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“Geographies of the Underworld: Chthonic Poetics and Virtual Worlds”
Executive Summary, DM Masters Thesis

I. Research Problem

Underworld. (un·der·world, n.) A region, realm, or dwelling place conceived to be below the surface of the earth; the world of the dead, located below the world of the living.¹

Underworld elements manifest frequently in video games—so frequently, in fact, as to make their presence normative. Clearly, there are factors that have made video games a comfortable home for the underworld in the digital age. In order to understand what those factors are, we need to go back to first principles. To understand the underworld in video games, we must first understand the nature of the underworld.

Underworlds exist as “real” but imaginary places, which recognizable landscapes, denizens and conventions. As spiritual spaces, they stand in contrast to the material world, but connect to it through interfaces, including the biological (through ecstatic states) and the topographic (such as an explicit relationship with caves). Underworlds are virtual environments that predate digital technology.

II. Proposed Solution

These mythic constructs generally share several key characteristics, despite their varied and separate traditions: a distinct spatial geography, generating narratives of embodied journey and challenge, in a world that is bound by logic and rules peculiar to that place. I seek to derive a poetics of underworld from these characteristics, and then use this chthonic poetics as a means of understanding the relationship between underworlds and video games.

My approach to the problem is based in discursive cultural and media analysis of the rich and varied cultural sources for the underworld, and in-game ethnographic observation and analysis. Formulating a poetics necessarily involves aesthetics, but like Gaston Bachelard I am interested in the phenomenological as well as the representational aspects of my subject. To articulate the poetics, I look at the world internals and their effects, as well as how underworlds have been depicted in art and the narratives they have inspired.

The validity of a chthonic poetics thus devised can be tested against other traditional underworlds (non-digital virtual worlds). Using the chthonic poetics as a tool for investigating and analyzing digital virtual worlds in MMOs (massive multiplayer online games) should result in a better understanding of why there is a link between underworlds and video games, an the mechanisms involved in that relationship.

Thesis website: http://lcc.gatech.edu/~kfletcher/Underworld/home.html