***From Faerie Tale to Adventure Game***

By Michael Nitsche

***Introduction***

This essay is a visitor to the world of science fiction and fantasy – one that comes from the relatively new field of video games studies. That is why the argument has to start from the video game aspect and look from this vantage point towards parallels to science fiction and especially fantasy. More precisely, this essay investigates how genre-typical elements such as characters, settings, or predefined dramatic situations found their way into the spatial design of the video game *Zanzarah: The Hidden Portal*.

First, as space is used as a central argument, a short overview over the relevance of space for literary as well as interactive texts provides a connection between the two and the grounds for a more detailed analysis of *Zanzarah* itself. This analysis constitutes the second part of the argument as it looks into the design and operation of the game's virtual world to illustrate parallels to the fantastic. It will argue that the interactive functionality cannot be traced to any specific genre but that the context generated by a number of game elements pushes the fictional world into the fantastic.

*Zanzarah: The Hidden Portal* uses a basic quest setting and translates it into a navigable game space. The essay analyses this transformation and the role of fantasy therein as it exemplifies the technique of molding narrative and spatial elements into a fantasy game world. The goal is not a direct media comparison but an investigation into themes and recurrent motifs in this molding process. The author worked as co-writer on *Zanzarah* and had access to all the design material and underlying processes of the actual creation of the game. This allows for a more complete view of the game world instead of one that grows from a player's perspective.

Any direct mapping of literary media on video games would be futile as games differ in their underlying technology from the way traditional media operate. Unlike books, video games depend on mathematical rule systems and processes – they are very much representations of the "science" as presented in many science fiction pieces. John W. Campbell's description of science fiction as "an effort to predict the future on the

basis of known facts, culled largely from present-day laboratories" (Campbell cf (James 56)) resonates with views of video games as dramatized simulation machines that reference back to reality. Juul summarizes: "[t]o play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world" (Juul *Half-Real*, 1) – it is math and myth, science and fiction. Their rule-driven nature has led to a general questioning of their narrative qualities in such theoretical works as Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* or Juul's *A Clash between Game and Narrative* and *A Brief Note on Games and Narratives*. This essay touches on that debate within computer game research as its core point of spatiality includes interactive "play" options as well as the representational elements that are usually attributed to the narrative side. It will not elaborate on that issue, though, in order to concentrate on the connection to fantasy.

***Fantastic Spaces from the Page to the Monitor***

The dominance of audio-visual presentation in video games has led to their close relationship with traditional moving images. Beside traditional games, one dominating reference for modern commercial video games is the cinema, not the book. A film and game franchise are often developed in parallel with the film directors' participating in both of them. Yet, there is also a history of video games based on books: from Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide Through the Galaxy* (Adams/ Meretzky) to American McGee's game version of Lewis' *Alice in Wonderland* (McGee). Prominent fictional universes, such as Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, have inspired landmark video games such as *Alone in the Dark* (Raynal) or have been directly incorporated into games like *Prisoner of Ice* (Dufour). Tolkien's Middle-earth has seen dozens of video game adaptations and has inspired countless games beyond that. Science fiction and cyberpunk have heavily inspired a wide range of different video games although direct adaptations are less prominent. Their most prominent reference to literature is the adaptation of the term – and so some extent the idea – of *cyberspace* from the science fiction author William Gibson to the actualized virtual worlds of today's digital media. His *Neuromancer* was

adapted (Balfour) and many games refer to science fiction settings but most cyberpunk games, like the outstanding *Deus Ex* (Spector), feature original storylines. Still, the value of science fiction and fantasy literature for video games is eminent, if not always as direct sources, but surely as inspirational reference. Both worlds seem to share common themes and motifs. On the other hand, the range of different game adaptations indicates a lack of any single interaction design that might be connected to science fiction or fantasy. The same Tolkien book can inspire two very different video games. Referencing the literary genre does not lead to a specific gameplay.

Cyberspace – "navigable space" – implies the notion of movement through a spatialized fictional world of data and, in extension, the interaction with it and its ingredients. Such a movement through space, the realization of a quest, is a typical aspect of video games but also a powerful literary feature. Certeau even argued that every story is a travel story as it has to include spatial practices that localize events (Certeau). Not surprisingly, we can find traces of such localizations in books: maps and whole geographies for fantasy worlds such as Tolkien's Middle-earth. Readers can trace heroes' journeys through the pages as well as on the map. Even if direct maps are not available, readers can create a spatial model from the information given in the novel or short story. Such a process is referred to as the creation of a cognitive map of the fictional world.

Cognitive maps emerged from the field of psychology as a cognitive model for spatial comprehension. They should not to be confused with actual printed orientation maps but are individual interpretations of space. Tolman formulated this theory for rats and their wayfinding behavior and indicated a transfer of his findings to human spatial recognition and the dependent human behavior (Tolman). They found their way into the field of architecture, for example in Lynch's influential analysis of human orientation in large "real-world" environments (Lynch). Lynch identified five basic elements (path, landmark, edge, node, and district) as dominant forms in these interpretations of space.

With such a clear theory in place, researchers have looked into the value of the cognitive map for narratology. Herman concentrates on the cognitive aspects of traditional text-based narrative and introduces the term "storyworld" as "mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate – or make a deictic shift – as they work to comprehend a

narrative" (Herman 9). He describes the connection between narrative and his "storyworlds": "narrative can also be thought of as systems of verbal or visual cues prompting their readers to *spatialize* storyworlds into evolving configurations of participants, objects, and places" (Herman 263). "Storyworlds" are results of the story making process cued by the author and completed by readers. They have a spatial quality, as they position events in time and space, which invites references to Lynch's work. Ryan rejects any such direct application of Lynch to written texts, arguing that "people read for the plot and not for the map, unless they are literary cartographers. We construct our mental models of narrative space only as far as we find a cognitive advantage in this activity - only as far as is needed to achieve immersion in the textual world" (Ryan *Cognitive Maps,* 238). Notably, she connects the spatialization via comprehension to the effect of "immersion," a key feature of interactive media (Murray). Although Ryan cannot support a direct application of cognitive mapping to literary texts in her preliminary experiments, her work remains focused on spatiality in and of written texts especially in the area of interactive hypertexts (e.g. Ryan *Cyberspace*).

Hypertexts, web pages, or Multi User Dungeons (MUD) can deliver spatially arranged content structures through written literary text. To illustrate the difference between their spatial structuring and that of fixed, printed texts, a short look at MUDs is helpful. MUDs depend on the written word to present their worlds as different nodes, each node consisting of the description of one specific location and the events in it. But unlike most books, the text in MUDs has to be browsed and interacted with to make sense. There is no given single order of nodes but players have to navigate them – often using spatial metaphors such as "go north" or "go through door." Navigation opens up new territory, leads to other characters or objects that inhabit space and text. Players can even create new "geography" by adding new nodes and rooms to the MUD itself (see e.g. Anders or Bartle *Designing Interactive Worlds*).

Many MUDs and early text adventures feature strong ties to science fiction/ fantasy literature. Bartle – co-author of the first MUD – pointed out that fantasy themes dominated a whole generation of early MUDs, possibly inspired by the fantasy theme of the original MUD1 (Bartle *Computer Games*). Fantasy and science fiction themes held a strong presence throughout the zenith of text adventures and into the arrival of the

graphic adventure; from the text worlds of *Zork* (Blank) to the 2D graphics of *Myst* (Miller) and the high art of the 2D graphic adventure as demonstrated, for example, in *Grim Fandango* (Schafer) or *The Dig* (Clark).

Often players have to comprehend the descriptions of space (in MUDs) or separate graphics (in early graphic adventures) into one interconnected game space. Ryan's critique could be applied to that form of spatialization. But recognizing the spatial connections in most of these games provides a "cognitive advantage" and the more the title relies on graphics and perspective, the more it concentrates on "immersion in the textual world" via 3D. Modern 3D video games usually demand a very detailed comprehension of the virtual game space. Players of a 3D video game encounter space directly and interact with it. Chatman's distinguishes between the "abstract" space in verbal narrative, which we can extend broadly to the written word, and the "literal" story-space in cinema "that is, objects, dimensions and relations are analogous, at least two-dimensionally, to those in the real world" (Chatman 96-97). Video game spaces are highly illustrative and their expressive quality has developed to a stage that rivals photography's and film's "literal" quality but in contrast to those established media forms, they are interactive and accessible like architectural structures or virtual stages. Video games do not just depict motion like film does – they contain it.

Such a step into spatial design and architecture had to leave its mark on the role of the designer/ author of these environments. As early as 1991 Randall Walser introduced the term of the "spacemaker" for VR designers.

> Whereas the playwright and the filmmaker both try to communicate the idea of an experience, the spacemaker tries to communicate the experience itself. (…) Thus the spacemaker can never hope to communicate a particular reality, but only to set up opportunities for certain kinds of realities to emerge. The filmmaker says, "Look, I'll show you." The spacemaker says, "Here, I'll help you discover." (Walser cited from (Rheingold 286))

These elements of discovery and movement through virtual environments inspired Fuller and Jenkins to draw parallels between travel logs and spatial exploration in video games (Fuller). Later Jenkins referred again to Certeau and elaborated this idea into an approach to video games as "spatial art" (Jenkins/ Squire) shaped and inspired by various aesthetic

principles. Consequently, Jenkins suggests that we should “think of game designers less as storytellers than as narrative architects” (Jenkins 129) who “don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces” (Jenkins 121). How, then, do these architects sculpt video game spaces to provide the player with enough incentives for a meaningful comprehension of space and event in their experience?

There exist a range of approaches regarding video game design. Some researchers focus on underlying rule systems (Salen), Artificial Intelligence (Mateas), or media comparison (Wolf) (King/ Krzywinska). More as an addition than contradiction to these approaches, my central point is the idea that virtual space is a key element of the experience of 3D video games. Interaction with and within a video game space is not one interactive option among many, or reducible to heavily restricted rule patterns (as we have seen them in the navigation of MUDs), but a core experiential element that influences interaction as well as comprehension. I argue that the narrative evolves in the players’ minds as they explore the virtual environment and make sense of it. Much like Lynch’s cognitive maps for orientation, we develop spatialized models of the game world we engage with to comprehend our quest through a video game space. The experiential quality of virtual space derives from the way we read and interact with real space. As Ryan argues:

> If the body in space is the dominant theme of VR narratives, the most important component of the plot will be the setting, and the narrative structures will be predominantly epic: the user will explore fantastic landscapes, navigate a space fragmented into multiple domains (the rooms of a castle, the diversified geography of an island, even the books of a library), take possession of virtual worlds through movement and action, or achieve intimacy with the environment. (Ryan *Virtual Reality*, 322)

Various elements such as characters, tasks, sub-spaces, and interactive objects support this exploration and the continuous process of comprehension and can function as pointers to existing genre. That is why the analysis of *Zanzarah* will start form the element of movement and look further into surrounding spaces, localized events and characters, and dominant architectural structures to search for parallels to the fantastic in them.

## *Space in Zanzarah*

### Setting and Quest

*Zanzarah: The Hidden Portal* is a PC game designed by Andreas Nitsche for Funatics Software and released by THQ in 2002. The opening sequence of *Zanzarah: The Hidden Portal* is a short pre-rendered video clip that introduces a young girl, Amy, living in a townhouse in central London. One late evening, as her parents leave her alone in the house, she starts to read a faerie tale book. Soon she is distracted by a strange sound from the attic. At that moment, the player takes over control of Amy and the adventure proper starts wherein the player gains access to a hidden parallel world: the magical Zanzarah.

The initial context leaves it ambiguous whether the following adventure is happening inside Amy's imagination as she reads the book or realizes outside the book as a "real" event. At the same time, *Zanzarah* emphasizes the difference between the worlds as it copies the technique of the 1939 Fleming/ Thorpe classic *The Wizard of Oz*: the "real" world of Amy's London home is shown in a sepia color-reduced style; the magic world of Zanzarah uses the full color-spectrum. The borderline between both worlds is part of the overall setting and clearly marked, not only in the gameplay but also the presentation.

Once the adventure starts the whole in-game space is a world seemingly frozen in time. Amy's parents will not return some time later, there are no day-night-changes or time-dependent tasks in *Zanzarah*. Instead of applying temporal conditions, the whole environment in *Zanzarah* is set up to optimize the player's quest as a spatial and conditional progression. It does not matter how long the player needs to solve any task in the game, as the development is not measured in time but in the spatial progress.

The game world itself consists of three sections: the London "reality," the magic kingdom of Zanzarah, and the world of the faeries who live in their own realm. Along the quest the player discovers that, once united, the three worlds were torn apart and have to be reunited by the player. The source of all evil is a malfunctioning machine. Although the worlds are filled with references to magic and myth, the heart of the set up contains a technological problem. The player sets out to shut down this machine and to fulfill this task a player has to interact with the world on all three levels. Accordingly, the main

gameplay can be divided into three different sections that copy the spatial distinction into the interaction design of the game.

The “real” world of Amy’s London home houses her faerie collection: the more faeries she wins on her quest, the more appear in her townhouse. Amy needs to return regularly to her London home base to select which specialized faeries she needs for certain tasks. The environment operates like an inventory and houses the gameplay element of collecting and the strategic assembly of a powerful “deck” as seen in many collecting card games. Faeries are the fighting forces in the game and battle against opposing faeries in designated separate locations – the faerie realm, which is the second game space format and concentrates on the fighting element. Finally, the main world – Zanzarah – contains puzzles, tasks, collectible objects as well as restrictions and thresholds. It stages the main quest through a complex mapping of directed tasks, free exploration, and pre-scripted events onto the game space.

Players constantly move between these three layers. They establish a different here-and-now as well as a fictionalized past and present regarding a connection of the “real” London and the two magical worlds. Re-interpreted in the light of science fiction studies, one senses parallels to Heinlein’s defining precepts for science fiction. For Heinlein as well as for *Zanzarah*, the circumstances of the introduced difference – in the game’s case the relation between the three worlds – present the main driving force of the action, which is shaped by basic human problem: the tension between imagination and reason, magic and logic. *Zanzarah* also re-interprets some historic events (as stated in Heinlein’s fifth precept) like the fight of the church against shamanism but, overall, the game fails to develop them further. The lack of such historic references might be rooted in the forward driving nature of the gameplay. Although there are attempts to provide deeper characterization and a richer background, few games outside the role-playing domain find the time to “include and explain [new] established facts as satisfactorily as the one the author saw fit to junk” (Heinlein cf (James, 59)). As critics of narrative in games have stated, most video games rarely explain why the aliens break loose and concentrate on the action of their attack itself. Somewhat opposing such simplicity, *Zanzarah* as well as many other modern titles attempts to weave a net of context and explanations to draw the player into the game world. Still, often these nets remain full of

loopholes compared to many science fiction texts that can carry and develop educational and scientific concepts to greater detail as represented in the approach of John W. Campbell. Nevertheless, it comes as a surprise to see that *Zanzarah*'s overall setting in a three-folded world and its basic quests echoes science fiction specific precepts and that the borderlines between the three layers are not hidden but emphasized to connect the setting to the fantastic.

**Freedom of Movement and Projection**

The three basic gameplay modes of *Zanzarah* quote established game traditions: adventure games, first-person-shooters, and collecting and trading games. This illustrates the independence of gameplay design from any specific traditional literary genre. For example, there are first-person-shooting games that refer to science fiction (*Deus Ex*) and others to historic war epics (*Medal of Honor*), adventure games quote fantasy settings (*King's Quest*) as well as espionage thrillers (*Metal Gear Solid*). Research still battles with the definitions of game-genres but even if one conclusive model existed, mapping this model onto traditional literary genre classifications would contradict the specifics of the video game format, which depend on the element of interaction. As we cannot connect any specific interaction to the fantasy genre we will return to the most basic one, whose importance has already been outlined above: spatial movement.

Movement is a fundamental form of interaction in 3D video game spaces, which makes it a good target for this essay's analysis. As argued above, MUDs and hypertext have a spatial quality but movement through 3D audio-visual game spaces is intrinsically different from interacting with any hypertextual structure. 3D video game spaces use movement as free spatial exploration, hypertext uses conditional links. When clicking on a hypertext link the user cannot predict the direction she will take. In fact, it is part of the pleasure of navigating a hypertext such as Michael Joyce's *Twilight, a Symphony* to succumb to the author's expertise in the writing of each node and his careful arrangement of available text elements. Thus, navigating a hypertext generates a unique reading path through the piece but the reader's control is limited because she cannot predict where the next link might take her nor can she change the individual node itself. In contrast, the

illusion of coherent movement through a 3D video game space supports a consistency and a different quality of agency to the game world that allows for a different level of prediction and immersion. Players control the movement and encounter the fictional universe of *Zanzarah* as one as continuous universe. Such a continuous spectacular world can be highly engaging – it can also distract.

Audio-visual presentation of video game spaces has improved faster than the level of innovative interaction within them. Video game worlds offer more and more elaborate visual pointers while the interaction often remains rudimentary. Trees, flowers, virtual houses, or machinery might be modelled to great detail but players still cannot climb, pick, enter, or operate many of these models. Yet, one can usually move freely through these visual wonders.

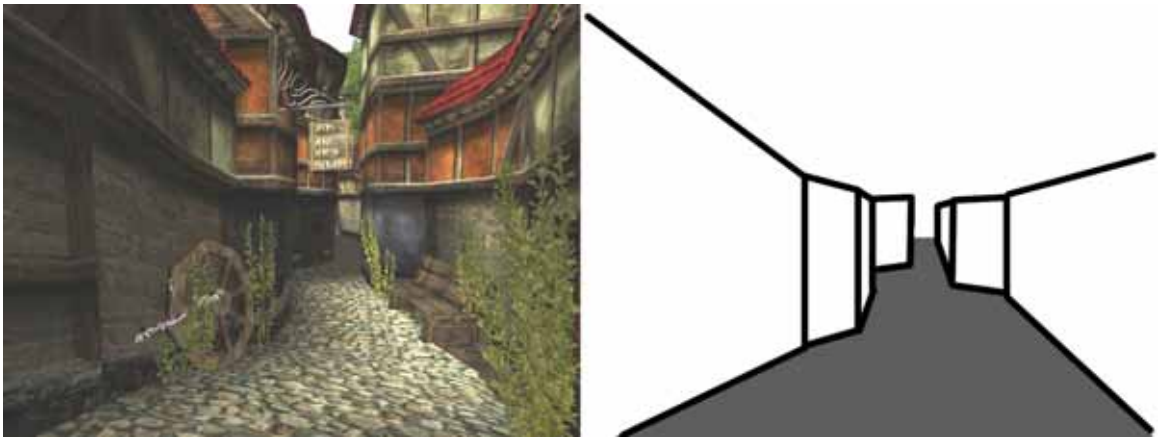

**Figure 1: *Zanzarah* screenshot (left) versus factual functional space diagram (right); what visually appears to be a street with many interactive options operates more like a corridor with limited movement access; one cannot sit on the bench, plug the flowers or roll the wheel, even the sign is unreadable**

Thanks to the improved level of graphical complexity designers can apply Gibson's principle of affordances as directing a player's perception and expectations. Attention can be directed through visual cues but the resulting expectations are rarely completely fulfilled. Fencott suggested "perceptual opportunities" as manifestations of a meaningful direction (Fencott) where players' readings are guided through appearance and functionality of a virtual space, but his examples remain basic. In contrast, *Zanzarah* offers rich audio-visual content that encourages players to project a complex network of possibilities into the virtual world. This world features typical fantasy connotations

ranging from enchanted forests to dwarf caves and majestic flying cathedrals. Often this complexity is not matched by the actual interaction but while the interaction range is limited, the stylish graphical definition of all three game worlds guides the player to the projection of a fantasy genre. Condemning such a projection as mere illustration would be too single-minded as it is this context generated by the fictional world that motivates the player and becomes a crucial element of the forming experience. In-game characters and set tasks play a crucial part in the support of this projection.

**Repetitive Characters and Tasks**

*Zanzarah* includes many narrative devices that quote the fantastic genre: whether in the form of typical characters (faeries, goblins, dwarfs), operational archetypes (mentor, guardian, growing hero), objects (magical items, outlandish costumes, teleporters), or expressive settings (parallel worlds, dungeons, enchanted forests). All of these features have the same purpose: to engage the player, contextualize, and ultimately advance the player's quest. The characters have limited artificial intelligence but react to the game state of the player character and her status in the quest.

For example, during the quest, Amy and the player find evidence for a treachery committed by one game character. From that moment on, a wide range of computer-controlled characters display their outrage about this treason. Their behavior is not driven by some elaborate artificial intelligence but by the position of the main character in the quest and is meant to remind the player of that current game state. The only relevant conflict in *Zanzarah* is that of the player, while the characters are limited to repetitive behavior patterns that direct and inform the player. To some extent, such a repetitive behavior is a current necessity of game production. Creating the necessary range of character-unique content (e.g. the dialogue and animations) for a deep responsive system is expensive and time-intense (Mateas). The simplified game characters have strict and limited functions within a set quest, like Proppian archetypes. They can re-instantiate the fantastic setting over and again. One consequence of that is a limitation of their spatial behavior. To keep the main quest coherent, every character is fixed to a certain location depending on the state of the heroine's progress.

Typical examples for these simplified entities are threshold guardians: virtual characters that block access to other areas of the game world until the player has solved the task to overcome them. In *Zanzarah* most of these tasks are built around key-lock problems that regulate spatial access. There are nine basic stages and numerous sub-stages in *Zanzarah* (the different color coding in the design map in Fig. 2 indicates these stages), at each of which the player has to overcome some threshold to access more parts of the game world. In technical terms, the player encounters a form of lock, gathers information on what the key might be, finds the appropriate key, and opens the lock with it. Such a basic, yet very flexible principle offers enormous range of interaction. Like the three main interaction settings associated with the three different world layers, the set up itself does not point to any literary genre and can be found in countless games set in numerous fictional worlds. But using fantastic motifs in the key-lock context helps to re-focus the player onto the fantastic. One lock is a group of evil kobolds that besiege a village; another lock is the need for a certain faerie; other locks include use of magic items and victory in crucial faerie battles. While the interaction models do not point to any specific traditional genre, their in-game context does.

Puzzles and unsolved mysteries in science fiction and fantasy do not always have to be fully resolved. Frequently, there is no definite answer to what exactly the unspeakable horror of Lovecraft or the mysteriously beautiful end of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* are. Instead, leaving parts of the fictional world in the unknown can be a technique and pose a stimulating question to the audience. In contrast, unsolvable puzzles are rare in commercial game design. If, for example, *Zanzarah* would feature firewalls that cannot be penetrated but that obviously guard the way to a new area, players would look all over the game world to find the lock for this problem. Not providing the lock would confuse and frustrate them. That is, why *Zanzarah* only establishes puzzles that can be solved. *Zanzarah* asks the player to make conscious decisions on how to proceed, where to go, and what to do there – misguiding them could be fatal. The same confidence that the reader of a book has in the wholeness of the overall structure of a story is present in the confidence of the player that the virtual world she inhabits ultimately makes sense. Such an explanation might not be typical of the fantasy genre, but it is used in *Zanzarah*

to reinforce fantastic connotations via repetition throughout. Not only can all mysteries be solved – but most *have* to be solved in order to finish the game.

**Labyrinths and Arenas**

One dominating spatial form in digital media is the labyrinth. Eco, who pioneered the idea, has argued that there are three types of labyrinths in digital media: the linear or unicursal, the maze that offers branching and multicursal forms, and the net or rhizome in which each point can be connected to any other point (Eco). As will be explained in the following paragraphs, all three forms can be found in *Zanzarah* and their interconnection re-frames the game into a fantastic setting over and over again.

*Zanzarah*'s main quest world has all the qualities of a multicursal maze where players can explore, get lost, and have to re-trace their steps to find the next quest goal. As argued above, the game constantly re-frames the free exploration through repetitive in-game encounters into the contextualization of tasks and quests. In that way, multicursality is utilized by entities inside the maze to emphasize the fantasy aspects through their fixed traditional repetitive role-patterns. The seamless world of Zanzarah is assembled from numerous large cells (each section in the design map in Fig. 2 stands for one of these cells) that are interconnected forming a complex continuous world. Along these interconnections and inside the cells players encounter the same genre-specific characters again and again and genre-related repetition is enforced by spatial design of the multicursal maze that positions certain entities at crucial locations in the world.

**Figure 2: *Zanzarah* design document (left), part of the map defining conditional references between locations versus in-game map for orientation in the world (right)**

This interplay depends on the logic of a unicursal path overlaid onto the maze. The game includes such a unicursal path in the form of the pre-envisioned optimal solution for the main quest. This solution path winds itself through the world repeatedly crossing itself. Following it would be the fastest possible way to "beat" the game but players constantly negotiate whether to strictly follow the unicursal solution or divert from the main quest and explore on their own. The former is the drive to finish the game and solve the overall challenge, the latter is often necessary to "level up" the character and improve one's skills. Through this negotiation, it is extremely unlikely that any two players ever create the same journey as they are free to follow Ariadne's thread laid out by the designer through the game world or depart from the prepared path and become literally lost in the fictional world.

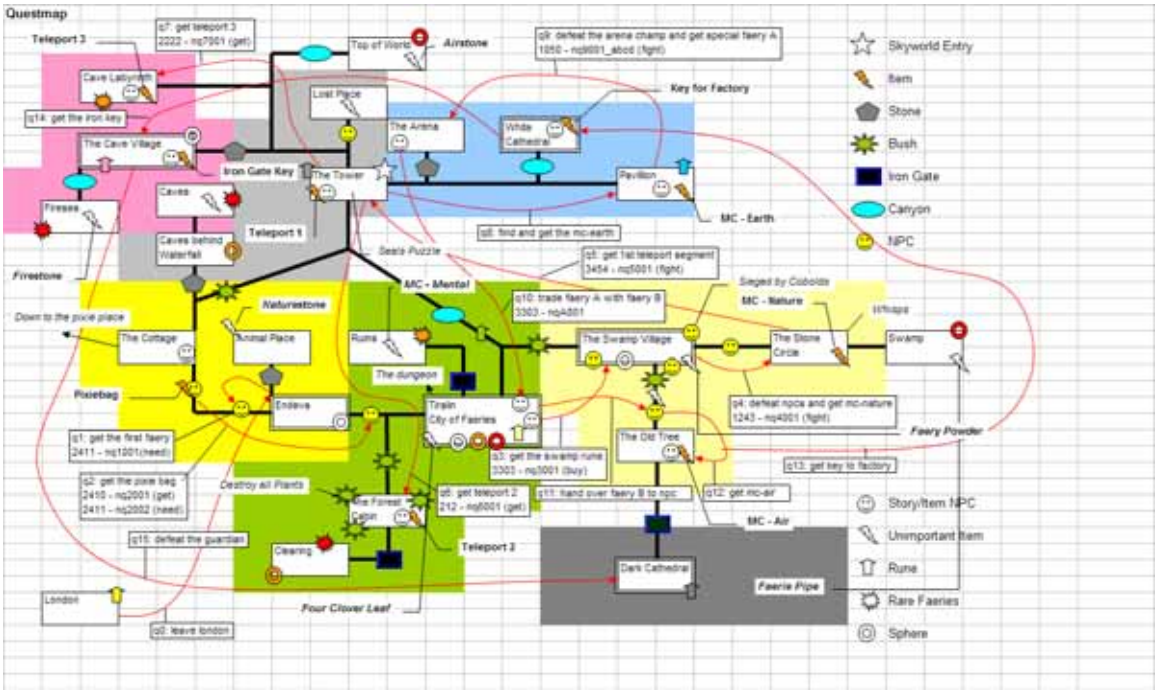


**Figure 3: *Zanzarah* design document map illustrating the quests within the game world, curved lines indicate origin of a quest and the area that allows for its completion, graphical icons represent specific entities such as characters, treasures, and blocking threshold guardians**

*Zanzarah* also offers a reference to the concept of the net or rhizome through the feature of teleportation. The most frequent teleportation relocates the player at the

beginning of each battle sequence from any location in the quest world to an otherwise unconnected battle-arena in the faerie realm. All fights – and there are a great number of them – are staged in these closed environments that form spatially distinct pockets accessible only via teleportation. The concept of teleportation is borrowed from science fiction, but it is also intrinsic to virtual spaces. It is available in many spatially organized new media, from textual environments such as MUDs (Anders) to 3D games such as *Zanzarah* or online worlds such as *Second Life*. As such, it might be the one crucial interaction form envisioned in science fiction and realized in game worlds independently of their setting.

Notably, all three labyrinthine forms exist in parallel and a form of symbiosis in *Zanzarah*. Such a parallel use of the various forms answers to Aarseth's call for a re-formulation of the labyrinth in digital interactive media (Aarseth *Cybertext*, 5-9). Aarseth suggests that a parallel use of different labyrinthine forms points back to older medieval interpretations of the concept of the labyrinth that saw different formats existing in harmony and parallel. In the case of *Zanzarah*, the various labyrinthine formats enhance the references to fantastic motifs especially in their interconnections with each other, through repetitive reframing between unicursal directed quests and multicursal access worlds, and through the science fiction method of teleportation. At the same time, the presence and interconnection of different labyrinthine formats indicates that there might be an older, more fundamental point of reference.

The battle locations in *Zanzarah* differ from the labyrinthine structures as they resemble more of an arena-like form.

**Figure 4: *Zanzarah* screen shot of a typical enclosed battle arena (left) versus an open quest location (right)**

These separate arenas are the second relevant spatial form in *Zanzarah*. Stone highlights their value when she refers to video games as "*arenas for social experience*" (Stone 15; her italics). An arena's spatial conditions are significantly different from labyrinthine structures. Labyrinths offer few orientating reference points in a repetitive and disorientating structure – an arena is a mostly open structure with one dominating demarcation line: the surrounding enclosement. Whether it is a football pitch, a boxing ring, or the coliseum, arenas provide free movement in a contained space with high visibility while labyrinths restrain movement in an extremely complex space that complicates any comprehension. An arena's value for spatial exploration is limited but it is good for staging confrontations or performances for audiences.

The dominating form of the arena in *Zanzarah* is the battle arena. Spatially separated from the main quest world, they can be reached only via a teleportation effect that highlights the difference between the worlds. Crossing into an arena also leads to a new interaction form: from "exploration" of a multicursal maze to "fighting" in an arena. The difference is further enhanced through a change in the representation style from a following camera hovering behind the human heroine Amy to a first person point of view from the perspective of the fighting faerie. The player relocates from one fictional world to another one as well as from the main hero to one of her helping warriors and from the task of exploring to that of fighting.

Within each arena, players find themselves embodying the role of a faerie that has to engage in a fight and utilize the surrounding space in a different manner than the exploring heroine. Most faeries can fly, adding a new dimension to the freedom of movement that changes the role of spatial structures such as gaps or walls. New movement abilities turn structures that would have been obstacles in the quest world into valuable cover and strategic combat locations in the battle arena. Players have to switch very fast into the new setting and realize the new demands or they will lose the fight.

Thematically, the re-location motif quotes myths of a faerie world existing next to human reality but differing in time, scale, and space. We can find such a relocation at the heart of many fantasy pieces such as John Norman's Gor saga. But in contrast to

traditional fantasy, the shift into the battle arenas of *Zanzarah* is a re-location *out* of the quest world. The faerie world and its battle arenas are mostly independent of the quest itself. Whenever the player loses a battle, the player is thrown out of the quest world even further as she is automatically teleported to Amy's house in the "real" London and has to re-enter the quest from a limited number of entry points. It is the game's way to punish the player for the defeat and a double re-location out of the quest world.

We can argue that the role of arenas in the overall labyrinthine design of *Zanzarah* reverses fantasy's concept of relocation. Instead of a shift into the main fantasy quest world, the player is pulled first into the more abstract faerie environment with the possible further teleportation into the most "real" London part of the fictional universe, almost outside the central quest space. Yet through the teleportation effect this reversal is still supporting the fantasy elements: If the player wins the battle, she is re-located back into the main quest world; if she loses and ends up in London, the player can always re-enter the quest world. No time or conditional limitations restrict the player who can teleport countless times. Both options feature the element of re-entry into the quest world. Any re-entry re-enforces the overall fantastic setting through the re-institution of the fantastic context. In fact, the further one is teleported away, the more emphasis there is on a re-framing: the player has to consult the overall world map to activate the teleportation, apply magic items she has found in her quest so far to control the effect, and might meet typical characters and settings at the re-entry point. Instead of hiding the borderlines between the worlds, *Zanzarah* utilizes them once more in its gameplay mechanics and guarantees that the player crosses them repeatedly. In that way, it re-establishes the fantasy element through a repeated encounter with thresholds situated in a specific fantastic context.

Repetition is a common and often necessary element in video games due to their length. The playing time needed to finish a game like *Zanzarah* easily exceeds 20-30 hours and can be much longer, depending on the player's skills. Like reading a book, the playing of a game is often fragmented, but unlike the reader, the game player has to "drive" the quest. She has to create the quest events and cannot only immerse herself into the prefixed order of the literary text. Players need to be re-introduced into the main

dilemma and the tasks at hand. To enhance such a re-orientation a repetitive structure that enhances the game's fantastic context is not a nuisance but very appropriate.

### *Conclusion: About the Resulting Form*

*Zanzarah* features clear beginning and end states and provides for continuous growth in-between but it does not follow any established dramatic arc model. Instead, it was designed around a spatial and conditional progression. A number of models have been suggested for a dramatic structuring of video games: Some have applied Aristotelian dramatic principles (Laurel *Interactive Fantasy System*; Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*; Meadows) and various act-structures have been used (and taught) for interactive digital media (Wimberley; Garrand; Siegel). Opposing such an approach, ludologists (Juul, *Game and Narrative*; Eskelinen) as well as hypertext theorists (Landow) have rejected any adaptation of Aristotle's principles for interactive media, others have offered different dramatic references (Frasca; Mateas). Comparing these approaches, it becomes clear that no ultimate dramatic über-structures can be defined for video games. They are too diverse for such an attempt and – like theatre, film, and television – will always offer variations. But as the discussion of *Zanzarah* has shown, one form can be that of a spatialized epic quest that is realized through a virtual journey. This journey has quest motives which are also recognized by anti-narratologists (Aarseth, *Quest Games*). The question, then, is whether these quests have any intrinsic structure. Or, as Aarseth asks: "Are all quests structurally similar? Are there quests in all kinds of games? Is it possible to come up with a typology of quests, or a grammar?" (Aarseth, *Quest Games*, 367). Again, because of the wide variety of game structures, no definite answer is possible; but for the specific case of *Zanzarah*, an attempt will follow.

Supporters of Joseph Campbell's theories, in the domain of film (Vogler) as well as the video game (Dunniway), argue that there is such a universal typology in the form of the *monomyth* (Campbell). The monomyth model is based on the idea that among all the stories one might encounter "it will be always the one, shapeshifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more

remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told" (Campbell 3). Campbell developed a model for this proto-story that stages the progress of the hero along a set path from the ordinary world into the world of the adventure and back – all in the search of a healing process for the environment and/ or the hero himself. Although the value of the monomyth is at times carried too far, the model offers one possible structuring approach. The approach of *Zanzarah* (and many other comparable titles) allows for an extremely flexible use of Campbell's principles that is rooted in the element of the video game space and its exploration through movement. The hero development, then, is not traced in a temporal way (as for example in most films) but through a spatial positioning. While the interaction with the game is still time-based, the inherent structure is space-based and different stages of the monomyth are reached through spatial progression. As a consequence, the player has to unlock access to the whole world up to its most hidden secret areas to reach the final stage in *Zanzarah*; only then can she fulfill the quest in a final confrontation. Full access is the *elixir* (in Campbell's terms) that the player has to acquire over time to save the game world. The quest ends with the cure of the game world through the re-unification of the three separated world layers mirroring Campbell's idea of a healing of the world and re-establishment of a former status quo.

Ultimately, we can trace elements of the fantastic in many motifs and themes throughout the game *Zanzarah* – in its representational techniques as well as in its interaction design and operational game space that re-establish the fantastic via motifs over and again on different levels. The monomyth points to more fundamental connections between science fiction/ fantasy and the video game format discussed here. Campell's concept certainly is not unique for fantasy literature but references between myths and science fiction are older than Campbell's own writings (see e.g. in the work of Olaf Stapledon). It seems that video game worlds and science fiction/ fantasy genre touch on the fundamental basis of their underlying origins and how they relate to and emerge from mythology. From the perspective of computer game research, it has been argued and debated almost since the first incarnations of digital new media that new media brought back the flexibility of ancient oral storytelling through its interactive features. Maybe the reason why science fiction and fantasy are so relevant to video games is that both forms – in their own but relating ways – refer back to these early forms of

storytelling. This would explain the reappearance of the many motifs in both forms and could provide a fruitful area for future research.

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