“Geographies of the Underworld: Chthonic Poetics and Virtual Worlds”

DM Masters Thesis Proposal

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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. The scenario presented in id Software’s 1993 game *Doom* includes a human research base on Mars being overrun by demons from Hell. The gamer’s response when faced with this unlikely turn of events is not “Why does this video game have demons running around Mars?” but rather, “Of course there are demons running around on Mars. It’s a video game!”

One explanation for the popularity of demons, spirits, and supernatural worlds in video games is titillation. Western culture considers these tropes transgressive. This “edginess” creates marketing caché with the adolescent male demographic on which the game industry has been traditionally focused. It may bolster the mythos of game developers, building on the “wizard” identity of game virtuoso and the quasi-shamanistic role invoked by software engineers as they mediate machine and human communication.

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But the desire to épater le bourgeoisie does not account for the ubiquity of the underworld in video game history, particularly when considering the mass of games developed in Asia, often for non-Western audiences. There we find underworld elements from Asian cultures as well as from the Western tradition, and motifs from different cultures are often combined within a given title. *Kid Icarus* (Nintendo, 1986), with an angelic hero trapped in the underworld ruled by Medusa, combines ancient Greek and Christian elements. The *Shin Megami Tensei*, or "MegaTen", games (Atlus, 1992-2007) are a series that pull from mythological traditions that span many time periods and cultures. The plots and game play revolves around supernatural entities and places.

Clearly, there are other 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, whose landscapes, denizens and conventions are created and sustained through community consensus and history as well as invention by individuals. As spiritual spaces, they stand in contrast to the material world, but connect to it through interfaces, including the biological (such as shamen, or practitioners in ecstatic states) and the topographic (through an explicit relationship with caves, for instance). Underworlds are virtual environments that predate digital technology.
With this in mind, it should not be surprising that the underworld manifests in
digital virtual environments as well. It emerges sporadically at a superficial level,
influencing art direction, story and setting, but the more persistent – and
promising – presence lies at a deeper level, where chthonic poetics operate at
the core of video game worlds.
II. Proposed Solution

A concept of “underworld” runs through diverse cultures over the span of human history. 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. Accordingly, I look at the world internals, (such as how causality functions) and how they affect those in them, 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 this case, MMOs), should result in a better understanding of why there is a link between underworlds and video games, an the mechanisms involved in that relationship.
III. Context of Inquiry

The research space involving underworlds, virtual worlds and video games is immense, and all aspects of this area cannot be covered within the bounds of a single masters thesis. I am attempting to establish the groundwork from which later research could grow, and chthonic poetics can provide a valuable part of the structure for that work. Poetics in the chthonic context describes laws, aesthetics, and attributes of the underworld as a way to define structural, phenomenological and functional principles of virtual worlds.²

I am using a broad base of criticism to create and evaluate a framework for this poetics. Perspectives on poetics are varied (and often antagonistic). With this in mind, Bachelard’s work on the poetics of architecture and imagination is relevant for its discussion of existential space (although the book itself is more poetic than practical). The growing body of criticism on the neo-baroque has been instructive, particularly by Angela Ndalianis and Patricia Lynn Bornhofen. Both authors look at the neo-baroque as a system of poetics. Bornhofen’s is the more conservative work, however, which seeks to mediate between classical definitions of poetics and the more subjective interpretations that came out of post-modern literary criticism. Ndalianis also

² In this case, poetics as a body of prescriptive and/or proscriptive “best practices” is irrelevant and would be little more than an exercise in a priori reasoning.
sees the neo-baroque as a poetics rather than a historical or cultural boundary, but her evaluation places far more emphasis on descriptive aspects and the experience of the aesthetics than on prescriptive principles. This interpretation should be more productive for dealing with a construct like the underworld, whose nature makes questions of authorship and mimesis convoluted at best.

I’ve tightened my research scope on the digital side of the research question, as well, and for this project I am limiting my work with digital virtual worlds to massive multiplayer online games (MMOs). I suspect that my argument regarding chthonic poetics applies to other types of game worlds, but MMOs provide a useful sub-section for two reasons. One, it limits the body of work that must be addressed to dozens of games, rather than the thousands of digital games that have been published for computers and consoles. Secondly, off-line console games, for instance, can be instantiated and terminated by the decision of one person; MMOs, on the other hand, are persistent, social worlds. This enables them to be responsive to their user communities and gives them an independent life that more closely resembles the relationship of underworlds to their traditional cultures.

T.L. Taylor’s extensive work with EverQuest has been valuable to my research in MMOs, as have the discussions on the Terra Nova blog, founded by Edward Castronova, Julian Dibbell, Dan Hunter, and Greg Lastowka. The quantitative research done by the PlayOn group at PARC, as well as that done by Nick Yee for The Daedalus Project, is a useful complement to my qualitative methodology.

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3 If we include MUDs, MOOs, and MUSHes this figure could grow into the hundreds. I think text-based worlds distinct enough to merit their own study, and so they will not be part of the thesis research. They raise unique questions about embodiment and spectacle, and it would be interesting to consider them in the context of oral tradition and non-visual representations of underworlds.
4 http://terranova.blogs.com/
5 I have, however, found the discussions in the comments sections more enlightening and germane to my investigations.
Margaret Wertheim has done significant work in looking at cyberspace as a frontier of spiritual space, and it forms a significant part of my research foundation. She identifies the utopian promises of perfected body, social equality and angelic existence within the modes of communication as well as the digital medium itself, wherein we become “beings of light” through the photons traveling over fiber optic cables and emanating from glowing screens. She also historicizes these impulses within a larger context of human spirituality. Her discussion of the existential break caused by the objective cosmology of the scientific revolution is particularly relevant to the history of virtual worlds. She sees digital media re-establishing a cosmology that is able to contain spiritual (or imaginary) and material worlds within it.

Wertheim focuses too narrowly, however, when she bases her argument on the Western, Christian tradition that grew from the early middle ages. I offer two critiques here: one, that this is not the firmest base she could use, as it actually undermines her arguments; and second, that the elements she has identified in the New Jerusalem and the Heavenly City also appear in other cultures’ spiritual constructions. I argue that her arguments can apply to a broader context that includes pre-Christian and non-Western cultures.
IV. Focus of Inquiry

The thesis breaks down into these chapters:

I. Introduction
II. Critical Perspectives on Virtual Spaces and Mythopoetic Landscapes
III. Developing a Poetics of Underworld, Part I: Pre-digital Underworlds
IV. Developing a Poetics of Underworld, Part II: Chthonic Poetics
V. Chthonic Poetics in Digital Worlds: Digital Manifestations of Underworld
VI. Critical Assessment and Conclusion

The Introduction presents the research problem and the methodology. It also provides background information on the concept of “underworld” and how it fits in the history of human activity. This clarifies later discussion and analysis, but it also historicizes virtual worlds, one of the secondary goals of the study.

Chapter Two addresses the critical foundation of my analysis and places my research in a larger academic context. This section discusses the works and authors in that inform my understanding of the research problem.

In Chapter Three, I take examples of traditional underworlds from different time periods and cultures and examine them for shared characteristics. One of the
critical questions the research should answer is what specific, unique characteristics appear in these underworlds? What are the trait and qualities that make their geographies, structures and existential rules expressly “chthonic”? My underworld examples will draw from Xibalba (the classical Mayan underworld), the ancient Greek Underworld, Dante’s Inferno, Duat (the ancient Egyptian underworld), and Diyu (the Chinese underworld incorporating Taoist and Buddhist beliefs).

My initial research indicates that a given underworld often has a defined geography, with recognizable boundaries, that contributes to a spatial construction of meaning. Actions and individuals in that world are subject to its peculiar rules and logic; these usually differ radically from those of the material world. Physical laws, causality, and social mores do not behave according to the world of the living, yet they seem to have an internal consistency. The underworld is immanent and liminal; it exists outside of the material world while also being connected to it through physical topography (both natural features and man-made architecture), living interpreters, or ritual. The dead inhabit it, but it can be visited by the living in special circumstances. The experience within this geography is profoundly embodied, whether the subject is a transient visitor, a deceased soul, or a supernatural resident. Movement and existence in such a place oppress the mind and body, and reaction to this generates narratives of challenge and tests. The journey narrative also reflects the transitionary nature of the space; often the underworld is an intermediary step between life and a soul’s ultimate destination.

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6 While a special case as a unique literary work, it has attained sufficiently wide renown to stand on its own, and it incorporates much from previous older cultural constructs. Dante’s Inferno may be considered as part of a larger discussion of the ancient Greek tradition, however, as much of the geography comes from that context.

7 The contemporary Christian constructs of Heaven and Hell would fall into this scenario, which resembled the “endgame” state in some MMOs in that there are no more obstacles to overcome. Similarly, we may considered “non-game” virtual worlds like SecondLife, where there are no specific goals to achieve or barriers to growth, to be closer to Margaret Wertheim’s digital New Jerusalem than the average MMO game.
Chapter Four extrapolates unique aesthetic and functional rules and characteristics from the motifs and characteristics that emerged from the underworlds discussion in Chapter Three. I refine these and build a chthonic poetics from them. I consider other underworlds through this interpretive lens to gauge its usefulness and robustness.

In Chapter Five I apply the chthonic poetics to digital virtual worlds. My analysis focuses on one MMO in detail, *World of Warcraft*. I chose this game world for several reasons, including its immense popularity, environmental complexity, and prominence in scholarly discourse about virtual worlds and MMOs. I also find it attractive because underworld influences appear at three levels in the game: the superficial or spectacular; the autochthonous or diagetic; and the metastructural. I address other MMOs, particularly those in other genres, although in less detail.

Chapter Six brings closure to the thesis. Here, I review my research and articulation of chthonic poetics. I evaluate its success, and I offer other related areas of inquiry that might be productive avenues in which to continue research in the relationship between virtual worlds, digital media, and underworld.

V. Research, Resources and Outcome

The thesis requires research in three primary areas: traditional underworlds in art, architecture, and ethnography; critical approaches to poetics; and ethnographic observation in MMOs, both in-game from the player perspective and in the “web of meaning” formed by forums, websites, and other loci of MMO discussions.

The MMO research will be broken up in two parts: long-term, in-depth play in one to three MMOs, from the initiate stage through significant progress through the world’s geography as well as player experience; and short-term play in several worlds that provides a introduction to that world’s structure and aesthetics. Long-
term play has commenced in World of Warcraft and ToonTown as part of Celia Pearce’s course on MMOs (LCC 8823 Fall 2007).

VI. Timetable

**November 16, 2007** Chapter 1 (“Introduction”) sent to committee for comment and review.

**December 7, 2007** Chapter 2 (“Critical Perspectives”) sent to committee for comment and review.

**December 7, 2007** Deadline for Thesis Topic forms, signed by committee members, to Matthew Mc. and DGS, and to Graduate Studies Office.

**January 4, 2008** Chapter 3 (“Developing a Poetics of Underworld, Part I”) sent to committee for comment and review.

**January 25, 2008** Chapter 4 (“Developing a Poetics of Underworld, Part II”) sent to committee for comment and review.

**February 15, 2008** Chapter 5 (“Chthonic Poetics in Digital Worlds”) sent to committee for comment and review.

**March 17, 2008** Full draft of thesis to committee members.

**April 1, 2008** Week of thesis defenses.

**April 6, 2008** GT-formatted thesis and signed approval forms turned into to Graduate Office.
VII. Bibliography and References

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