starting in the Dwarf/Gnome starting region. We all made them at the same time and did all the starting quests together. That was when I learned that when grouping in a party from level 1, the entire 5-man party levels up at the same time. That infamous golden light and basking horns blaring out times five in our dinky headsets. We all laughed and howled when it happened. It did not take long for the server to be back up again and we left our gnomes forever. I don't think we ever played those characters again. But that will always be a part of The Opening of Ahn-Qiraj to me, even though it took place on a different server than the event itself.

The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj was a one-time event in World of Warcraft (WoW), the popular MMO by Blizzard Entertainment Ltd. (2004) . It was an event that took months to prepare for and in a single night of grand (laggy) spectacle, it was over. It is not the only live event in games but it is the first I remember. It is one of the things I think back on fondly when remembering my time playing World of Warcraft in elementary school, even though my active role in it was negligible. But there is also something else. When I think back on my time playing World of Warcraft, it is not only the bright and burning which comes to mind, but the daily life of it. The hours I spent playing Warsong Gulch, playing at being a strategist. The one quest where I helped a turtle across a desert. When I finally got a long cloak that went to my legs. When I ran around with

[1] For those who do not know, Ahn'Qiraj is a raid in World of Warcraft that opened with a giant community event where hundreds of players would gather to defend against an incoming horde of enemies, flooding out from two large gates. I should also clarify that this was the specific opening on the "Doomhammer" server, which I played on.

Figure 1: Promotional Image for Ahn'Qiraj. I tried to search for old screenshots of mine of the event, which I do remember taking, but I could not find them, unfortunately.

a friend in Orgrimmar, asking high level characters for pittance gold to buy the expensive mounts. When I made silly machinima for no one but myself. When Burning Crusade came out, and the Portal didn't work. And then even later, after I stopped playing, when I continued to follow the story of the World. And as I kept following the changes and new stories, as people migrated away from WoW onto other, newer things. I do not play World of Warcraft anymore. But in some ways, this work would never have existed if I had not. I have little desire to play the game today, but today I see what I was enthralled by back then in so many other places. And it is still this phenomenon I want to understand, it is still this *something* World of Warcraft managed to do that I am chasing. There will be examples from World of Warcraft in here, but there will also be others that are more recent. Destiny (Bungie and Activision, 2014, 2017)[2]. Final Fantasy XIV (Square Enix, 2013). Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017). League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009). All these games share a certain form of storytelling I have named "perennial experiences".

This literature review is about understanding this "something" World of Warcraft did. I am choosing to call it "narrative play", because I am curious how these games tell stories for and with their community, and how the ongoing live nature affects the experience. Throughout this literature review, we will attempt to understand the complex interactions that attract people to playing these games, see how this happens through the promise of enchantment and ability to participate, while providing the space for rich, fictional universes to

[2]There is a fun connective tissue between Destiny and Ahn'Qiraj: Luke Smith, the former Creative Director of Destiny, played World of Warcraft and became the person to ring the gong on his server to call for the opening of the gates, which only one person per server would ever do. He has mentioned this as an inspiration for where he wanted to take Destiny.

explore and change through playful interactions over time. We will see how is done by both the author and audience—in fact we will see a move away from these two as the fundamental split in narrative play. Rather we will see a move towards understanding how these games work—how they facilitate this play—and how the community and the authors respond to it, both in terms of the fiction and in terms of how the play of the game itself changes over time.

To do this, I have decided to tackle the problem from three separate angles. The first angle, Play (Section 2), is the most obvious: We need to understand when and how play happens in games like these. For that I have chosen to specifically focus on the *boundary* of play, and its related term "the magic circle", to understand how fraught and complicated even defining *when* people are playing can be, but also how valuable defining this border as a social construct still remains. The second, Myth (Section 3), is where this literature review will delve into the complicated topics of mythology and religion. These topics have been compared to perennial games in various ways, and this is a useful lens to understand how the storytelling of perennial games function, as it is more akin to how mythology operates. while also giving us a unique insight into *why* these games are attractive. The third, Space (Section 4), is a lens through which we will understand the game itself, and how it facilitates play, quite literally through its space. However, we will need to expand some typical conceptions of space to encompass the totality of perennial games, by seeing how the space of the virtual world is not a complete picture of the possible playable space, and how a too narrow temporal understanding of space will make it appear static and unchanging.

The guiding research question throughout is *"Why and how do we play with narrative in perennial games?"* Perennial games are in focus in this literature review, however, I do also believe that some of these aspects echo into non-perennial games as well. What perenniality gives us is a focusing lens that sharpens many aspects of narrative play into something unique, and makes it unavoidable to perceive—however, I do not think that this means that all I will go through is *only* present in perennial games. It is just more bright and obvious as a result of it.

Before we delve into the three major angles, I first need to define what I mean by "narrative play" and "perennial game" more closely.

1.1 Narrative Play

First, we need to define narrative play. This will not be a complete definition, but rather a working definition, which we can use through this literature review to compare across terms and to understand the fundamental activity I am interested in. I am naming this narrative play, as a way to describe the activity and give it form. So what is narrative play? If we have narrative instruments (Kreminski and Mateas, 2021a), it is logical that we have narrative play. Constructing narratives with narrative instruments logically seems to be narrative play—that is what we do with musical instruments. But as Kreminski shows, there are more ways to experience narrative instruments than a pure author

(creator) relationship. That would be like saying the only interaction with an instrument is composition. We play existing pieces on instruments. We can fulfill prescribed roles in games, executing predefined scripts. We can improvise, creating new experiences within expected boundaries. But we also do more than "play" on instruments. Practice. Repair. Ignore. Improvise. Work on. Warmup. Exercise. As an interactable object, as a social object, instruments might be designed for one purpose, but they get used for many others—both to facilitate and move towards that activity, but also in subversion of it. This is present in games too, as we already have research showing how "games" are larger than just "played activities" (Calleja, 2012; Pargman and Jakobsson, 2008; Taylor, 2009) (See Section 2). We can play in games and we can not play in games. This is the first aspect of narrative play I want to highlight. I am interested in a type of play that is broader than seen in "narrative instruments", and thus I am looking at games that are not played exclusively for narrative creation, but also just "regularly" played to experience a pre-written story. This, too, is narrative play.

But play, naturally is much larger than games or musical instruments. Sicart's view on play shows how it is appropriative (Sicart, 2014), it is able to turn objects not meant for play into played objects. We can turn almost anything into a musical instrument by hitting it rhythmically. We can turn any space into a playspace, changing its meaning through made-up yet socially agreed-upon rules. In the types of games we will be looking at (perennial games), this type of play will also be present, shown through players interacting with the game outside the game, turning aspects of their daily life, websites, real-life spaces and real-life interactions into parts of the playspaces, where the players are playing with and around the narrative of the game. This, too, is narrative play.

Narrative play is, in broad strokes, when a person is "playing with narrative", whether that be pre-scripted narrative or improvised, whether that be wholly compositional or directed. But the type of narrative play I want to focus on here, is a bit more specific. I am more focused on experiences where players are actors or active audience members rather than (co)authors. Where the play happens not on instruments but stages—play-acting rather than playwriting. Stages allow for movement but still provide a frame, they allow creativity and expression but their boundaries are more set, a script and a director is more in control. Events are introduced from on high that alter the story. The players are not in charge of the foundation, but merely their own actions inside it.

However, I am ultimately not thinking of a static stage but a moving one. A morphing and shape-shifting stage, one that has to push things aside to make room for something new. A stage that never looks the same way twice and yet is repetitive and cyclical, a stage that has friction, that breaks and heaves, that is sometimes held together with duct-tape, and yet still holds and still allows the players to take the stage and make something with it. A kind of stage that exists not to display but to *play in* and *with*. The narrative play I am focusing on is the kind of narrative play that takes place on such a stage, where the fabric of the world is ever-changing and where what there is to play with changes all the time. Perennial games are such a stage.

1.2 Perennial Games

Perennial games is a type of game I have outlined in an existing paper I wrote with Elin Carstensdottir (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021). However, because of their relevance, I will briefly summarize that paper here. A perennial game is a way to describe long-running, ongoing games, also sometimes called "live-service" games or "live" games, that describes them closer to how they are experienced as stories, rather than describing their distribution. A perennial game is defined by three major aspects, that a game needs to fulfill to be considered a "true" perennial game. The first is perpetuity, meaning it has no defined end from its outset, and it could, provided ample maintenance, go on forever. The second is that it should be temporally continuous, meaning it follows a temporal structure bound to real-world time. This means that it is not tied to any single experience (the virtual world of WoW exists without me being in it), and will thus have moments one can miss. The third is the presence of a "Universal chronicle", an (in-flux) set of events and narratives and diegesis that audience and developer agree upon as true. There is a "canon". And while this can and will be disputed and discussed, no one disagrees that there is a fundamental foundation *to* discuss. The examples of these types of games (and experiences that are not games, as the paper also defines) are myriad and wide-ranging. Perennial games are specifically not a genre of play or rules, but can manifest in many forms. World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004), League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009), Blaseball (The Game Band, 2020), Destiny (Bungie and Activision, 2014, 2017), Magic: The Gathering (Wizards of the Coast, 1993), Final Fantasy XIV (Square Enix, 2013), Eve: Online (CCP Games, 2008), and Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) are all examples of perennial games. The paper discusses more details about the specifics of this definition than I will go into here, but I will touch upon one more aspect. The experience of unfolding the diegesis and universal chronicle of a perennial game happens in an interplay between the three major actors: The authors, the audience, and the game itself, as can be seen in figure 2 (originally from Larsen and Carstensdottir (2021)).

It is in constant conversation over time between these three entities that the world is formed, and new elements can come from all three. The authors can add new content to the game, and the audience can build upon that and feed back into the world with their own behavior, which can change the world, and the game itself can also, through systemic, unplanned or emergent interactions, create new stories that the other entities can react to. And this, over time, influences and shapes the universal chronicle of the experience.

I want to address one addendum the paper did not cover. We need to relate perennial games to the previous concept of "vast narratives" that we were unfortunately unaware of at the time of writing the paper. Vast Narratives, as defined by Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin (2009) share a lot of commonalities with perennial games, although there are a couple differences. Vast narratives is defined more explicitly by their narrative content and its presentation. Cross-media universes like Marvel or or Doctor Who, which I can see both fitting as

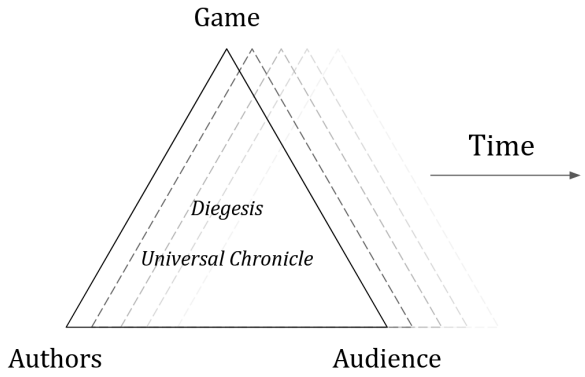

Figure 2: This triangle shows the trifecta of control as shared between the author, the game or system, and the audience, as they negotiate the diegesis and universal chronicle. These then evolve concurrently over time, as shown by the figure's third dimension, which shapes the experience through the control all three exert.

perennial experiences. However, they also include the TV show The Wire as one of their primary examples, through its vast exploration of American politics from many comprehensive angles, which is not quite the same as the perennial experience definition. Here it is the content that is vast, and then we enter the territory that perennial experiences avoid: The actual specifics of content, genre, play, or activity. The perennial definition is one of format rather than content. That said, there are many correlations, as most of their other examples of vast narratives, like World of Warcraft or Doctor Who or superhero comics, fit quite well in the perennial experiences mold.

To end, I want to note a crucial part of the perennial definition in the triangle. Note the use of *audience* rather than player. In the paper, we consider the relation of the non-authors to be that of an audience, rather than that of a player. The audience are who experience the perennial narrative. The players actuate the experience, bring it to life, interact with the game and move it, but there is a subtle but crucial difference between that and experiencing the perennial narrative which can happen decoupled from the actual play. We can see examples of people who act solely as players or solely as audience members of perennial games, and therefore it is valuable to separate them, despite the fact that many people do both at the same time. Audience and player are here lenses to view the experience through, rather than mutually exclusive actions.

For this literature review, however, I must stress something important: While we can separate the audience and play experience of the game itself in a perennial game, when we reframe perennial games in terms of narrative play, the audience are given an active role. The audience, while perhaps not playing the game (as in, are not active participants in the world of Destiny) they can still *play with the story* of Destiny. This will become clear through

later examples as well, but one of the points with this work I want to highlight is how narrative play is (also) an activity of the audience. The audience were never passive, even in the perennial paper, but now we, through narrative play, have a way to describe what they are doing. However, this role is a different role than the typical usage of *"playing the game"*, as that does not necessarily imply playing with the narrative, so the split of player and audience is still valuable.

Now, we are ready to investigate the concept of play, which naturally is a vital topic to understand these phenomenae.

2 The Boundaries of Play

This section will outline a specific part of play as it pertains to game studies. Play studies is a broader topic with far-reaching theories from Caillois (2001) to Huizinga (1956) to Sutton-Smith (2009) to Suits (2020) and Sicart (2014), and play is even broader still, and could include animal play or instrument play, or child's play, etc. (Bateson, 1955). I am here intending to focus on play in game studies, and not just that, but specifically looking at the boundaries between play and not-play, and the term so often defined (and contested, as we will see) as this boundary: The magic circle. I do this for one key reason. There is a strong correlation between essays on the magic circle and perennial games, so much so that in many cases, their examples of an eroding or porous or breaking or destroyed magic circle *are* perennial games (MMOs, ARGs, etc.) Perennial games already then were key in redefining play as not so clearly defined. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. This chapter will outline first what I mean by play, then go into what the magic circle is and where it comes from, then listing all the myriad of criticisms it has gotten over the years, and finally some of its defenders, before I will summarize how and why the magic circle is even still relevant today. For this, I will be leaning on the many re-interpretations and reviews of the magic circle that has been done over the years, notably by Juul (2008), Stenros (2014), and Calleja (2012) who each reflect on many of the previous discussions of the magic circle as it has happened in game studies.

Play has been discussed throughout academia for a long time. From Caillois (2001)' types of play to Huizinga (1956)'s "playing man" to Bateson (1955)'s views on play and fantasy as some of the examples from the 1950s, up to today's game studies (Calleja, 2012; Juul, 2008), play is an inseparable part of games: After all, we play games, do we not? There are many nuanced views on what play is at large, which I will not spend too long on, other than to gather some of the primary attributes about play from it. Play is most often defined as unproductive but meaningful (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003), or it is productive in itself (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Sicart, 2014), non-serious (Huizinga, 1956), voluntary (Huizinga, 1956), paratelic (for its own purpose) (Nieuwdorp, 2005; Sicart, 2014), and personal (Sicart, 2014) or social (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Ringland et al., 2022), and an active engagement (Suits, 2020). As can already be seen here, some of these definitions are perhaps contradictory, but the important point about play is not these distinctions. What I want to focus on for this review, is the boundary between play and non-play in games. As we delve through narrative play, we cannot avoid more freeform kinds of play as well, but for right now, we will focus on structured play. There are some rules, defined either beforehand or during play, that players relate their play to. I am thus distancing myself slightly from Sicart's more romantic notion of play put forward in "Play Matters" (Sicart, 2014), although I do find that notion useful for other aspects (and it will be used here and there). But I, unlike him in that work, am interested in games as a fundamental category of play. However, this fundamental category is not as clear cut as we might hope it to be, and in fact, the very idea of demarcating a boundary between play and non-play in games is

a heavily debated topic that starts and, perhaps, ends with "the magic circle".

2.1 The Origin of the Magic Circle

It is quite an accepted truism that the commonly accepted first inspiration for the magic circle is to be found in Johan Huizinga (1956)'s book "Homo Ludens" about play and culture (Montola, 2005; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). And this is true to the extent that is the first mention of the term "magic circle" about the concept of play as an example of how ritual play is different than the profane, non-magic world. However, here is the most common quote introducing the term "magic circle":

> *All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. . .The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated hedged round, hallowed within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.* (Huizinga, 1956,p. 12)

The magic circle, as you may notice, is paid little attention. It is an example among many, not the key argument in Huizinga's statement. It is barely a keyword. It was surprising to me when I read this, knowing the influence it has had in game studies at large, that it came from such a small beginning. However, reading the many interpretations and criticisms of the magic circle, the cause for this becomes clear. As stated by Moore (2011), Stenros (2014) and others (Calleja, 2012; Juul, 2008), the more common understanding of the magic circle in game studies comes from Salen and Zimmerman's interpretation of Huizinga from their 2004 book Rules of Play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). They directly cite Huizinga for this term but, as Stenros and others have identified later, have a rather different definition for it than his. Salen and Zimmerman took this image of a magic circle and used it as a metaphor to describe the separability of play systems (Stenros, 2014). This boundary is fragile and prone to breaking, but distinct: There are moments of play and moments of non-play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). As mentioned by Calleja, note this quote from Rules of Play: *"Huizinga used magic circle as one of his examples. we're going to use it as a shorthand for the special place and time created by a game."* (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003) A *shorthand*, they wrote. The term "magic circle" for them, takes on a rather different life: It is a way to describe the separation from the rest of life a game creates. As Calleja further points out, this kind of separation does not suit Huizinga's overall claims with Homo Ludens. He talks about play in culture, how it reverberates through politics and war and religion, how life can be viewed as play. From reading Salen and Zimmerman's definition, you get a rather different view, that of a distinct, complete boundary between play and "life". Marinka Copier (2005,

2007), a dutch academic who rereads Huizinga, shows how this mistranslation of Huizinga prevails throughout English game studies. Her primary point of contention is how Salen and Zimmerman bring up an example of a literal chalk circle on the ground to exemplify the magic circle, which is a quite literal interpretation of a circle defining the boundary of play, which, to Copier, is a much too rigid understanding of Huizinga's points. Huizinga, rather, described an inherent contradiction that play is both separated from "ordinary" life but simultaneously it is an important part of daily life. Its role as an "interlude" in daily routine is an integral part of life in general (Copier, 2005). Huizinga's magic circle is a "sacred space", entirely metaphor, and it becomes too literal in Salen and Zimmerman's descriptions. It is primarily this interpretation of the magic circle that has been criticized throughout game studies. As Stenros lucidly says: *"much of the criticism of Salen and Zimmerman seems to stem from their ill-worded explanation behind the choice of the term"* and, perhaps more strongly: *"It is hard to find a scholar who insists on a strict border between play and non-play"* (Stenros, 2014). Even Zimmerman corrected and addressed these concerns in a later paper in 2012 (Zimmerman, 2012). This concept, of a "magic circle" being a complete, hard boundary between play and life, is a phantom that no one seems to actually agree with.

2.2 The Myriad Criticisms of the Hard Boundary

Yet, there truly is no shortage of examples of people criticizing this viewpoint of play. The following table shows the major academic teardowns of the magic circle, their core reasoning or critique and their proposed replacement.

Reference	**Reasoning/Critique**	**Replacement Metaphor or theory**
Copier (2005)	Salen and Zimmerman mistranslated Huizinga's magic circle, which was never entirely separated from ordinary life.	Turner's liminal spaces. Play is a collection of performances or "ritual acts", that are socially constructed.
Nieuwdorp (2005)	The magic circle is insufficient for pervasive games[3], where reality is part of the game.	Turner. Liminal interface. "Paratelic & paraludic interfaces."
Montola (2005)	The magic circle is frequently expanded in pervasive games, but this is also present in historical examples, such as hide-and-seek.	Keeps the magic circle, but allows expansions.

[3] "Pervasive games" was a new buzzword at the time to try to describe the new flux of games that incorporated real world locations or settings into their play, such as ARGs, AR, location-based games, etc. (Montola, 2005; Nieuwdorp, 2005). Montola defines a pervasive game as something that expands the magic circle, either spatially, temporally, or socially.

Taylor (2009)	Questions the strict division between play and life, through ethnographic studies of MMOs. It is a more fluid distinction.	Calls for investigations of players intervening or participating in the game.
Castronova (2008)	The circle does not include how information from the game affects the real life and world of the player.	"Membrane"
Malaby (2007)	There is no division between play and life at all, through ethnographic studies of Greek gambling games.	Wants to shift games to not be a subset of play, but see them as social artifacts.
Copier (2007)	The magic circle hides the ambiguity, variability, and complexity of actual games and play.	Goffman's Frame analysis. Actor-Network theory.
Lauteren (2007)	Contemporary play is different from Huizinga's time, and we should not compare the two. We need to remember the structural similarities between work and play, which have been set in opposition with each other.	Play is a result of shifting spatial, temporal, and social boundaries that affect what is and is not viewed as play, culturally.
Lammes (2008)	The magic circle is a simplification of the relationship between the game and the world.	"Magic node"
Juul (2008)	The magic circle is a mistranslated and rushed binary explanation of a more complex phenomenon.	"Puzzle piece."
Pargman and Jakobsson (2008)	Through interview studies of "hardcore gamers" they show how gameplay is viewed as decidedly ordinary and non-magical in many situations.	Goffman's Frame analysis. A "no-boundary" hypothesis, describing situations in which everyday life comes to encompass game play
Consalvo (2009)	The magic circle doesn't exist: It is an overly formal and structuralist way of thinking. Cheating serves as her primary example.	Goffman's Frame analysis (through Fine (2002)).

Pearce and Artemesia (2009)	Through her ethnographic study of the Uru Diaspora, she finds how, in the real world, the theoretical sacrosanct circle does not apply.	"A porous circle", or a series of nested, overlapping circles.
Moore (2011)	Considers the mobility of play, how people move in and out of play, and how experienced players perceive no magic circle.	Goffman's Frame analysis. Baudelaire and Benjamin's "flâneur".
Calleja (2012)	The magic circle is a misinterpreted, problem-laden metaphor that game studies should move away from.	Call for a move towards "more nuanced and analytically productive concepts" for digital games.
Creane (2021)	Looks at LARPs. Elements from games can "bleed out" into the real world or the real world can "bleed in" to the game.	A bleeding circle.

It is presented here in a table because I do not want to spend a lot of time on each critique, especially after we have seen how these critiques are essentially fighting a phantom concept[4]. However, some of the criticism is more nuanced and insightful and does afford some merit to look into, as it touches upon more than just defeating a straw man. The number of references is a point in itself. This is more than a mere trifle of an idea that is easily dismissed. The magic circle is nothing if not pervasive in game studies. In 2009, Consalvo announced that "there is no magic circle", and then 3 years later, Calleja, in "Erasing the Magic Circle", tried to erase that which had already been eradicated. Clearly, neither attempt was successful. Even after all these attempts at modification and destruction, it persists. As Stenros mentions, it *"seems to be a useful, powerful metaphor, though it has not been clear what it is a metaphor for"* (Stenros, 2014). The timeline shows how most academic discourse on the topic has waned but it still pops up now and again, as in Creane (2021) and Ringland et al. (2022) (more on this one soon). It is a common refrain to explain the power of games and how they work (Zimmerman, 2012). The interest here for me is how the boundary is broken, and why a binary is insufficient, not if (as that is a given).

First off, a majority of these works discuss the too-literal version of Salen and Zimmerman's example "magic circle", even if they uncritically ascribe it to Huizinga, either exclusively or as well as Salen and Zimmerman. However, a couple, such as Copier and Lauteren do engage with Huizinga's original version, and only Lauteren here is directly critical of that one (Copier in fact uses

[4]Upon reading this research, I could not help getting flashbacks to the Debate That Never Took Place (Frasca, 2003). It seems game studies (and perhaps academia) seems plagued to discuss the phantoms of others.

Huizinga's to create her modification). Some, like Juul, Calleja, and Stenros, are explicitly aware of the distinction between the two versions of the magic circle, yet predominantly criticize the popularized one and omit Huizinga's.

2.2.1 The Criticisms from MMOs and Pervasive Games

Another major similarity is how many of the critiques come from MMOs (Pearce, Taylor, Castronova), or pervasive games (Nieuwdorp, Montola), as they were clear examples of these boundaries breaking down, which was perhaps less obvious than traditional games, even if many examples later were also introduced from those. This is worth highlighting because how these games have strong overlap with perennial games, or in fact are perennial games in many cases. In perennial games, like MMOs, we see a clear example of a type of game that cannot be described using strict binaries of play and not-play. It is here we often see "play" as work or as a chore, through grinding or farming (Nardi, 2010; Taylor, 2009), or as social obligation, such as raids you are expected to show up to, or that require certain preparation from you in order to participate in. As Calleja (2012) points out, it does not make sense to label all activity in a virtual world as "ludic". Digital games are more than just played activities. Play is decidedly non-magical (Pargman and Jakobsson, 2008). Many MMO players, too, play them for social reasons, and do menial, ritual activities with others to experience social connections and bonds. The temporal continuity of these games—that they exist as part of daily life and (social) routine—makes a strong case for this. "Playing" the game thus means more than the act of doing the play activities prescribed by the game (Carr and Oliver, 2009). The category of "pervasive games" is a strong example of how the real world enters and influences the game. And while pervasive games do not have to be perennial, there is certainly a possibility for overlap, as the temporal continuity element, once again, is strong in pervasive games. And, as explained by Nieuwdorp and Montola, pervasive games are frequently breaking or expanding the notion of what a "game" is and when a person is playing them. They might even be playing a game without realizing it, breaking the idea that play is always a voluntary, active state, as Sicart (2014) also mentions.

2.2.2 The Other Metaphors

Not all of these papers are only critical though, some offer solutions and perspectives on the magic circle that try to reframe in it a way that makes more sense to their way of thinking. This, for many, comes in terms of rephrasing the metaphor away from the "circle" to something else. Pearce and Artemesia (2009) explained how it was rather a porous circle that seeps information in and out, or Castronova (2008)'s idea of a "membrane" that allows transmitting information from the outside into the game. Juul (2008) rather proposes the "puzzle piece" as a complete re-imagining of the idea—a game is something that fits in certain contexts and not in others—which seems to not have gained much traction, and part of the problem there perhaps is how the metaphor of a "puz-

zle piece" is much less clear and evocative than a circle. Other metaphors have also been suggested, such as "soap bubble", "thin line" (Nieuwdorp, 2005), or "magic node" (Lammes, 2008). These kinds of criticisms tend to want to keep some semblance of a boundary, but acknowledge that the concept of a "circle", with the images of a hard boundary that produces, is not useful.

Several, too, want to move away from the boundary all together, and instead offer other ways of understanding the relationship between games and play and ordinary life. This often uses other sociological concepts. One of those is Goffman's frame and keys theory (Goffman, 1974), referenced by Copier, Pargman & Jakobsson, Consalvo, and Moore (and several of these also lean on Gary Alan Fine (2002)'s interpretation of Goffman for games), which in short is a way to understand how we organize and structure the world (frames), and how these are "keyed', given additional, acknowledged meaning in space and time. Goffman defines "play" as an example of such a keying (Goffman, 1974). Another common occurrence is Turner (1974)'s liminal spaces , exceptional spaces that are autonomous "realities" that are optionally entered into and transform some social and cultural attributes, used by Nieuwdorp and Copier.

2.2.3 The Screen as a Boundary

A point of contention too on the magic circle, has been the nature of the screen in digital games. According to Calleja (2012), the magic circle made little sense in digital games because the screen already serves as the "natural" spatial boundary. There is no reason to articulate what is "out of play" in a digital game, as everything in the screen is part of it, and the screen, serving as this boundary, leads to no need to uphold a magic circle. There is no disagreement with a computer about what the rules of the game is, no reason to create a socially constructed contract on what the meaning of kicking a ball is—the game has that pre-programmed. This perspective, however, is fraught. Stenros (2014) raises several critiques to this point, listed here:

- The interpretation of the magic circle is (once again) too narrow, only seeing agreement on rules as relevant, leaving out interpretation, extra-ludic motivations, player-created goals, etc.
- The difference is not as severe, as in non-digital games, there are many "rules" that a player cannot ignore. The weight of equipment, the weather, gravity. Digital games, too, also have social rules that can be negotiated.
- It casts digital games in a narrow light. Only the events displayed on screen are within the magic circle, leaving out the player and controller, and other non-digital parts of the game.

These criticisms aside, I have a further criticism against this claim, that I would like to mention. The screen is a rather nonsensical boundary in a quite practical sense, too. People play many games on the same screen, the same game on several screens. People use screens for other things than playing games, even while playing a game (one might be reading the news or browsing the internet,

while tabbing in and out of a game). People, as mentioned above, can be doing other activities than "play" while inside the virtual world of a game, or they can play the game while not inside it[5]. The screen is as bad a boundary to describe where people are playing a game as any other part of the real world. You can say the digital game can only exist on a screen, but this is merely a physical reality, and not an effective boundary of experience and activity.

2.2.4 Summary on the Criticism

To summarize this part: Huizinga is not to be blamed for the much-derided idea of the magic circle as a complete, distinct boundary between play and and non-play, and few to no scholars actually defend or uphold this viewpoint as actual or useful, not even Salen and Zimmerman, who (inadvertently) popularized it. Zimmerman, in his 2012 clarification, even partway admitted that their use of the term is not a direct use of Huizinga's but an invention of their own, and how this interpretation in turn had been misinterpreted into the hard-line stance most people critique. After all this has been said about a concept so derided and fraught, it perhaps seems hard to understand why it is even worth talking about. And there is merit to rejecting the term altogether and going with another way of describing the relationship between play and non-play in games. However, there is also something sticky about the term, and something useful, specifically about the "magic" of it, that I will get to now. But note that when I am talking about "the magic circle", a formal, hard boundary between play and not-play is not what I am referring to. What I want to refer to instead, is another kind of magic circle: A way to describe the definition of a games' play while it is *in play.*

2.3 The Positive Uses of the Circle

Now, I will show the examples of the few of the people who, while acknowledging its problems, defend the use of the term "magic circle". These are primarily Stenros (2014), Aupers (2015), and Ringland et al. (2022).

Stenros (2014), through his very comprehensive review of the different interpretations of the magic circle, reaches their conclusion after evaluating the mental, social, and cultural borders around play. For him, the magic circle has its basis in a social contract, and it is only an implied or explicit social construction, which can be shaped and re-negotiated during play, as players are able to meta-communicate about the play activity as they perform it. This is not a unique take. Copier, likewise, in her earlier work, wants to move towards a space constructed in negotiation between players but she does not want to call it "the magic circle". Others, like Lauteren, Malaby, and Montola, also

[5]There are many examples of this, but for one example, I am here thinking of theorycrafting, a common practice in online games to play with the material realities of games (the numbers, data and effective statistics known about the game), and try to find the most effective, theoretical strategies available. This is a form of play too, but often done without ever booting it up. When we start talking about narrative play in earnest, we will see many other examples of this.

mention the importance of the socially constructed nature of play in their criticism. Stenros' primary difference is how he keeps the magic circle as part of his framework. He places the onus of creating the magic circle on people. It is a socially constructed and negotiated boundary, and this is the only way to understand the magic circle fruitfully. He in fact rejects other interpretations (mental or cultural borders) as not part of the magic circle.

Ringland et al. (2022), a very recent example of a use of the magic circle, is actually not from game studies at all, but rather from HCI, and is thus a reappropriation of this view of the magic circle. They primarily lean on Stenros' interpretation of the magic circle as socially constructed, to understand the social play between the k-pop group BTS and their fanbase on social media. They define the boundary as intentionally blurry, messy and porous (echoing Pearce), and showcase how this play happens between fans and the group through live and asynchronous interactions. They, like so many before, end up not fully satisfied with the idea of a "circle" and thus replace with with a "magic shop", both a tongue-in-cheek reference to one of BTS' songs, but also a metaphor that suits how fans and the group "pick and choose" how their play operates, reflecting on each other and are actively participating in the setting and destruction of boundaries. Despite this, they are considerably more positive on the magic circle, than most of the work we have seen here so far.

The final defense of the magic circle is by Stef Aupers (2015) (a name we are going to see more in the next section), who wants to uphold the magic circle for a rather different reason: Spirituality. Aupers, like Copier and Lauteren, engage with Huizinga's original definition of the magic circle, and explain how play was connected to the sacred: *"the concept of play merges quite naturally with that of holiness"* (Huizinga, 1956,p. 25), and, through a study of World of Warcraft, shows how this play can still be seen as separated from daily life. To briefly explain what I will spend much of the next section on, Aupers details how the world has become increasingly "non-magical", "disenchanted" (Weber, 1946,p. 139), and less sacred. However, through WoW, Aupers sees a potential strategy for how play is an example of the sacred still living on in modern society, removed from its religious (as in, organized religion) connotations. The magical, enchanted world of WoW, encourages players to step in and play inside it. However, this play is not as strict as the previous understandings of the magic circle, as we can at the same time as we play *"keep an ironic distance towards our playful behavior"* (Aupers, 2015). To Aupers, it is precisely this double nature of play that allows it to be a powerful strategy in a disenchanted world. *"play - in the frivolous meaning of the word - has become an alibi to cover up for the more serious, ultimately spiritual dimensions of play."* Protected by a mantra of "it is just play", players can allow themselves a safe space to engage and experiment with the sacred. The magic circle is thus legitimizing that which has otherwise been removed from society, and gives people a chance to "play" with the mythic, magic, the sacred, and the "ultimate values" these kinds of activities espouse.

2.4 What Is the Magic Circle Good For?

As Zimmerman (2012) says in the updated article, the magic circle is, at its core, a very banal concept, that "when a game is being played, new meanings are generated." So banal in fact it warrants little debate. It is a design tool rather than a scientific accuracy, and when taken to an extreme, it becomes useless. But, held up as a potential point of tension, using it to talk about the boundary rather than using it to demarcate what is play and what is not, might be a useful way of going about it. Aupers shows a way this exact point can become useful. Because the magic circle is both nonsense and very real. Defining the boundary between play and nonplay is inherently messy and complicated and it is shifting and *that is the point.* As play is negotiated and diverse and disruptive, there is no single form we can place around it. But rejecting the idea that play is different from non-play is to me also rather nonsensical. Most of the rejections of the magic circle leave me unsatisfied to explain the, well, magic of play. All that Sicart (2014) describes in his book is powerful and useful, and while he does not talk about games nor wants to define a boundary, I cannot help but reach the conclusion that talking about the existence of one is useful in this specific case. Aupers ideas help show this, and furthermore, the idea of the socially constructed boundary helps make this more clear as well.

How? I am noticing a stark similarity to something covered about perennial games already. The diegesis of a game like Destiny or World of Warcraft is inherently muddy and up for negotiation at all times. The players and designers are part of an ongoing conversation about what belongs in the game, what is part of its world and, indeed, its play. I cannot help but notice the similarity here to this same discussion on the magic circle. Viewing play as a socially negotiated construct is very apt here. But importantly, taking this view allows the further insight that this social negotiation is part of the play of perennial games. As Carr (2012) says, *"players [...] frequently disagree about the game they are playing, while they are playing it"*. Instead of framing the magic circle as a construct on how games are played, we view it as an object of play itself. Using the notion of the double-nature of play from Aupers, we can see how it is exactly the idea of the alluring, clear boundary, that is attractive about games, and yet, as we also know, this boundary is not clear, inherently fraught, and thus up for social negotiation at all times. But the concept cannot be entirely rejected for that same reason. As Stenros said, meta-communication about the game while playing is frequently occurring, and this is simply how the magic circle manifests itself. Not as a strict boundary, but as an object of discussion. To play a game is to define what the game is, and this always happens in motion, in negotiation, and incompletely. To borrow a word from post-structuralist thought, a game is always "becoming" through its play. The magic circle, and yes, even the game, do not exist until they are being played, in which case they are simultaneously constructed at run-time.

Let me be clear, at the end here, and say that this is the only way I see the magic circle being useful. As a fundamental category to delineate between play and non-play in any formal sense, it is complete nonsense, and non-real.

Trying to describe a structural understanding of how play is different from non-play is, as evident by these many critiques, an impossible exercise. But, now, moving onto the next section, we will continue our adventure further into the part of play we hint at with Aupers' definition: The fantastical, the mythical, and the unreal. We need to go through this before we can fully understand the differences in play for the audience and the players, as well as to truly understand narrative play.

3 Myth in MMOs

On August 24, 2013, a moon crashed into the world. No, not Earth, but Eorzea, the realm of Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV). This happened for a couple of reasons. The developers, Square Enix, were going to "reboot" their game from its initial failed state, to "A Realm Reborn", which required them to reshape a lot of the game into something else, effectively being an entirely new game[6]. They thus wanted a reason why the old servers were no longer accessible, replaced by something new, a both fictional and nonfictional reason for why the world had changed, and the solution became this: A Mooncrash, causing a Calamity, caused by The Garlean Empire wanting to destroy Eorzea—which would partly fail, but forever change the world. Players could, months in advance, look up to the sky and see the moon approach them in real time, getting closer and closer, until the fateful day when the servers shut down, and players would watch the final battle to stop the moon, the heroic sacrifices made to save what could be saved, and then later, log in to a new, reborn world. The developers did not need to come up with a fictional reason for this event, but they did. And they went even further: The new game takes place 5 years after the Calamity, and many of its events occur because of this originating event—the original game is part of the fictional history. It is an instigating event of one story and the end of another. Because the original Final Fantasy XIV is no longer playable: Only A Realm Reborn exists now. The old world was effectively, actually and fictionally, wiped out by the moon. Furthermore, there is no way to re-experience the moon's crash: It happened once, in 2013 and never again will any player relive it. It can only be seen today through videos, screenshots and retellings. I share this example first for a couple of reasons that will be elaborated throughout this chapter. The first is that the Fall of Dalamud (the name of the moon) is a great example of a developed myth, a live event that propagates through a community and shapes its sense of identity, belonging and heritage. It is an example of the developers performing narrative play. It is a clear example of perennial storytelling, of the world changing over time (a more drastic example than most) and the players responding to it.

Final Fantasy XIV is an MMO, the single game genre that has potentially received the most academic attention, in large part due to a veritable explosion of anthropological and sociological studies done in the boom of MMOs in the early aughts (1999–2009). There is a wealth of research here from anthropologists realizing that virtual worlds were fruitful, true avenues of research. Much of this research is fascinating and still relevant to this day (See play section), such as Pearce and Artemesia (2009)'s excellent account of the Uru diaspora , or Taylor (2009)'s or Nardi (2010)'s, and Bainbridge (2012)'s ethnographic accounts of World of Warcraft, Boellstorff (2015)'s of Second Life (and the ethnography handbook they collaborated on (Boellstorff et al., 2012)), or Klastrup (2003)'s of Everquest (Daybreak Game Company and Darkpaw Games and 989 Studios and Verant Interactive and Sigil Games Online, 1999). Such a wealth of research

[6]Much of this information comes from the excellent YouTube documentary on the history of FFXIV, produced by noclip (Noclip, 2017)

happened here into the social construction of play and virtual worlds that has done much good to encapsulate and describe the magic of MMOs and virtual worlds in general. I do not plan on doing a complete rundown of all the insights gained from this research, but I will here highlight the major components that are relevant in this context:

- This research did much to challenge the play/non-play boundary, as described in the play section, by discovering the magic circle was a muddy and imprecise concept in virtual worlds.
- Much of this research looked at MMOs from a sociological or anthropological lens, and thus looked at them as social places first and foremost (which isn't a wrong take by any means!). The emphasis in this research on "virtual worlds" rather than "games" is also telling, as it is typically not the ludic aspects that are in focus. This is relevant because of point 3:
- The emphasis on MMOs as places has historically disincentivized analyses of their storytelling. While backstories and lore and the worlds were discussed, even in storytelling terms, it was not uncommon to omit or disregard the authored story of MMOs as a backdrop to the "main event" which was the player's own stories taking place in those spaces. They were "places" not "plots" (Bartle, 2004; Costikyan, 2007; Lohmann, 2008)

I will spend more time in section 4 on this last point, but here I mention it largely because it was part of the motivation to talk about myth. In the paper on perennial games (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021), we made this same point on the staticness of storytelling brought forth by the early MMO research, and found it lacking to describe current perennial games. Much of the perennial paper was about disproving this point by reshifting the temporal scale of the narrative away from an individual player's experience onto the community. The Fall of Dalamud is a quintessential example: It is not part of any single players' narrative experience of FFXIV but rather a point in a story that has run since 2011 to this day. Me, starting to play FFXIV in 2021 has a very different relationship to this event than someone who played in 2013, and this *is* the perennial experience.

This, however, requires more elaboration. What I want to focus this chapter on is what we ended on in the perennial paper, and use it as a starting off-point to explore an aspect of the MMO research I did not have space then to fully dive into. Because one aspect of this MMO research that helps alleviate these tensions with "storytelling" is to instead connect to two adjacent cultural concepts: Myth and Religion.

3.1 Mythology

Mythology has a long academic history which will be briefly covered here. As Segal (2004) says, a common everyday understanding of "myth" has become

as a falsehood: A story that was once believed to be true but is false (Segal, 2004). This is not what I mean by myth. Folklorist Lauri Honko (1984) defined myth as a *"a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world, the creation, fundamental events"* (Honko, 1984), yet myth has lost many of its religious connotations later (Segal, 2004). There have been several movements trying to explain myths, such as the "myth-ritual theory" proposed by James George Frazer (1913), that myths were developed to explain societal rituals, whose meanings had gotten lost (Segal, 2004). The more common and influential views on myth came from structural theorists like Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955, 1981a) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1954), part of a major structural rethinking of myth. For them, myth is treated as a story that can *"teach us a great deal about the societies from which they originate"* (Lévi-Strauss, 1981a). We can see similar movements from Campbell (2008), famous for the "monomyth", or Jung or Eliade (Geraci, 2014; Segal, 2004), who all looked at myths across societies as a gateway to understand fundamental things about the human mind. As Dorson (1973) argues, the two viewpoints expemplified by Levi-Strauss and Campbell approach myth from different angles but end up in a similar spot: Finding a universal system of mythology. The point was not the indivudal stories themselves but what they could tell us about people.

The modern ideas of myth has changed since these structuralist findings. The primary gain from the structural work is understanding myths as *stories* first and foremost. Later work on mythology has, in poststructural fashion, moved away from universal ideas into more contextual ones, but more importantly, mythology has been modernised. In modern academia, mythology studies is no longer purely investigating old stories of gods and godlikes, but stories in a much broader sense (Segal, 2004). We can see examples of mythology in modern cinema (Hirschman, 1987), or as political strategy (Kjellgren, 2021) or in the play of video games (Asimos, 2018; Geraci, 2014; Krzywinska, 2006) (which we will look closer at in the rest of this section). Myths can now be about *fiction*, too, no longer stories passed off as true. Modern fictional worlds are often constructed with "Mythologies" or "Lore bibles"—grand, canonical documents that define the history and reality of the fictional world. These views has naturally been criticised, for example by Rowland (1990), who says this loses the point of mythological criticism, however, this is a kind of myth that will be very useful for this literature review. J.R.R. Tolkien, as raised by Aupers (2015), critized the understanding of myths as "false" stories, and echoed the structural ideas of universal truths conveyed by mythology, but moreso advocated for *the active construction* of myths, using the term "mythopoeia" (myth-making), to call for the powerful yet deliberate construction of secondary worlds that nevertheless speak to our own. This view of myth is much closer to the type of myth we will be seeing in MMOs and perennial games: As something actively constructed, contemporary, and meaningful, where its "realness", as we will see, is not as obvious to pin down.

3.1.1 Cragoe's Mythology

The first view of mythology in games is from Cragoe (2016). He brings up the important fundamental connection between myth and narrative: *"The most familiar surviving stories that connect us to our ancestors take the form of folklore and mythology"* (Cragoe, 2016). His definition of mythology is as a story that communicates a form of truth—either literal or transcendental—but uses fiction to communicate. Cragoe's focus is on "live RPGs" (LARPs and tabletop RPGs), and by looking at the range of scholarly work on myth and folk narratives from Durkheim (1912) to Campbell (2008) to Lévi-Strauss (1955) to Barthes (1972), Cragoe identifies 5 elements that make them relevant to the modern narrative form (in his case, the RPG):

- Exaggerated communication of expected norms, including reinforcement of dominance relationships.
- Providing a people with a sense of solidarity through shared history and common totemic symbols.
- Facilitating a sense of cultural empowerment through the portrayal of the victories of common cultural heroes.
- Creating a system of mastery and ownership over the heritage and characteristics of the society.
- Entertainment and leisure through nostalgia and imaginative experience.

I will not go over these in detail, but this list serves as a good comparison point for what myths do, and continue to do in modern society. Cragoe's main contribution here, though, is how he sees role-playing in live RPGs as "modern mythmaking". His focus on live RPGs make the findings less directly useful for me, as the comparison lies strongly in the oral tradition of myths—something which does not exist as clearly in online, digital games. The differences between myths and live RPGs are revealing though: *"It is also noteworthy that whereas particular traditional tales tend to have some level of generational tenacity, a particular story told in an RPG game rarely lives on for long (outside of the memories of the participants themselves)"* (Cragoe, 2016). This is one of the reasons why I find perennial games to be a very apt example for this: Their universal chronicle and temporal continuity by definition lives on for a while, as long as there is a community to play the game. True, the timeframes of most perennial games are considerably shorter than most well-known myths (the longest I am aware of is the MUD Achaea, created in 1997 and still running (Reed, 2021), giving it a 25 year old history, a mere speck in contrast to, say, the Jesus Myth or Pandora's Box). Still, many of the reasons why people engage with live RPGs that Cragoe mention are also applicable to MMOs: *"Through the creation of a cultural system of production, solidarity, and agency that is endemically pleasing to the participants, we ensure the continued existence of cohesive and mutual social life"*, just on a much larger scale—but of course

still a scale that pales in comparison with religious myths. So let us move on to someone who did connect mythology and digital online games much more directly.

3.1.2 Krzywinska's Mythos

Contemporary to the anthropological explosion of research in MMOs, Tanya Krzywinska (2006, 2008) was making strong connections between MMOs and the mythical. In her evocatively titled paper *"Blood Scythes, Festivals, Quests and Backstories"*, Krzywinska (2006)'s main argument is how the mythic plays a primary role in MMOs in *"making a consistent fantasy world in terms of game play, morality, culture, time, and environment"*. Borrowing from Kaveney's idea of a "thick text", she shows how World of Warcraft (her primary example) uses myth in many ways that permeate the experience and provides a rich context for its play. She provides no single definition of the mythic in her descriptions but rather describes how World of Warcraft uses mythological structures and worldviews from pre-existing myths (Celtic, Greek, North American, Nordic etc.). WoW shares a similar ontology of gods or the supernatural who affect the world of mortals, that simultaneously extend into the "real" world through symbolic meaning, intertextual references, extending beyond any one single story, but provides a basis for many. An MMO also does this inherently, through its invocation of the "hero's quest"-aesthetics in the player's goals and actions, that tie together the mechanical actions and the fictional worlds together: The mythic is what explains why you are doing what you are doing, for whom, how that ties into the state of affairs of the realm at large, etc. Importantly, though, as this is no different than any game or piece of fiction, WoW is persistent and nonlinear: *"We nonetheless do "real" things in that world"* (Krzywinska, 2006), and *"myth, fantasy, and reality meet and manifest in what we do and how we act and interact with others in the game."* (Krzywinska, 2006). Any action a player does in WoW is part of its reality, by the virtue that other, real humans are there too and can interact with you. Thus, any action becomes real—and this blends in with the fictional elements. Krzwinska uses the nebulous term "worldness", one she shares with Klastrup (2003) and Pearce and Artemesia (2009) to describe these games' worlds. They are more than mere narratives, World of Warcraft has a history, both in terms of its mythology that extends beyond (and predates) the player's influence—including multiple previous games that shares its fiction, that outlines multiple views of this history and competing or collaborative worldviews, an "assemblage" of fictional races and cultures, that imbue and embed the world and the gameplay, inform the perspectives of the characters and in turn the players (it is, for example, not possible to have a neutral relationship to the cities of the opposing faction in WoW, as they are forever hostile towards you). Like Krzywinska, I take a fundamental view throughout this that *"it is common for players to understand the quest format in both narrative and other, more functional and experiential terms (e.g., a means of gaining better equipment and experience points); one is not reducible to the other, but instead they create a gestalt that better reflects in conceptual terms*

the multifaceted experience of playing the game" (Krzywinska, 2006).

As mentioned in the beginning of this section, it has been pointed out by many scholars that MMOs are less suited for storytelling (Bartle, 2004; Costikyan, 2007; Lohmann, 2008) because there is not always forward linear momentum in its narrative. Events in MMOs happen over and over again as players, either the same or others, repeat events ad infinitum: Bosses, even important story characters like Arthas the Lich King, are killed every day. However, unlike many others, to Krzywinska, this does not spell the demise of storytelling in WoW. Rather, through the mythical lens, she sees a power in it. *"as with retellings of myths, battles are fought over and over again, and in this there is a cyclical/recursive organization of time"*. Each battle is a little different, owing to this set of players' unique characteristics in time, even as patterns and strategies are passed from group to group, leading to ultimate "best practices", that might limit player agency. This, too, Krzywinska leans into a mythological correlation: *"Like the ancient Greeks, players are subject to the rules of the "powers that be," and both modify their behaviors to keep those powers "on side.""* (Krzywinska, 2006) These are rather complicated arguments, pulling in multiple directions at once. As she said at first, WoW shares a cosmology with real mythologies, then meant in the fictional sense, of there being fictional gods interfering in the fictional stories of Azeroth (the World of Warcraft), but now, she means mythology in rather different way: The real defined "meta" of World of Warcraft's play functioning as its own cosmology, its own "powers that be", its own gods ruling over what one should do and not. This, to me, effectively underscores how we cannot separate the ludic, the functional, from the narrative and mythological: Despite how little narrative content we can see in something like killing a boss for the 40th time, we can see the mythological in it, through language like Krzywinska's.

It is important to underscore that the power of the mythological in this language is how it has an inherent binding between the traditionally narrative and the traditionally ludic: It is possible to view both as mythic. Krzywinska puts much emphasis on how WoW situates its fiction firmly in the mythic, through its creation of an illusion of a coherent world in cultural, spatial, and temporal terms, yet this has gameplay consequences: *"Through a web of intertextual and intratextual signifiers, the game invites players to read the world and gameplay tasks as "myth," and like myth these have allegorical and material dimensions"* (Krzywinska, 2006). She directly uses myth itself to bind the allegorical and material, the fictional and the functional. She ends her paper on a question: *"having a material presence in this fictional world alongside other players with whom we interact raises all kinds of questions of a philosophical nature about the relationship between fantasy and reality, but that's a quest for another day..."* (Krzywinska, 2006). Perhaps a philosophical unraveling of reality is too much for today as well, but the core concept of the "mythic" is that it holds this inherent duality inside it: It is both real and not, and, rather than a focus on whether the story itself is true, it is undeniable that the narrative has a true function in society. It, as a story, exists. However, there are still questions that Krzywinska raises without fully answering herself, when it comes to myths in

games. The two statements in contention are "the fiction of the world is mythic within itself" vs "the game itself is mythic in our world", or asked in another way "are games already myths or are we making myths with them?" and they are not as unentanglable questions as one might think.

3.1.3 Asimos' Contemporary Mythology

Vivian Asimos (2018), in the most recent paper of this bunch, looks at video games writ large as "contemporary myth". *"In what is arguably the biggest entertainment industry in the world, we see myths as able to be reconnected to, told and retold, and played out by its audience. Video games provide a new medium for myths to inhabit, and its audience can directly interact with it. They play with myth."* (Asimos, 2018) This last sentence, no doubt, is a sentence heavy on meaning in this context, and it will be a recurring theme. She, unlike Cragoe, wants to get away from any mention of religion in her definition of myth. "Myth" does not mean a religious narrative for many of its definitions, but instead, *"myths are narratives which are used by a community or an individual in order to structure their understanding of themselves and the world around them. [...] This definition is purposely void of substantial elements, such as depiction of supernatural entities, or strict concepts of setting such as mythic time or otherworldly locations. The purpose is to retain the attention on the function the myth plays for the community, rather than what it contains"* (Asimos, 2018). Her definition is almost entirely leaning on the idea of myths as narrative with a communal function, which is both quite vague (and potentially applicable to any narrative) and clearly applicable to video games, as is her intention.

Her primary reference for myth comes from Levi-Strauss—she says social science still has not fully recovered from his view on myth, and is thus both reliant on this and skeptical of this reliance. Levi-Strauss defined the terms implicit and explicit myth: the implicit myth is the personal, ritual action of myth, while the explicit myth is the written form expressed in stories and narratives (Lévi-Strauss, 1981b). Because of a heavy linguistic bias, the concept of implicit myth was thus far too underdeveloped in Asimos' view. She then also leans on some of the later re-interpretations of Levi-Strauss such as Galinier, who posits ritual as considerably more important than Levi-Strauss claimed (Galinier, 2004), and Wagner, who reads playing games *as* a form of ritual (and thus implicit myth) (Wagner, 2014), and Miles-Watson, who redefines implicit myth as *"that which inspires and develops personal narratives of experience"* (Asimos, 2018; Wagner, 2014), and she ends up with a mixture of the concepts, understanding implicit myth as something more useful for games, bringing into attention the active role of the player in gameplay while including Miles-Watson's view of the individual, personalized narrative. Explicit myth in games is very literal: The scripted, authored narrative. This split is thus a very direct correlation to the player-story vs authored story split seen in emergent narrative and interactive storytelling works (Kreminski and Mateas, 2021b; Larsen et al., 2019; Ryan, 2018). It is such a literal translation it is striking and not without merit. Implicit myth

for Asimos, is further deliniated into two kinds, where one half is the strictly personalized narrative (what I would call the afterstory (Larsen et al., 2019) or what we see in retellings (Eladhari, 2018; Kreminski and Mateas, 2021a)), and the other also includes *"the actions taken, or the gameplay"*, which is a much vaguer statement, but it is most likely akin to something like systemic emergence.

Asimos' primary argument about these distinctions, however, is that they are deeply interwoven and should be looked at together in any analysis. Her focus of analysis is single player games like Resident Evil VII (Capcom, 2017), Dark Souls (From Software, 2011) and The Wolf Among Us (Telltale Games, 2013), with the argument that even these games are not played in a vacuum: Communities and myths arise around these games too, both for the individual and for communities. Her example, too, has an interesting point. She analyzes two very different Let's Play's of Resident Evil VII, one which focuses on entertainment, storytelling and experiencing the authored narrative, whereas the other is more focused on the gameplay mechanics of, e.g. inventory management, and little attention paid to the background story. These show two varying experiences of "the complete myth" (the combined outcome of explicit and implicit), and either is equally valid as experiences. At first glance, this seems almost a trite conclusion from a game studies lens: Obviously these two experiences are equally valid. However, I might raise the question to a critical viewer: Would they both be considered to be experiencing the narrative equally? This is what Asimos does by shifting the perspective from narrative to myth: In myth, a "narrative-light" experience is no less complete. We might be able to say this too, in a narrative lens[7], but the myth vocabulary allows a reshifting of this argument. I am not claiming that the act of inventory management or creating a Let's Play is "mythology" in itself, but rather that this is the material out of which the mythology is made. Recall what Krzywinska stated about being resigned to "the powers that be" in games regarding gameplay: The myth of the game is not solely the "fiction" but also directly gameplay-specific elements, such as mechanics, inventory, damage numbers, and even extradiegetic elements like achievements. This, too is part of the implicit myth, part of the play experience, and part of the mythmaking. The myth is thus able to stay intact regardless of diegetic breaks in the authored narrative. The myth is malleable and resilient towards breakages—it is in fact made to break and be rebuilt. Answering the question I raised about Krzywinska's work, Asimos would then say that *both* exist. Explicit myth, the explicit fiction as a piece of mythic fiction in our world, and the implicit myth, the players' experience, narrativized into myth.

I am, though, a little wary of this split. While it is useful from a definitional standpoint, it is too close to existing narrative scholarship to be truly useful by itself. This split, even in stances where we say we look at "both", will inevitably lead to attempts to separate author and player stories, which leads to the same fallacies that interactive storytelling and game studies scholarship has fallen into

[7] and I have said so before (Larsen, 2017).

regarding this for decades now. Instead, I must declare that the power of using "myth" is that it is able to, in a single phrase, encompass a more holistic, entire view of narrative play, that does not talk about a played or design narrative but rather something else: Something that is in play, redefined and reshaped like a myth, something that is both real and fake, something that succumbs to the powers that be and becomes them. It has to include a double-move towards and away from the player. The moment the player makes a choice, it is in context to a design, and the moment the designer makes a choice, it is in context to a future or existing player. There is myth because it has a communal and individual function beyond the game itself, a meaning that reinforces both the play and the design.

This argument will become more clear in the end of this section, as there is a second aspect I mentioned other than myth: Religion. And through this we will see the final puzzle pieces fall into place on why perennial games create meaning through their play, that can be used to reflect on how MMOs are both real and not.

3.2 Religion

Myth and religion are implicitly related, but the relationship is a contentious one (Segal, 2004). Myths might be part of a religion, or they might not, some stories in a religion might be myths, some might be "legends" or "folktales" based on who you ask. Segal (2004) defines myths as any story, removing the religious connotation, where as previously mentioned definitions, like Honko (1984) and Cragoe (2016) insisted on maintaining that myths were religious. Religion, however, is a much broader system of rituals and beliefs and customs moreso than it is a series of stories, even though it often includes myths. Like the structuralists used myths to understand something about society, here the primary interest is not in religion per se[8], but rather religious *functions* in society, and how we can see how virtual worlds are able to fulfill some of them. There are two primary scholars I want to walk trhough who have looked specifically at religious functions and virtual worlds, and their speculations are quite relevant in this context.

3.2.1 Geraci's Virtually Sacred

Robert M. Geraci, in his book "Virtually Sacred" (Geraci, 2014), looks at World of Warcraft and Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003) through the lens of religious practice. The ultimate conclusion is that *"World of Warcraft is virtually sacred: a digital arena for secularized, quasi-religious practice"* (Geraci, 2014). Note that this is not, as he notes, making a grand claim that WoW is a "religion"

[8]I will note that throughout these examples, the religious studies are quite coloured by a western, Christian perspective of Religion, not necessarily through direct mentions but moreso out of a Western bias. I am unfortunately unable to broaden my scope at the current moment, well aware that other religious practices such as the Jewish Torah or Theravada Buddhism would be very interesting in terms of their communal storytelling aspects.

in the vein of Christianity or even Scientology, but merely that there are many of its operations that can be viewed as fulfilling religious functions. There are parts of WoW that function like religion, and fulfill a similar role in people's lives, while not pretending to be an actual religion (because it is masquerading as play). Geraci brings up a few crucial elements that support this argument.

Echoing (and referencing) Krzywinska, Geraci shows how players of World of Warcraft actively get to see themselves as part of a grander story, and that even mundane and "profane"[9] activities like grinding or crafting or farming take up a more sacred or meaningful role because the player can see a clear meaning behind the activities: They are strengthening their characters, building the toolkit to fight Arthas, a character they have known about and wanted to fight for 7 years (Geraci, 2014). Geraci is quite critical of the idea that players do not care about the overarching narrative of an MMO. He brings up a distinction by Costikyan (2007) of two types of narratives in MMOs: the overarching narrative and the individual quests a player is doing. Costikyan concludes that players do not care much about the first part, but Geraci's survey results seem to indicate that this is very much not true of all players, and he backs this up with the religious angle. Being part of something greater and more meaningful than we are able to do in our, mostly, normal lives, is a big draw to these types of games. In real life, it is sometimes difficult to find a greater meaning in the daily chores, but in a virtual world, even boring actions can take greater meanings because they are weaved in a larger tapestry of storytelling, of which the player can feel they are playing a part. This references something that echoes through much of this research on religion in virtual worlds, which is Weber's notion of a "disenchanted world", mentioned by both Geraci, Aupers (2015), and Saler (2012), to which the virtual world is a counterpoint. To summarize Weber's point, as read through these sources, the modern (mostly western) world has become increasingly secularized and non-religious, non-mystical and non-magical. Virtual worlds, in contrast (and this is Geraci and Aupers' point) offer a chance at living, if ever briefly, in a world that once again has something that the modern world is missing: A sense of purpose, a chance to exist in *"a cosmos of epic meaning"* (Geraci, 2014), or harkening back to *"a time when life mattered"* (Hong, 2015)[10]. As Geraci said: *"myths are the thing through which character's (and thus players) actions make sense)"* (Geraci, 2014). Note here that Geraci is very much talking about the backstory, the lore, the fictional characters of the game as part of what sets this mythical expectation up, but it is the players' actions that fulfill them: The myths provide the context the player can insert themselves in. This, to Geraci works because virtual worlds have "real histories", which the players can reference and situate themselves in: Life goes on in a virtual world when a player does not engage with it, and a real sense of place is established through this passage of time.

[9] This is using Durkheim's distinction of sacred/profane (Durkheim, 1912), something Sapach (2015) also does to investigate World of Warcraft, although her findings are far less thorough than Geraci's.

[10] Another reading of myth and history, namely that virtual worlds are an *"invocation to a time "when life mattered"* (Hong, 2015). More on this later.

This idea of dealing with a disenchanted world through fantastical media is not new. Saler (2012)'s historical covering of how turn-of-the-century (1900-1940) literature such as Sherlock Holmes, Lovecraft and Lord of the Rings, gained a lot of traction at the time precisely because of its ability to inject enchantment into a world that was becoming increasingly rationalised, where it was no longer acceptable as an upstanding member of society to, say, believe in fairies. Saler covers in great detail how the fan communities that developed then in many ways were quite similar to those we see around perennial games and other media today, just using physical letters or debate clubs rather than forum posts and chat servers. It is not a unique feature of MMOs to create enchantment, however, it is now much more possible to "enter" these worlds than were possible before, as the very object that is being mythologised *is* what people play inside.

Geraci also echoes Krzywinska in bringing up the repetitive nature of the storytelling of World of Warcraft as a potential positive: Mircea Eliade argued that *"'primitive" [his word, Geraci added quotations] religious individuals, participation in a sacred history depends upon the cyclical nature of that history"* (Geraci, 2014). Despite the unfortunate description of people, there is something useful in that statement. It is possible for players to relive the mythos of World of Warcraft through their play, and thus ritually repeat the great events of its mythos, as we would retell a great myth again and again.

There are other crucial aspects of religious function that World of Warcraft delivers. Most notably, and perhaps most obviously, the social functions of religion are very well established as part of the appeal and drive of any massively multiplayer game. Social grouping through guilds, with organized activities like raids or dungeons requiring social action and dependence, is very present in MMOs and virtual worlds, as established by the range of anthropological work that Geraci also leans on (Boellstorff, 2015; Carr, 2012; Cole and Griffiths, 2007; Nardi, 2010; Nardi and Harris, 2006; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Geraci's point with this is that virtual worlds thus have the ability to impinge on the social role of religion in society: Instead of gathering in churches we gather in raids, and perform, again, a ritual activity every week with a community of like-minded people who can provide guidance and structure to life, that can extend far outside the game. This was previously a strong aspect of religious communities, but now is done in many ways—and virtual worlds can be seen as one of them.

Geraci does not finish here, though, but goes even further: In games we can "transcend", he says, and become something more than we are in reality, accomplish things we could not, present ourselves in ways we could never with our physical bodies. Religions often have transcendent themes, of becoming something more (more pure, more holy) than we are in our corporeal life. Virtual worlds, here, offer a chance at some of it: here you can become a god yourself, or something close to it. As an example of this, we can see through the ample scholarly work on identity and bodies in MMOs (Carroll, 2016; Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008; Ensslin and Muse, 2011; Hutchinson, 2013; Jedruszczak, 2016), how players often use virtual characters as idealized extensions of themselves,

often being something they could not be in real life.

Next, I will bring up another read on religion in virtual worlds, which will bring forth a final, crucial point about how they function as myths. Stef Aupers has, along with collaborators, written a series of papers on religion and World of Warcraft in recent years, based on a series of in-depth interviews with players about their relationship to religion in the game (Aupers, 2015; Aupers et al., 2017; de Wildt and Aupers, 2016; Schaap and Aupers, 2017).

3.2.2 Aupers' Religious Play

Aupers, in contrast to Asimos, wants to look at religion directly, with a focus on the players and how they perceive religious game narratives (and not philosophical arguments on what myth and religion is). They find several ways players react to religion in their play (Aupers et al., 2017; Schaap and Aupers, 2017), listed here:

- Performance: "trying out" other religions or playing a religious character despite being non-religious oneself, or vice-versa.
- Learning to be more open-minded about other perspectives on religion. This is especially true as a large part of MMO players self-identify as atheists or agnostics, and seeing how the various races and cultures in WoW use religion as part of their society can be insightful.
- As a gateway into "religious quests"; using the game as a way to find your meaning in life.This is not meant in the same way as Geraci, but rather that a player for example was inspired to pick up Buddhist practices after researching the Tauren belief systems in the game.

This last part leads into another of (Aupers et al., 2017)'s points: How religion has made a move from passive consumption in the mass media days (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997) towards more active engagement in new media. Religion in the modern western world has also moved away from a passive dominance of Christianity into a milieu towards more active participatory choice. People choose their own religions frequently and even often "bricolages" or mixes of religions as *"religious consumption a la carte"* (Possamai, 2003). This reflects another hypothesis by Aupers, namely that people, even if they are non-religious, "want to believe" and are allured by the prospect that there are real gods to believe in (Aupers, 2015).

Aupers comes from a much different tradition than most discussed here, using sources of Stuart Hall (especially the idea of "decoding/encoding") (Hall, 1980) to explain player phenomena, and also relying on a series of modern academic work on new religious practice in fiction-based religions (Partridge (2006), and esp. Possamai (2003, 2005), who in turn used Baudrillard to see how people constructed "simulacrums" of religions out of popular culture artifacts). The primary assumption this challenges is the clear distinction between reality and fiction: Consumers—fans—of fictional properties like Lord of the Rings or

Star Trek can be argued to actively turn the texts into a reality that feels real (Jenkins, 2012), what Possamai calls: "hyper-real". Markham (1998) argued that online environments cannot be said to be "not real", and any kind of binary separation of these as real or not is not sufficient. This is tied to another frequent word that surrounds religion (and not much else in this topic), namely that of belief. During (2002) shows how "once a particular text is deemed to be fiction, then it is impossible simply to believe in the reality of fictional events" (During, 2002) (read in Schaap and Aupers (2017)). As Geraci said, World of Warcraft makes no allusions towards becoming a "real" religion. People do not "believe" in the gods of WoW, the way they would the Christian god. However, I want to contrast this with a quote one of the participants in Aupers' interviews says, which they also highlight:

> *For me there is a fundamental difference between the gods in WoW and the gods in real life. The gods in WoW exist and the gods in real life do not. And that sounds like I'm being a petty, sort of atheist douchebag making a point, but it's not exactly like that. [...] In both WoW and in Terry Pratchett's Discworld [fantasy novel series; JS/SA], gods exist. And gods exert power. And if you piss of [sic] a god, the god will strike you with lightning.* (Schaap and Aupers, 2017)

"The gods in WoW exist", is the primary point here, to contrast with the idea of belief. Because this, naturally, is only true *within the fiction* of WoW. The gods of WoW exist as much as Arthas exists, and as *little* as he does[11]. Here is the complication, though: The player, a real person, interacts with Arthas, and performs real actions when in a raid group to kill him—and thus, if the gods of WoW exist as much as Arthas, then the gods are also real in the sense that they are part of the player's experience, and thus part of the real world in the same sense that the World of Warcraft is. As During says, there is no sense of real or unreal we can firmly plant these categories in, as they intentionally operate on both axes at the same time.

3.2.3 "Real Enough"

You might wonder why it matters so much whether the gods in Azeroth (or any other fictional game) are real, and to some extent, you are right, but there is a crucial aspect to this discussion that makes me want to highlight it. In my Perennial Games paper (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021), I discussed how it was precisely the "diegetic muddiness"—the sense that what is part of the world and what is not is up for discussion at run-time—is part of the appeal of

[11] I have, like this interviewee, also stumbled upon the strange notion that in fantasy worlds (literary and games), the gods of their religions tend to be real in the world with provable consequences upon the world, in contrast to our world's religions, which are mostly exclusively based on belief in the unprovable. This might be another way that we can see how people "want to believe" (Aupers, 2015). Maybe this is one of the secret reasons that these questions fascinate me.

perennial games. It is not a negative quality that breaks their narratives, it is rather a part of their strengths. I cannot help but notice the reflection of this argument once again when looking at myth and religion in MMOs. It is precisely the fact that MMOs are "real-not-real" that make them prime for this kind of religious, mythological discussion. They are fake enough that it exists within play (and is thus safe and inviting, non-dangerous and explorative), but it is real enough that it matters (people care about it, find meaning and connection with it—it is more than frivolous). Hong has valuable insight here: Using discussions on the real by Žižek (2002), they conclude: *"I refer to it here as a sense of "real enough": We are able to play as if we believe this could have been real. The desire for the real does not take the form of earnest angst, but a willingness to dive knowingly into video game spectacles of "when life mattered.'"* and later *"the invocation of a mythic time when life mattered comes hand in hand with a postmodern attitude of real enough. I end by suggesting that what is at stake is not the "realness" of games, but a politics of engagement with the real writ large."* (Hong, 2015)

However, we are not done, because there are aspects of myth that strain this relationship. As mentioned in an interview with Kate Orman in Third Person (Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2009), traditional mythologies contradict themselves a lot[12]. And we can see examples of this in MMOs and perennial games (Destiny is a prime example of whole lore books with intentionally false accounts of happenings), and different parts of the community can have multiple, co-existing explanations for events. Yet, one does not need to spend a long time in any "lore" community to notice their frequent obsession with "the canon"—once again, knowing what is true and what is false. Multiple versions of the same story are rarely accepted, and rejected upon discovering one of them as a lie. "Retconning"[13] is seen as a great sin and consistency often as a great virtue. This is a great and difficult tension that as mentioned is part of the perennial experience, but I do think it goes deeper than that. Because, as shown by Krzywinska and Asimos, the play of the games matter too, to their mythology. It is not "just" lore.

3.3 The Two Layers of Myth

Thus, I would say there are two inseparable layers of myths in perennial games. I am changing this from the implicit or explicit myth split or the split mentioned by Geraci, to incorporate play and fiction more foundationally, rather than leaning on the player or the author.

There are myths inside games, that they are built upon. The fiction, the lore, the backstories and fabric of the universe. This is where "the gods are

[12] And so does Doctor Who, which is what Kate Orman is talking about, another example of a perennial narrative that, through the course of its runtime and multitude of media, has contradicted itself, while fans have tried to keep a resemblance of "canon".

[13] "Retroactive continuity": Changing a previously established truth about the world to serve a new narrative purpose. This could be innocuous, like changing the previous off-screen location of a character, to severe, such as reviving them from death.

real", through which the actions of players gain meaning, and we can view their lore and cosmology as revealing about their creators and the people who play them. It is here the discussion of the "real" and "canon" is most prevalent as this kind of myth is the object of this discussion. This is the first layer of myth.

But another view is looking at the game as an object of myth-making, and this includes everything that is part of its play, which is inherently *nonfiction* as it happens to real people. Naturally, questing, grinding, and raiding, and socializing and inventory management, are included in its play and this sits in context to the mythical meaning established by the first kind of myth. But I want to take it further when I say everything that is part of its play, to crucially include that which is not directly "playing the game": Patch notes. YouTube videos, community discussions, memes (especially memes!), achievements, world's first races, bugs, prominent community members such as YouTubers and live streamers, meta discussions, guide websites, esports tournaments[14]) etc. Do I mean that these aspects are mythical inherently? No. But these are the tools with which the myths can be made. The creation of a "meta" in any game is a good example already mentioned by Krzywinska: We must submit to the "powers that be" if we are to play efficiently—or intentionally counterplay against it, in any case, we reflect on the established myth. A meme, such as the infamous "Leeroy Jenkins" from early World of Warcraft (Schreier, 2017) is part of the community's shared understanding of the game: It is part of the experience and used and reused as people play together. This *is* the enchantment of the world. We are able to take something fictional and *play* with it, make it real, and thus feel like we can make our lives a little more magical. This is the second layer of myth.

Let me explain the difference between these two layers with an example, as well as clear something up about the definition of perennial games. Live service games like Rocket League (Psyonix, 2015) or Counterstrike: Go (Valve, 2012) or Minecraft (Mojang, 2011) were not brought up in the perennial games paper as example of perennial games. However, under the definition, these are all perennial games. The contention comes in how we understand the fiction of these games, as compared to other perennial games like World of Warcraft or Destiny, that have a clear fictional world or lore. A game like Rocket League has very little in terms of fictional content, but it does still have a clear perennial experience. In the terms of the mythological layers, Rocket League has very little in terms of the first layer, but it is still a perennial game as there is a lot in the second layer. Take an example like the "flip reset", a technique that was discovered by the community that has no definition in the game's rules, that over time was developed, practiced and then popularized to the point where it is now a common and expected part of high-level play. There are iconic flip reset shots, players who perfected it, and many different variations that are useful in various scenarios. This development over time is part of the mythology, the universal chronicle of Rocket League. However, there is a difference between

[14]Esports could be viewed as its own mythology, as a sports narrative on its own, but that is a greater discussion that is fascinating because of its ties to the mythology of the game itself, too. It is not just sport.

this and the type of perennial experience that happens in Destiny, where the perennial developments are about fictional characters and events, that has a substantial first layer. In Rocket League, there is no discussion of what is true. It unquestionably is true that the flip reset underwent this development. This loses the muddy diegesis, which was one of the important aspects of perennial games mentioned in the paper (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021). When a fictional element enters the game, suddenly, we have elements that are up for debate. The first layer of myth is alive. However, it is not as clear cut as saying that Rocket League as "no story" and has none of the first layer, as its perenniality cannot be denied, and storytelling in games is not binary. I will draw on Marie-laure Ryan's definition of scalar narrativity to understand this (Ryan, 2006). Rather than saying that Rocket League has no story I would rather say it has low narrativity and this leads to a thinner first layer of myth than Destiny, but there is always the possibility for people to create a layer of fictionality where none is intended (just see how players create lore of Minecraft despite being given very little to work with (theatakhan, 2016)).

The second layer of myth clearly is created through play, but its needs to be emphasized that the first is not exempt from play either: It is in large part through narrative play that these myths are upheld, through retellings and mythic repetition, etc). And it is also the first layer of myth that *draws* the player in, entices them with the promise of magic: Here in this world, you can be a wizard (or a rocket powered car, who doesn't want to be that).

But of course, these two kinds of myth cannot be separated. Leeroy Jenkins, later introduced in Hearthstone (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014) on the same level as any fictional character in World of Warcraft, shows this. The Fall of Dalamud, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, is another great example of a myth that functions in both layers inherently, through its conception. It is both a scripted and authored event by the developers that is part of the fictional fabric of the universe of FFXIV, but it is also an event uplifted and retold to mythological status by its players. As a developer said in an interview on the mooncrash: *"We have a myth that actually happened"* (Noclip, 2017) (note here he is using myth in the derogatory sense). Destiny, as explained in detail in my perennial paper, has countless examples of players engaging in an activity and then that becoming "canonized" through the game's lore acknowledging such actions later.

These two chapers has helped us understand why people play with narrative in perennial games, but we need to investigate one more aspect to understand the how. Now, we can no longer avoid looking at the game itself.

4 The Expansions of Space

As we begin to bring the ideas of play and myth together into narrative play, I need to address one how games *facilitate* this play. We thus need to understand what the game is, but I will avoid the fallacy of defining games (Aarseth and Calleja, 2015). Instead, I will focus on a specific aspect of games that I consider one of the more fruitful in this comparison: Space.

I do this for a couple of reasons. First, space is an inherent, unavoidable, defining part of games. As Aarseth said *"What distinguishes the cultural genre of computer games from others such as novels and movies, in addition to its obvious cybernetic differences, is its preoccupation with space"* (Aarseth, 2001). This is a sentiment echoed by many others, including Adams (2003); Nitsche (2008); Schell (2008). Third, space is a rather unique category in games research in that it is the one time narrative has consistently been inseparable from the ludic aspects of games. Already in the early aughts, ludologists were touting the importance of space (Aarseth, 2001) in studying games. Space is also one of the defining categories in narrative (Meyer, 2016; Ryan, 2009), and even at the height of ludonarrative distinctions, it was admitted that space was the one place games and narrative conjoined, as Juul said: *"Space is a special issue between rules and fiction [...] [L]evel design, space, and the shape of game objects refer simultaneously to rules and fiction. This is a case where rules and fiction do overlap."* (Juul, 2005). Space is thus a unique gateway into talking about a construct in games that inherently has its fictional and formal aspects intertwined from its very definition. Finally, space is perhaps the most obvious category to talk about in regards to perennial games: As already mentioned, the primary academic descriptions of most studied perennial games are as spaces or places—as virtual worlds. This definition, as I will also describe, is part of what has caused the (over)fixation on virtual worlds as spatial (which often cause them to appear static and ahistorical). I will challenge this view with a *temporal* expansion of space. We need to understand how space does and does not change over time in order to truly understand perennial games. However, I also want to first challenge common conceptions of space with a *spatial* expansion, by reinterpreting what is included when we talk about the space of perennial games, because it goes further than the "virtual world" or the the 3d-visual representation we typically only associate with the digital space.

This section will first take us through a short history lesson on space in games studies and how it has been ifluenced by the "spatial turn" of cultural studies, before we delve into the number of ways space and be analyzed and understood in games, such as architecture, phenomenology, and semiotics.

4.1 The Spatial Turn

The primary figure to define space in the modern age is Lefebvre. He defined space as socially constructed (Aarseth, 2001; Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith,

1991) in the 60s and 70s[15], and created through "spatial practice", and thus highlighted 3 ways of understanding space: The first being material or present space, which was in opposition to conceptual or imaginary space, but then a third category was formed from these two: A symbolic, representational, collective and lived space, also defined as cultures (Günzel, 2019).

Fig. 1: Triad of Space according to Lefebvre and Soja

Spaces	Forms	Modalities	Equivalents
1st	**Spatial practice** [*pratique spatiale*]	**perceived** [*espace perçu*]	subjective | real everyday live/nature
2nd	**Representations of space** [*représentations de l'espace*]	**conceived** [*espace conçu*]	objective | imaginary urbanism/cartography
3rd	**Representational spaces** [*espaces de représentation*]	**lived** [*espace vécu*]	collective | symbolic lifeworld/culture

Figure 3: Lefebvre's Triad of Space. From Günzel (2019).

Lefebvre was, along with Foucault and others of this time, part of what has later been named "the spatial turn" of academia, primarily in the humanities and cultural studies, which has taken many forms (Günzel, 2019; Warf and Arias, 2008). The spatial turn is in broad strokes a redefinition and reinsertion of the importance of space as a fundamental category to understand society, capitalism and social structures (Warf and Arias, 2008). This was in reaction to an earlier historicism of the Enlightenment that (over)emphasized time in the structuralisation of human experience through a linear understanding of time (later = more progressed, better, more civilized). Space thus becomes "anti-historical" (Flynn, 2004; Massey, 1994). David Harvey (2006) and Edward Soja (1989), a major voice in the spatial turn, took this throughout the 70s and 80s and explored further space was a vital part of the construction of human and social thought, and how space could not be considered subordinate to time or the social.

These kinds of movements had lasting impacts through many fields. The one other than game studies I will highlight here as it is relevant, is narratology, which also went through its own "spatial turn" through thinkers like Lotman (1990), Foucault (1986), and Bahktin (Meyer, 2016). This helped redefine the importance of space in narrative, a medium often defined as *temporal*[16] by

[15]This was published in French, and influenced French contemporary philosophy, but according to Günzel (2019), it was not until Edward Soja's later translation that Lefebvre's thoughts became really popular and influential in the English speaking parts of the world (Günzel, 2019)

[16]One of the common descriptions or definitions of narrative is "a series of events" which inherently presupposes a temporal orde (Ryan et al., 2016), but does not define a spatial one, even though we cannot imagine a narrative not taking place in... well, a place. It is, as

its nature. As Parker (2018) describes, while many narrative thinkers have mentioned space as a vital category, such as Todorov, Genette, Barthes, etc. many do not spend as much emphasis on it in their actual analyses as they do time. Yet, as Parker and Ryan et al. (2016)[17] demonstrate through their frequent revisiting of space (Parker, 2016, 2018; Ryan, 2009; Ryan et al., 2016), it is an inescapable and crucial category of narrative.

4.2 Space in Games Studies

Game studies, while both a newer field and perhaps more inherently space-cognizant, cannot be said to have had a clear spatial "turn" but rather, space has been seeped into the definition of games from the very beginning. In 1998[18], Aarseth (1998) borrowed Lefebvre's concepts and defined how we can talk about a first, (simulated) physical space, a second (imaginary) abstract space, and a third "aesthetic" space of games. *"As spatial practice, computer games are both representations of space (a formal system of relations) and representational spaces (symbolic imagery with primarily aesthetic purpose)"* (Aarseth, 2001) (read in Ryan et al. (2016). Others, too used Lefebvre's 3 types of space, such as Miklaucic (2006), who looked at SimCity like a representation of space, or Stockburger (2006), who saw the first space as the physical medium of game devices and the second as the narrative, or Huber (2009), who expanded Lefebvre with additional 3 orthogonal categories that could be used in a 9 by 9 grid, or Gunzel, who shows how games can be seen as "spatial concepts" through this. Huber's, especially, deserve some recognition for its quite comprehensive mapping of the various types of space and traversal in a game (he was looking specifically at Final Fantasy X and X-2 (Square, 2001, 2003)), as can be seen in figure 4. This could quite easily be applied to many perennial games, such as Destiny 2.

Other understandings of space are also prevalent, though, such as Aarseth et al. (2003)'s later typology of space of "perspective" (vagrant or omnipresent), "topography" (geometrical or topological), and "environment" (dynamic or static), as part of his multi-dimensional typology of games, or Günzel (2008)'s 3 steps to describe space. Shared among those two is an angle of perspective and understanding the difference between interactable and non-interactable space, as a crucial point in analyzing game space. McGregor and Akira (2007) defined another typology of different spatial patterns such as "Challenge space" or "contested space", that are inspired by architectural use of space to understand patterns of how spaces are used based on their definitions. Nitsche (2008)'s patterns of space in games, such as "Arena" or "Maze" or "Rails", also fit these criteria. A commonality is that they all focus on how the space is *used*.

Parker (2018), mentions buried in the definition "event" itself; an event is a change *in place*.

[17] Ryan et al. (2016) also use Lefebvre's categories in reference to Aarseth, but renames the first two categories as "strategic design" and "mimetic design".

[18] As Günzel (2019) notes, this is not the first mention of space in games. Wolf (1997) in 1997 talks about space in games from from the perspective of Bordwellian film studies, to define what can be considered "on-screen" and "off-screen". But this is the first use of concepts directly from this spatial turn.

	Material space (experienced space)	Representation of space (conceptualized space)	Space of representation (lived/ played space)
Absolute space	Rendered 3-D space; physics; buildings, trees, grass, road; barriers, walls, and rivers that effect navigation	Map displays; intertitles; landscape features; textured spaces; city layouts; reference to spaces in FAQs, walk-throughs, and guides	The game world and its fiction as an object of contemplation; literacy of game space and ability to interact with it confidently—the space created by mastery; the learned map, becoming traversable with minimal attention
Relative space	Modes of transportation and acceleration: chocobo space, airship space; scaled space (from overhead map to walking space to battle space)	Airship destination menus; nodes and linkages; zone transitions; hidden and revealed spaces (secret doors, corridors); minigame (Blitzball) spaces	Affective play spaces: melancholy, anxiety/tension—sense of threat/ excitement in high-risk zones and boss fights; shifts of attention motivated by changes in level of threat and comfort; cutscene spaces[1]
Relational space	"Battle space" versus "traversing space"; transitions in scale; blockages and transitions between zones and modes	Narrated space;[2] the fictional accounting of fictional space; aestheticized space, rendered architectures, and landscapes	Collective and personal memory; pre- and postcataclysmic spaces; zones of return; sublime spaces

Figure 4: Huber's modification of Lefebvre's Triad, here with an orthogonal dimension of three other kinds of space, showing all the possible ways to understand space in Final Fantasy X and X-2.

This echoes a common stance in spatial studies in games, that has been drawing on phenomenology, as exemplified by Flynn (2004) or Leino (2013) or Resmini (2021), drawing on Crick (2011), a strand later taken up by scholars like Keogh (2018). The point here is that game worlds are experienced bodily: *"A game world can be roamed like the physical one, and thus is experienced as an inter-enactment as well as an embodiment"* (Resmini, 2021). It is phenomenologically experienced, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) would say, with the body as the zero-point (Flynn, 2004; Leino, 2013), from which everything else begins. The player *inhabits* the space of the game moreso than merely a representation of a subject: The player *takes up* space, too.

4.2.1 Architecture

Architecture is another natural comparison between spatial design in games, as architecture is not just about designing spatial structures, but thinking through how spaces will be used. Nitsche (2008) explains how this can be applied, by showing how Ching (2014)'s architectural descriptions fit well to games[19]. Resmini uses both McGregor's architectural approach and also references Lynch (1960)'s much older typology of spatial primities (paths, edges, nodes, districts, landmarks) that form the basis for how we understand space as people. Resmini uses these to describe the space of three different games in a similar genre to show how different use of space can lead to quite different experiences in games that otherwise are quite similar.

Architecture has also been approached in game narrative, through Henry Jenkins (2004)' seminal *"Games as narrative architecture"*, which alone can

[19] And anecdotally, I can say that I have also been exposed to Ching's architectural frameworks in a Level Design class.

be said to be a key referent in at least 2 different interactive storytelling approaches[20]. This paper, while not directly concerning itself with classical architecture it is a paper that does show how games as constructed spaces can be used for narrative outside the understandings of narrative as temporal plots. This is another clear example of how space cannot escape being both fictional and functional, and it is also an example of looking at the space as how it is used.

4.2.2 Literary Studies of Space

Space can also be analyzed through two other views: Viewing the space as text or viewing it as a semiotic sign, both of which are drawing from literary or cultural studies of space. The first is understanding the semiotics of space, as exemplified by the work of Lotman (1990), used to analyse the space of games by Meyer (2016); Schrape (2019). Lotman described how spaces could be understood as a "semiosphere", a semiotic universe consisting of codes and language connecting and relating to each other (Schrape, 2019), and this can also be used to describe fictional universes. This is marked by boundaries, which are key for stories in Lotman's work, as an event in a story is marked by the crossing of a boundary. These boundaries create binary distinctions, which are used heavily in stories to mark spatial relationships that signify meaning: A high castle vs a low field, a good, safe village, vs an evil, dangerous, swamp, etc. Here, the topology, semantics, and topography can all merge into a "semantic field", that can be analyzed to understand the meaning of the game space through its many features. Ryan et al. (2016) use this in their recent work too, but also criticise this boundary crossing as being potentially too broad to be useful. When not applied as a literal boundary crossing, it is so vague it might as well be renamed "change of state", and thus losing its purpose.

The second view is that of looking at the space as *text*. As exemplified by the visual and cultural studies approaches from Soraya Murray (2020) or Mukherjee (2015), one can view the landscapes, spaces and places of games as meaningful in a cultural context, and as telling about the world we live in. As constructed spaces, every part of them can be used to understand something about the context and conditions under which they were made. Lastowka (2009), too, shows how even a game like Everquest (a perennial game) can be viewed as a text: *"a field of symbols and structures that precede its interaction with an audience and also guide the manner in which an audience uses the software, we must also come to appreciate that Norrath is something more than a platform for community formation and communication."* (Lastowka, 2009) This is naturally something quite well known in traditional narrative, as this is often the primary function of spatial analysis, as well as ways of echoing the characterization in the story, as seen in concepts like the "Seelenlandschaft" (soul landscape) (Domsch, 2019). And here is a part of space that is no different from narrative: Space in games is just as constructed as it is in literary fiction. Murray ends up being

[20] Emergent and environmental storytelling.

critical of games, though, as she sees a subordination of space to gameplay, which strongly affects the reading of the space. The game serves the user, first and foremost, and so we become, as Murray quite damnedly states, predators in the landscape, scanning it for viable resources, only interested in it in the terms of its game-value.

4.3 The Space Outside The Game

These examples have all so far exclusively concerned themselves with the space in the (digital) game itself (with maybe the exception being phenomenology as that does not forget the body outside the digital world). Contrast this with Nitsche (2008)'s definition of space in games, in his book on the topic "Video Game Spaces", for which he defines five layers or planes of space: Rule-based space, mediated space, fictional space, play space, and social space. Through the inclusion of fictional, play and social space, Nitsche looks outside the internal operations of the game (which is in the mediated and rule-based space) and looks at the player (and who they are playing with). The fictional space happens in the mind of the player, the play happens with their body, and the social space happens in relation to another human being while playing during a multi-player game. Nitsche (2019), in a later essay, takes this even further and describes how our real play spaces are influenced by our (potentially digital) play. It is very obvious in categories like pervasive games and ARGs how real space can be affected, but his points here are how we can also consider how our living spaces are redone to allow for and accentuate play, through for example the setup of furniture and he asks that we should *"consider game-worlds as co-inhabitants of our living spaces"* (Nitsche, 2019).

This leads to my first expansion of space. As noted in the mythology section, the mythological constructs of perennial games is larger than the "virtual world" of the game itself. Patch notes, YouTube videos, community discussions, memes, achievements, world's first races, bugs, prominent community members such as YouTubers and live streamers, meta discussions, guide websites, e-sport tournaments, among other things, are all part of the sphere of understanding of these games—one might say the semiosphere. And thus we cannot, as Nitsche has already shown, define our space simply by what is rendered in the 3D environment. But it is even broader than he defined it too. His "social space" is still confined to the interpersonal space that exists *while playing*. Rather, I want to continue the move he begins in his later paper by introducing the real world space as part of the game space, even when not directly part of the play. The story of the Uru Diaspora covered by Pearce and Artemesia (2009) is a quite good example of this. The 3D fictional space of their virtual world collapsed, and yet their story was not over, their mythology was not yet finished, as they kept migrating to other realms, using third-party spaces to communicate across time. One might say this has nothing to do with the space of the initial game they met in, but this would not be entirely genuine: They came together because of the promises made by that space. Pearce describes in detail how the aesthetics and values of that world attracted them in the first place, and thus they could

find other like-minded individuals (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009). Without that space, they never would have met[21]. I am not saying that all the places they gathered after Myst Online: Uru disappeared is part of the space of Uru. But rather how we cannot define the space of the game as the sole and only arbiter of interaction between the players, as the only space within which they play. Nitsche's comments on how the real space is influenced by the games we play is important here, and I want to take that into not just the physical world as he does but also the digital, non-virtual world—or, the internet. These kinds of spaces are affected by the game and they simultaneously affect the game itself. Feedback is given to the developers, guides on how to play are released that change the meta, and so on. We can see this in any perennial game. And yet, while there are always surrounding places and spaces that support them, there is a central, recurring activity, place, that presents the anchor and initial draw[22]. This is where the magic circle resides most strongly. This is also the space that most predominantly can be read as a text created by a game developer (whereas other spaces can be read as other kinds of texts). But, naturally, as players explore the world and play with it, they expand the possible spaces beyond what is controlled by the initial authors. This is not something entirely new, as we can see earlier mentioned scholars like Nitsche (2008) or Pearce and Artemesia (2009) discuss it, but we can also see it through newer work like Gursoy (2020), who looked at the narrative developed in patch notes alone. Yet, these other spaces deserve a much closer and comprehensive look, that also understands the specifics of these spaces. Because these spaces all have their own limitations too. Social platforms like YouTube, Twitch, Twitter and Reddit have plenty of limitations and built-in affordances, expectations and constraints. But they are inherently different than the authored space of the game, and yet can never escape them. In viewing the narrative play of the game and the mythology the players are creating, we must not limit ourselves to only what happens in the 3D environment, but it has to include other aspects in our view of space, too. This is another reason why these spaces are worth looking at: The affordances of these spaces impact the game, too, through the the interconnected relations that develop across these spaces.

I will take an example from Destiny to showcase many of these spatial aspects. The "Loot Cave", something already covered in the perennial paper (Gach, 2020; Good, 2014; Hornshaw, 2021), is a great example of the various ways the spaces of the game and the outside community impacted the play of destiny. A overlooked exploit in Destiny 1 meant that a player could stand at a specific spot and shoot continuously spawning enemies to get infinite loot for very little work. Bungie, the developers, patched this out but it was already a mainstay in the community. People who did not play Destiny had heard of

[21] I do think there is something to be said here about chaos or trauma bringing people together, as well. It is not an infrequent occurrence to see stories of how perennial games "were bad" initially (Destiny, FFXIV, Rainbow Six: Siege) but improved over time with the community and the community being stronger as a result. But this is more complicated than I have space here for.

[22] And this is in fact what was lost when Uru collapsed.

"The Loot Cave" (I did not play Destiny 1 and I heard of it from general gaming podcasts). It spread through avenues like Reddit and YouTube, showing other players how to get "quick and easy loot", a common goal in these games. These kinds of videos tend to proliferate well in perennial communities: Ways to optimize play and "farm" experience or items is a quite common type of shared service done for and by the community. It is, perhaps, a way we can see Murray's "predatory" look quite clearly: Players did not see the cave for the loot. However, the cave itself also matters. The architecture of the cave, what allowed this easy spot to stand and shoot, was only possible because of how the cave was architectured. It, from a semiotic point of view, serves quite elegantly as a *cave*. A dark and cramped area where monsters spawn, in direct contrast to the open and expansive space the player stands. It serves as a boundary between interactable and non-interactable space, as monsters spawn in from an impenetrable "gate" in the back of the cave, yet the player can only interact with them once they walk out into the cave itself.

It was perhaps not much at the time, and little more than a fun glitch that became a story, indeed a myth, by itself. But it has turned into quite a bit more since then. When the area was reintroduced in Destiny 2, the cave was back and this time, a pile of corpses was inside it—showing how Bungie acknowledged that players' incessant, ridiculous shooting in a cave has been responded to, and is part of the world (Gach, 2020). And they could have stopped there, and this was the end of the story in the 2021 perennial paper. But they did not stop there. Shortly after the paper's release, a new Dungeon was added to the game, a Dungeon that takes place *inside* the Loot Cave (Hornshaw, 2021). Players enter the cramped space, but this time find a secret entrance, that opens up to an entire underground cavern, an expansive, sprawling space full of "loot", that has been corrupted. This Dungeon, named Grasp of Avarice, leans quite heavily on pirate iconography, as it tells the story of a person who got enthralled by the promise of the Loot in the Loot Cave but went mad with desire. The players venture into the cave to learn of his ultimate demise, while fending off against the many traps he had set up so no one else could steal his "treasure". There are many ways one could analyze this space, using many of these techniques, but I will leave it here as a prospect for future work. What is important here is how this would never have happened without the communal spaces that exist outside the virtual world of Destiny. The Loot Cave only became a mythologized place through other means.

The concept of the virtual world needs to be explored further, and this will further define this expansion of space, and also bring us to the next one.

4.4 Virtual Worlds - Space in Perennial Games

"Virtual world" is the predominant way to describe worlds like those in World of Warcraft or Destiny, and done so from the dawn of their research by the influential works of people like Celia Pearce (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009), Klastrup (2003), Taylor (2009), etc. Pearce and Klastrup, who spent much effort on defining the virtual world, does so in detail, and many lean on their work and

use the term often as shorthand. Klastrup's (the more concise of the two) is:

> *A virtual world is a persistent online representation, which contains the possibility of synchronous interaction between users and between user and world within the framework of a space designed as a navigable universe. [...] "Virtual worlds" are worlds you can move in, through persistent representation(s) of the user, in contrast to the represented worlds of traditional fictions, which are worlds presented as inhabited by real people, but not actually inhabitable.* (Klastrup, 2003)

Many of these terms repeat in Pearce and Artemesia (2009)'s: Persistence, inhabitability, spatiality, navigability (explorability and mappability), and sociability. They are places you inhabit, you cannot merely spectate or perceive them, but the only way to engage is to participate (what Pearce calls "consequential participation")[23]. They are persistent, both in the sense that they stay consistent, but also in that they exist outside participation too. They are always, in their views, mimetic, mappable and navigable, with continuous space that can be explored at leisure (barring constraints placed by the rules of the game). A virtual world is a fiction, because it is constructed and (re)presenting a fictional world, but it is also a social, performative space, and a space for a game (Klastrup, 2003). Some virtual worlds are decidedly less fictional (like Second Life) compared to others that rely on their fiction to define them (like World of Warcraft or Lord of the Rings Online (Standing Stone Games, 2007), relying on pre-existing fiction, but it can also be entirely original fiction such as in Destiny or FFXIV).

Another term they both use is the nebulous term "worldness", which we also saw Krzywinska (2006) use earlier to describe the connective tissue of the world to its mythos. Pearce defines it loosely as what makes a virtual world "feel" like a consistent world, a more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts element that ties it all together. Klastrup tries to define this a bit more stringently but ends up in a similar place: *"...the experience of "worldness" appears to be related to the feeling of presence and engagement in the virtual world, an experience which is the result of the particular world design (how the world is presented to us as a tool to play with), the interplay between agents and interaction forms available in the world (the world as game and social space), and the accumulated experience of "lived life" in the world (interaction-in-time and the continuous performance of persistent characters in the world)."* (Klastrup, 2003). It is about individual feeling and experience rather than material reality. It is about lived life and a feeling of coherence and completeness that belongs more or less to the individual in experience. There are countless ways to break down the actual world of any (perennial) game: Loading screens, out-of-bounds areas, invisible colliders, inaccessible affordances, limited vocabulary, impossible geometry (caves larger

[23] As they note this to differentiate from other types of games, this is not meant in the same way as the phenomenological inhabitation, as that applies to many more kinds of games than those in these kinds of virtual worlds

than their outsides allow, etc.), and so on. The point is not that these worlds are coherent, but that they *feel* coherent. Nitsche (2008) describes how virtual worlds become places, something not all game spaces become inherently. He sees this as an effect of the social interaction that happens in these worlds. People grow to know them, and through the social interactions establish meaning inside them, and thus begin to consider them their own.

4.4.1 Dwellings - Space as Home

This echoes Vella (2019)'s paper on dwellings in games, on how games are so often considered to be about travel, navigation (Manovich, 2002), quests and exploration, which he calls "hermetic", using a word from Casey (1993), and that they are not predominantly "hestial", that is, about being-at-home, or taking place in dwellings. However, some games have the capacity to turn the hermetic into the hestial, as players become increasingly familiar with an existing environment, beginning to learn it like the back of their hand. An example Vella brings up is a player of Minecraft (Mojang, 2011) getting so used to their previously daunting cave-system they now navigate them effortlessly, almost instinctively. Vella does not (by design) talk about multiplayer worlds, but I do think here it is worth pointing out just how much virtual worlds can become dwellings. Because of their temporal nature, perennial games especially will become a place and will become a dwelling for those in it. And yes, this is obvious in the big well-known social hubs like Ironforge (Blizzard Entertainment Ltd., 2004) or Limsa Lominsa (Square Enix, 2013), but I see it extending further: A raid that was puzzling and challenging the first time becomes second-nature after the 30th. You know all the challenges, you know where to stand, where to jump, where to cast your spells and when to dodge. And this avoids talking about the very literal player housing that exists in several of these games, such as FFXIV (Lucas, 2020). Because of the persistence and temporal engagement with these games, I do consider it an eventuality for anyone who plays them long enough that it becomes a sort of dwelling, a second home. Their spaces are not static (as I will discuss shortly) but they are consistent and present and fixed enough for them to become reliable fixtures, and for people to learn about them over time.

4.4.2 The Internet as Place

The virtual world is viewed as a key requirement for some of these aspects. As Nitsche says *"an event is not happening "on the web" but is localized in a game world."* (Nitsche, 2008) This is also seen in how Geraci (2014) talks about space and religion. He notes how virtual worlds granted the "place" required for religious practice. The internet, to him, is a "non-place". It does not have space or orientation, it is not mappable in the same way a virtual world is. Geraci then references Eliade who had shown how religion relies on spatial relations quite heavily: We orient ourselves in the world based on our religious understanding. The church is in the *center* of town. Sacred places in the world become the *center*

of the world (Jerusalem, Mekka, etc), which the rest of the world is oriented towards. To Geraci, the internet cannot provide this, but virtual worlds can, and this is part of why virtual worlds provide a stronger religious function than was previously possible on the internet alone. Nitsche ends up in a similar point through Brenda Laurel (2013), who also uses Eliade to talk about how virtual worlds could allow the creation of "sacred sites". Later, Nitsche uses Norberg-Schulz (2019), to discuss how this placeness turns into a practice of identity: *"If a player has developed a consistent identity in the online world of Everquest, then the virtual space of Everquest has become a "place" for this particular player through the process of identity creation."* (Nitsche, 2019). For a new player, the consistent massively multiplayer world of Everquest might be a beautiful playground to explore, a space to master. For the longtime player, the game world has also become the home for countless social encounters with other players. This combines the religious angle discussed in the myth section to Vella's notions of dwelling in quite a neat manner.

However, I will here disagree with Geraci about the necessity for virtual worlds. While "the internet" does indeed not have inherent placeness, individual *places* on the internet very much can. Specific communities that are technically little more than chat-servers, such as forums or Discord servers, can become places much in the same way that Nitsche describes a place forming through a person's identity-formation within it. We get to know the people inside it, we get to rely on them, get used to its affordances and limitations, habituate our access to it, and we get to call it a home. We can see examples of this in many ways throughout internet culture and studies. Notable examples include "The Forge" (White, 2020) or Pearce and Artemesia (2009)'s Uru Diaspora already covered, or even major gaming forums like NeoGAF of Something Awful, which also became (in)famous for a certain type of community (Groen, 2015). This is another reason the spatial expansion is necessary, as merely understanding the internet as a nebulous "non-space" is not enough. We need to understand the *specific* places that serve the communities of perennial games, and how they do so.

4.5 Aspirational Worlds

Virtual worlds, especially in the earlier tradition, were very aspirational about their "worldness". If we look at the stated design goals of early virtual worlds like Ultima Online (Origin Systems, 1997) or Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003), they were not shy about what they were trying to make: A second world, like our own but different (Boellstorff, 2015; Geraci, 2014; Taylor, 2009). As a successor to MUDs, many of these initial virtual worlds were highly freeform, without any clear goals, but also allowing players much more control over their events, happenings and behavior. Games like Ultima Online, that allowed freeform player interactions, killings and stealings, etc. (Nitsche, 2008), or Achaea, that had giant player-and-developer-played storylines where players were given the powers of gods (Reed, 2021) or Second Life, that allows players to create their own entire islands, places, businesses and ways of life, to the slightly more

controlled but still very freeform games like Everquest, Star Wars Galaxies, (Lastowka, 2009; Taylor, 2009) etc. We see some semblances of that today in games like EVE: Online (CCP Games, 2008) where most of the famous stories are player-run events, but one may notice that most of these games are old at this point, if they are even still running. They were worlds in the old-school sense: Places in which things could happen, the very thing Bartle (2004) wrote about when he said that virtual worlds are not narratives, but places. They allowed social interaction and emergent behavior, but had little in terms of prescripted, expected action.

This has changed. Perhaps starting with World of Warcraft, as Nitsche (2008) also mentions, that streamlined and focused many of the parts of these games. But really, it has been an ongoing process from each iteration to the next, with not just WoW, but Everquest and each subsequent MMO after, which influenced the design of the others. Today, if we look at the current virtual world landscape we see only a couple of big entrants, all of which are nowhere as giant as they once were. Instead, other genres have taken over. And here is where the perennial refocusing helps us because these new genres might not be MMOs, but they are still perennial. League of Legends, Fortnite, Destiny, and so on are all games that have dominated the current markets, and they are a far cry away from that initial virtual world utopic dream: Gone is the player created worlds. Gone is the freeform ability to manage social structures and societies. It has been subsumed by something else. Even World of Warcraft and MMOs like Final Fantasy XIV, while potentially allowing some freeform creativity, is nowhere near that initial vision. Modern perennial games do not rely on "virtual worlds" anymore in the traditional sense.

This might sound tragic, but I do not intend it in that way. It is what it is. However, we can look back at these many changes and learn something about how their designs of these spaces influenced the behavior of the players. TL Taylor (2009) noted how some changes in the systems of Everquest drastically changed how players used its spaces. In the early days, traveling across the world was time-consuming or expensive to do for a single person, and thus some people became "taxi"-drivers, that could teleport players to places for a fee. Another example is how entire social hubs were created and formed by players in lieu of better in-game market systems, but then when these systems were introduced, many of these previous social hubs collapsed. These two examples show something quite harsh: A "better" (more efficient) system in both cases led to less player interaction, less friction leading to less communication. I can think of several anecdotal experiences of this myself, from my days of playing World of Warcraft. Early on, to gather groups one had to post in the general chat channels and hope others responded, forcing social interaction to gather a group, organize how to get to the dungeon in question. This took time and was cumbersome, but led to social interaction with other players. Nowadays, one can press a button, be matched with 4 other players, and get automatically teleported to where one needs to go. Convenient, no doubt, but also less social[24].

[24] And you can see the nostalgic power of World of Warcraft Classic to see how some players

Little to no communication becomes a norm, quickly, when it is not necessary. We can find many other examples of how the design of the systems impacted player behavior and thus how the spaces of the games were used (Packer, 2014; Scott, 2012). We can see an extreme of this in Destiny, in which most of the player-to-player interactions are removed or automised. Text chat is disabled by default, meaning few people use it, and activities that allow matchmaking with strangers do not require communication to complete, whereas the ones that do, simply do not allow matchmaking and it is thus expected one finds a group elsewhere. This, ironically, has the reverse effect of recreating the general channels from World of Warcraft, but just in third-party tools like Discord. And this is a further example why, in order to understand the play of Destiny, one must also investigate Discord: It is an unavoidable part of its play. Thus is the spatial expansion of space a necessity. But there is one more expansion these descriptions of the virtual world hints at.

4.6 Non-static Space: Virtual Worlds in Change

The second expansion I want to make is against the common refrain about virtual worlds: That they are spaces that do not tell pre-scripted stories (Bartle, 2004; Costikyan, 2007; Lee, 2016; Lohmann, 2008). In other words, they are static, only changing when players act inside them. This has some unfortunate implications. Seeing space as contrary to time leads us into similar thoughts as pre-spatial turn thinking: Space as anti-historical. It is similarly a potential problem with over structuralisation of space; that we begin to see it as statically dependent, as something that by definition is against time. This is a frequent underpinning in the criticisms of narrative in virtual worlds: They are places and *thus* they cannot be narratives. While most work that echoes these thoughts is from the initial virtual world explosion, where these worlds were more static, we still see it today: "Online worlds are ahistorical spaces full of players who live and make stories, but there is very little interaction between these individual stories" (Ryan et al., 2016) Online worlds are "ahistorical". This is categorically untrue. But, before I dismiss it entirely, let us investigate a little closer why these claims crop up, because the examples are quite consistent: Repetition.

In traditional narrative, once the hero slays the monster, we expect the monster to stay slayed. Not so in most virtual worlds: The monster is revived for the next hero of equal strength and measure to slay as well. This, to many (Bartle, 2004; Lohmann, 2008; Ryan et al., 2016), was the pivotal proof that virtual worlds did not function narratively. The space is static, the monster remains. What changes, they acknowledge, is the character. The hero becomes a little stronger. Gets a new pair of boots. And thus the change stays with the players, it stays social, it remains. But, as I have demonstrated in my perennial work (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021), this is looking at the space in too narrow of a timeframe: Taken upon a long view, all of these spaces have changed and will change. A patch might remove the monster, and cause a

do miss this kind of interaction.

volcano to explode behind it. A previously lush area might become deforested. A populated space station might go derelict. But what this doesn't mean is that it removes the repetition. It merely replaces it. Now, instead of killing a monster over and over again, the players might delve into a dungeon in that same area, over and over again. Something new has arisen, but it, once again, is not removed from repetition. We are still able to re-experience history. Remember, here, our mythological findings on repetition as not an ultimate sin, but rather a mythological tool (section 3). Once again, a too narrow view will not allow us to see the full picture.

Most perennial games are by no means simple in these regards. Server sharding, instancing, phasing, retconning, disabling of content, the removal of content and the re-introduction of that content, the ability to view the same place in multiple states of time, are all examples that complicate this considerably, but they do not alter the fundamental fact that I as a player can do the same activity over and over again with little to no explanation for why I can, nor does it change the fact that the world might be drastically different in a month. And this is also by no means consistent across examples of perennial games. Destiny treats repetition and change differently than FFXIV, which again is nowhere similar to League of Legends or Fortnite or Apex: Legends (Respawn Entertainment, 2019). We cannot go in detail with all the differences of all these games here but I do want to emphasize that all these uses of space are important to understand how these games work. It should be part of analyzing how players play them to understand what is repeated and what is not, why that is repeated and what that means for the players. Repetition here is a factor because it is such a frequent occurrence in perennial games. It can be said to be part of their defining traits, inherent in the "perennial" moniker: Something repeats over and over again, and yet each time is different. Therefore, understanding what changes and what doesn't is crucial to its design. This challenge of space relies on the play of perennial games, because it is precisely the play that is repeated. Play thrives in repetition. Feedback loops, interactions, turn orders, progression, core mechanics, are all based on or described with repetition: Something recurs, and it is in that structure we can play. And it is precisely also seeing what does not repeat, what changes and what becomes new, that allows us to see how perennial games change over time. It seems that it is part of the nature of space itself that has led to this common viewpoint. Perhaps game studies, as influenced from its conception by the spatial turn, and thus internalized space as a core function of games, has lost sight of when space by itself is limiting our understanding of games.

To understand the space of a perennial game, then we can employ all the strategies mentioned in early part of this section, but it is also vital that we keep in mind this temporal expansion, understood through how the world changes and how it does not. The worlds *change* over time, and how they change and why is crucial to their experience. World of Warcraft, in 2017, altered its entire levelling structure to be more freeform: Players can now choose where to go to level whenever, and the world will scale with them. Without having investigated this in detail, I claim that this *must* change the way we experience the space, but

we do not yet have a clear enough idea of *how*. This is what I mean by calling for an analysis of the change and repetition of the space. Another example is Destiny 2's removal of areas, which is a now common aspect of playing the game. Huge parts of Destiny 2's world has been removed from the game, present in 2017 but now lost to time—it has entered the "Content Vault" as they literally call it. They will furthermore reintroduce older content again, later, (pull it out from the Vault) maybe changing it or adjusting it to the current story (as they recently did with the Leviathan spaceship) or not (as they did with the Vault of Glass raid from Destiny 1). Few games quite so clearly show the changes of its space as Destiny does, but nevertheless, the space changes, and becomes something new.

5 Bringing it All Together

We have now gone through three rather separate aspects of perennial games. The boundary of their play, as socially constructed and defined, their mythmaking as something that can be viewed both as a layer of the fictional elements of the world and as what the audience do with the play, and finally, we looked at the space, how the room and environment can be viewed to understand how this myth is played with. These three concepts are disparate, but they are all also together, as we cannot imagine a perennial game existing without the interplay of these three concepts. They are intertwined, and rely on each other to all create the complete perennial experience as it unfolds. The entire experience unfolds inside what we might call a *mythological play space*, a space created through the fiction and the perenniality to allow both the traditional forms of play afforded by the game, but also the forms of play allowed by the myth, to change and alter the meaning, the fiction, the way we play, the reason we play, or the space we play in. It is, as any perennial experience, an everchanging experience over time. I have created this diagram (figure 5) to showcase the totality of the experience, but it should not be forgotten that this triangle, like the one showing the relationship between the author, audience and game from the perennial definition (section 1.2, moves foward through time.

Note here, how this figure avoids the relationship between author and audience, a move I have generally been doing throughout this literature review. This is important because I want to highlight that neither of these three categories are *fully* decided by the audience or the author or the game, but all three in unison (or in conflict). This triangle can thus be placed *inside* the other, as part of the creation of the universal chronicle. This, rather than answering who is doing the work, is answering *how* the work of the mythmaking is done.

5.1 Relating the Concepts

I will now spend a few extra words relating these concepts individually, to understand how integrated they are with each other.

5.1.1 Play and Space

"Play space" is probably the most obvious connection, as this is a frequent connection with play, as well, mentioned often in play studies, such as by Salen and Zimmerman (2003). We need *space* to play. Play exists in a *possibility space*. This can be understood both in the literal, topographical space of a 3D environment, but also as the imagined or representative space offered by a multiple choice selection or abstract textual spaces in Blaseball (The Game Band, 2020). All kinds of play needs space, and the moment space exists, we can analyze its construction, as any space for a game is *designed*. This space, as play space, is socially defined, constructed, and deliberated, and it is always up for discussion what parts of the space are worth playing with and why.

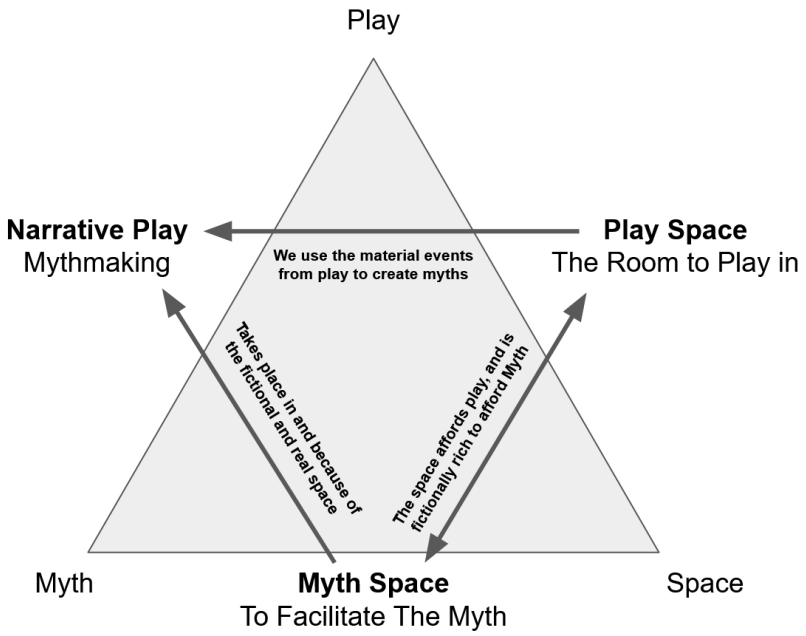

Figure 5: A triangle showing the relationships between the three covered topics in this literature review. This shows how narrative play functions in perennial games.

5.1.2 Myth and Space

Relating Myth and Space is a little less obvious, but still quite connected. As mentioned in section 4.4, Geraci and Nitsche already connected space to religious practice and the creation of *place*, also seen through Vella's ideas of dwellings in games. Games we spend long time in, especially with other people, become second homes, as we feel an intimate familiarity with them and perhaps also change them to our design over time. Combined with the obvious notion that since myths are stories and stories are heavily connected with space, we have a potent cocktail for mythmaking: The space, just as it is for play, helps facilitate the construction of myth, the sense of belonging, the religious function. And it is through analyzing this space, and how it is used, we can come to understand how the mythmaking is afforded by the construction of games.

5.1.3 Myth and Play

Finally, we have a relation between Myth and Play. This is where we must talk about narrative play, finally. As explained in the very beginning of this literature review, narrative play is about playing with narrative. Understood in the frame of perennial games, that is then more concretely about *playing with*

myth. We perform narrative play in many forms, but when done so in perennial games, the myth becomes the *object* of narrative play. It is what we change, it is what we play with. It is what the play is about. The product of narrative play, as it is indeed productive, is the making of myth.

This can take many forms and take place in many spaces, but as discussed in the myth section, I see two primary layers of mythmaking taking place in perennial games. These two layers are, like the triangle, not showing who is doing the mythmaking as it can be both the audience, the players, and the authors in both layers, but rather showing what the mythmaking is *about*. These layers can be seen in figure 6.

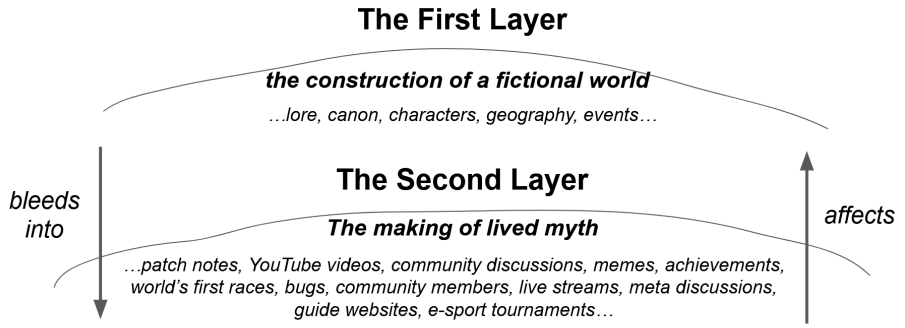

Figure 6: A diagram showing the two layers of mythmaking in perennial experiences.

The first layer is the construction of a fictional world. This mythmaking is closely related to J.R.R. Tolkiens "mythopoeia", it is the careful and deliberate construction of new mythology, of new fiction that aims to say something about the world. This is where the fiction resides. This is the Fall of Dalamud, an example of the developers shaping the world. This is Bungie making the myths of Destiny, by creating the gods and their domains, but it is not only the domain of authors. The players and audience play with the fiction, too, and through fanfiction, deliberation and play, affect, create new fiction, too. But crucially, the role of the audience is also often to *maintain* the fiction, to deliberate it and balance it with the gameplay, to update wiki sites and discuss narrative developments. Blaseball (The Game Band, 2020) is a prime example of the audience directly participating in and maintaining the fiction through their own actions, and the developers responding to this.

The second layer is the mythmaking of play itself. This is the fictionalization, the mythologization of play. This is me playing through the Opening of Ahn'Qiraj, and the many other recorded videos of that event. This is the playing of the game outside the virtual world, this is YouTube videos and patch notes, live streams and memes. This is often seen as the activity of the audience, although authors can and will participate, and in fact, any update to the game

can be seen as a part of this mythmaking, a further event to create myths out of. This is where the audience plays the game and create their own myths, or make myths out of what already exists in the first type of mythmaking. They experience the story, play through it and with it, and create their own memories. This is the kind of mythmaking that also happens in games like Rocket League, otherwise not considered fictional, and why Rocket League can still be studied a perennial game, because they so so much of this specific type of mythmaking that they cannot be disregarded. This is where Sports also reside on the perennial spectrum. And there is much to learn about perenniality from these types of games.

However, it is where both kinds of mythmaking combine that we create something truly special. Because suddenly, the second layer of mythmaking can become *about* the first, and the first is *affected* by the second. This is where the fictional no longer remains entirely fictional, and where the real world also becomes fiction. This is the true magic of perennial games, as it relies on perenniality to function: Mytmaking takes *time*, and it is only possible to affect the first layer of mytmaking, the world, if there is a built-in affordance to change it, and that can only happen over time. The second layer of mythmaking can happen with any game, and the first layer happens in traditional fiction, but it is only in perennial games that we see *both simultaenously*. We are creating new myths in the moment that alter the fictional world, and reflecting upon them and how they affect our play in the same moment. This is something that can only exist with perenniality and fiction combined. I will not say it is entirely unique to perennial *games*, as the examples Saler (2012) brings up also show signs of this kind of experience, and wrestling as we mentioned extensively (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021) also include fiction and perenniality. But what is unique about perennial *games* is rather why and how they work so effectively as perennial experiences.

I asked in the beginning a single question: *Why and how do we play with narrative in perennial games?*. It is now time to answer it.

5.2 Why?

The question of why we play with narrative in perennial games is answered through two of the sections. The first is play and the second is enchantment.

Play is attractive. The power of the magic circle, as defined in that section, is that it is socially constructed. In that statement lies a truth: We *want* to create a socially safe space for play. We *want* to enter this safe bubble. I did not spend much time on the power of play in that section, but as shown by Sicart (2014) or Bateson (1955) or Suits (2020) and Huizinga (1956), play is immensely powerful and human, regardless how we boundarize it. We *want* to play. The point of the magic circle is not the circle (as that is really where the problems come in, the *circle* is the problematic metaphor), but the magic.

And this is where Aupers (2015)'s highlighting of the attractiveness of play for spiritual purposes become relevant. This is where the enchantment mentioned by Geraci (2014); Hong (2015); Saler (2012) comes in. We play in mag-

ical worlds to counter a disenchanted world. We want to participate in "epic narratives" (Geraci, 2014; Krzywinska, 2006) because we so rarely get to do so otherwise. It should be no secret that wanting to be a part of something greater is attractive to human beings. This striving is, I'd wager, part of storytelling, part of religion, part of the creation of *society* in the first place.

And the play is important here, because it *lures us in*. One of Saler (2012)'s important points is how it was only a carefully considered mixture of magic, veiled in a sense of rationality and logic (the worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien are considered and internally consistent, mappable, and with their own careful history. This is catnip for a rational mind, while still allowing the indulgence of magical reality). Narrative play is that today. We get attracted by the fact that it is just play, it is pretend, it is "just inside the magic circle". But we stay because it is enchanting that which is outside, we stay because we, naturally, are outside the magic circle too, even as much as we use the circle to allow ourselves to play in the first place. As a secular society, we have lost the ability to play with traditional myth, and so we create our own, and the fictional aspect, the fact that it is *fake*, inside a pretend circle, is *why* we allow ourselves to play with it.

This is what I will call the "masquerade of play". The play is a trick we play on ourselves, to allow ourselves to enter a reality that is a little more magical than the one we otherwise would have. It is an allowance we grant ourselves, a token of acceptance. Because it is a *game*, because it is *fiction*, we may play with it. But of course, it is not entirely fake. We know this too, and it is part of the reason why it works: The "real enough" nature of these worlds is crucial to making us feel more a part of them. The play is only there to uphold the masquerade, but we know well enough that even masquerades are real, too.

5.3 How?

The question of how is we play with narrative in perennial games is answered through the sections on myth and space.

Understanding this play as *mythmaking* is the first important construct, as already covered. It is in the combination of the two layers of myth that narrative play in perennial games work, in the deliberation, unfolding, and creation of fictional mythology, and in the participation, spectatorship, and retellings of play experiences that the mythmaking is shaped and turns into something real.

This all happens in spaces, and through the analyses of these spaces, we can understand how the mythmaking is structured. I do not have the capability here to perform a complete inspection of space in all kinds of perennial games and how it affords mythmaking, since it is specific to each game, and each game space is constructed differently. The point here is that space is a powerful lens through which we can understand how the narrative play is done in combination with the game. The two expansions mentioned in the space section are vital here, as no perennial analysis is complete without looking at the participated spaces outside the virtual world of the game, nor without looking at the repetition and change over time in those spaces.

It is necessary to deconstruct the space, and this can be done in any number of ways. As shown in the space section, there is no shortage of ways to understand the space of a game, be that textually (Murray, 2020), semiotically (Meyer, 2016), geographically (Ryan et al., 2016), phenomenologically (Crick, 2011; Flynn, 2004), socially (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009). I will prescribe no method here as more fruitful than another, as it is dependent on what one is investigating. However, I will mention that which I find especially fruitful in terms of understanding narrative play. The examples brought forth by Taylor (2009) and Nitsche (2008) and Bartle (2022) that show how changes in the world's design affect how the space was treated by its players, and thus led to different possible narratives, is crucial to understanding the range of narrative play. It is likewise crucial to understand how players use these spaces, which has for example been successfully done through ethnographic studies (Boellstorff et al., 2012), as this can help highlight how the spatial design affects player behaviour.

Another aspect of this that I have not mentioned too much in this literature review as it was part of the perennial games paper (Larsen and Carstensdottir, 2021), is the notion of diegesis (Kleinman et al., 2019). As mentioned in section 3.2.3, it is a common part of perennial games to discuss what is canon and what is not. Their diegesis, as muddied exactly by the real-not-real nature of its mythology and the temporality, is an inherent tension in all perennial games that the community is constantly wrestling with. This is not a solvable conflict by design, as it is part of the perennial experience to wrestle with it. It should, however, be part of any perennial analysis to understand what is accepted as truth and what is accepted as fiction. In other words, it is necessary to investigate what the universal chronicle consists of, what the players care to maintain and what is forgotten.

We perform narrative play by making myths along with other players, the authors, and the game itself, through playing the game and reshaping what the game is about, through playing with the mythology of the fictional world and the mythology of the community. It is done in constant communication over time, through dialogue done through posts, videos, performances, play itself, conversations, patches, and social gatherings. It is done in community spaces, both those created by the developer, and those curated by the community in service of the game. It happens over time and in fluctuating places. The examples mentioned in this literature review, The Opening of Ahn'Qiraj, the Fall of Dalamud, and the Loot Cave in Destiny are just three types of examples of how narrative play happens in perennial games, and shows how the worlds changed as a result of the narrative play performed by the community and its developers. It is necessary to not only understand these as single events but as part of a larger mythology, an ever-evolving, indeed perennial, story.

The questions one should ask here to understand the narrative play of a specific perennial game are questions of mythmaking: What myths are told and retold in this community? How are myths created and deliberated? What is considered canon and how is that determined? How is the play of the game affecting the myth, what is repeated in play and what is not? Wherein does the repetition lie and how does that correspond with the fictional mythology?

(For example, are there diegetic reasons for the repetition or not?) How does the community treat the repetition and the change? How does the developer respond to community actions, both those prescribed and those not? How is the live dialogue maintained and moderated, and by whom?

These are just some of the questions one could ask when performing a specific analysis of the narrative play of a perennial game, but they are a decent starting point. As one can tell, narrative play in perennial games is a complicated, multi-faceted topic with many possible angles of attack. The answering of these two questions of how and why is a first step to begin to approach perennial games a little more directly, and with greater focus.

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