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Game in' Action

Collected Abstracts

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Representations of Mobility in World of WarCraft: or: Transportation and Traveling in Video Games

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If focusing on mobility and transportation in video games seems an odd venture, then consider the recent BBCNews report that declared that "Games make drivers go faster" (2007) or the statement by a transport spokesman in New Zealand who blames Playstations and X-boxes for teen road deaths (New Zealand Herald 2006). The influence of games (and new media in general) on particularly young people's behavior is nothing new, but the focus have perhaps rather been on violence than traffic manners.

The current paper is a first and tentative exploration laying the empirical foundations for a larger study of representations of mobility in terms of the modes and uses of transportation and traveling enabled and configured in a number of selected video games (mainly pc-games).

I originally conceived the study as part of a large project on sustainable mobility put together by researchers from the MACS-group at Göteborg University (Man Automobility, Culture, and Society); a project that now receives funding from MISTRA (SUMOCO). One of the main foci was to identify potential barriers to policy making that would counteract the negative environmental effects of ever-increasing mobility that, historically, is associated with positive social and economic progress. Simply put, man's generally positive attitude to mobility is such a barrier. It has a tendency to generate resistance to structural changes aimed at reducing individual mobility, even when a reduction would entail a decrease in the use of fossil fuels and greenhouse-gas emissions. Our transport ideologies make us inclined to choose individual freedom at environmental costs, and together with our socio-cultural (gendered) roles these inform our mobility behavior. One way to investigate attitudes to mobility/transportation is to interview transport users (Polk 1998; Thynell 2003; Andreasson 2000), another is to study representations of transportation and mobility, for example in novels, commercials, movies, magazines (Enevold 2003, Hagman 2000, Beckmann 2002,) and other media.

Given the commonplace that video games now are socio-cultural revenue-generating phenomena whose impact deserves studying, it is feasible to include them as important sources of information as regards choices and representations of transportation systems, and values and attitudes associated with mobility. They may also be assumed to contribute to disseminations of such values and attitudes – whether these be conservative, traditional views or innovative and visionary alternatives, the latter a field of growing interest in the face of global warming. On the one hand, I draw on transport research (see e.g. above), and, on the other, the type of literary studies that subscribe to the view of representations put forth by for example visual culture/literary critic W.J.T. Mitchell, as containing both aesthetic/semiotic and political aspects. It is a project in the vein of Cultural and (New) Media Studies, where it sees an appropriate role model in the game research of Dovey and Kennedy (2006).

To begin with, the project, which builds on my previous research on gender, mobility and travel narratives (focusing on representations of female mobile subjects), focuses on the MMOG World of WarCraft (WoW). WoW is the world's number one on-line game. The researcher currently plays the game, participates in guild, group and individual activities – including trying out its various transportation modes - observes and speaks with its users, collects screenshots and complements her in-game research with studies of other WoW-web-resources; the method is a version of Virtual Ethnography as modeled by Hine (2000). The WoW-community has already made an excellent inventory of available in-game movement and transportation, its rules, routes, and vehicles (WoWWiki). The task of this paper would be to briefly report on and illustrate my and my co-players actual in-game use and interaction with these transport modalities and to critically comment and link them to my previous studies and other current research on mobility.