A MATTER OF INSIGNIFICANCE
The MUD Puzzle Quest as Seductive Discourse

Ragnhild Tronstad

Previous attempts to analyse MUD[1] quests from the perspective of herme-neutics revealed a number of problems connected to regarding questing as primarily an interpretative activity.[2] Although interpretation is of funda-mental importance in order to solve a quest, and even if appropriation of the texts' meaning to a certain extent may contribute to or enhance the player's self-understanding,[3] it does not seem appropriate to regard "un-derstanding" or "appropriation of meaning" as a goal in itself when it comes to questing. One indication of this is the fact that the text space in quests may be experienced as exhausted independently of any "fusion of hori-zons" – that is, independent of the player's experience of having reached a (more or less complete) understanding of the text.

Of methodological problems arising when approaching the quest from the perspective of hermeneutics, the more severe one is perhaps that the several parts of the quest will then inevitably be judged according to their relation to the final meaning of the quest, instead of being related to the whole, as the whole of a quest is impossible to identify before a final meaning is reached. Reading the quest retrospectively, however, parts that didn't contribute to this final meaning may easily be overlooked. Still, such insignificant parts do have great influence on the questing experience. To understand questing, therefore, we should approach the text as it functions in the process of questing, before the text space defined by its limits as a whole is hermeneutically exhausted.

The experience of having exhausted the text space in quest environ-ments may provide the player with a sense of narrative closure to a "quest story". However, this does not mean that narrative closure is what deter-mines the exhaustion of the text space. If this were the case, MUD quests

could just as well be explained (and discarded) as "inferior narrative art"[4]: inferior because they, in contrast to more complex literary works, are easily exhausted through interpretation. But even if a sense of narrative closure may follow the solution of a quest, the text space is not to be regarded as exhausted until the player has acquired all points available in the area: combat points, quest points, and, maybe most importantly, explore points, or "explorer flags". Quest points are obtained when the quest is solved, the combat points when every monster in the area has been killed at least once. Monsters are normally fairly easy to find, although not always easy to kill. Explorer flags,[5] on the other hand, can often be very well hidden, requiring that the player investigate every little aspect of every little room in the area, turning every stone, climbing every tree, seeking out the most unthinkable possible action in order to interact with a certain object. Such activity is worthwhile as long as there are still missing flags.[6] When there are no missing flags left, there's little chance that there will be any possible actions worth performing either. The text space may now be regarded as exhausted, as there are no more secrets expected to be found within it.

In cases in which the completion of a quest does not provide any satisfactory closure of the quest as a story, inconsistencies or loose ends in the narrative may continue to be intriguing but will in general be re-examined by the player only insofar as there are missing points left in the area. When all points are gained, such narratives lose their potentiality, which is what gave them seductive power in the first place. Or to put it differently: When all points are gained, no player will go hunting for the better "story". The expectation of secrets to be found, thus, is determined by the knowledge of missing points in the area rather than by inconsistencies or loose ends in the narrative.

From the perspective of the player during the process of questing, there is still no finite meaning attached to the quest. Instead, there is potential meaning. As a researcher approaching the quest from an analytic point of view, it is necessary to situate oneself in a similar position: that is, one must approach the quest discourse as it functions *before* final meaning is attached to it.

I have found theories of seduction to be useful analytical tools in this respect, balancing and correcting the hermeneutical perspective. Based on my readings of Jean Baudrillard's *Seduction* and Shoshana Felman's *The Literary Speech Act*, I will in this essay show in what way regarding questing as a seductive, rather than interpretative, discourse may affect

our understanding of how quest rhetorics work. I will start out by presenting parts of Baudrillard's theory: First, his opposition between seduction and production, which implies the additional opposition between seduction and interpretation. Then his sketch of the seductive game, how seduction operates on the surface of meaning, is rule-bound and thereby avoids responsibility with regards to the laws governing "ordinary life", or life as we know it outside of the seductive game.

In the next section, I will present Shoshana Felman's reading of the Don Juan myth, as represented in Jean Baptiste Molière's play *Don Juan* and, secondarily, in the opera *Don Giovanni* by Lorenzo Da Ponte and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Using J. L. Austin's theory of the performatives, Felman identifies a fundamental attitude difference between the characters in Molière's play: where Don Juan himself is totally devoted to the performative *act*, his antagonists want *meaning*. Act and meaning, in Felman's (and Austin's) view, are different orders and, accordingly, must be approached in different manners.

Approaching the quest as a seductive discourse acting in accordance with the principles demonstrated by Don Juan, throughout the essay I will use examples from *Tubmud*[7] to show how the seductive acts of the quest are fought by the player – the antagonist in this case – seeking, and eventually obtaining, final meaning. There are, however, strategies for fighting back. Countering and evading the player's insistence on closure, clever quests and quest objects use such strategies for what they are worth. This is their seductive power.

Baudrillard on Seduction

Production, like revolution, puts an end to the epidemic of appearances. But seduction is inevitable. No one living escapes it – not even the dead. For the dead are only dead when there are no longer any echoes from this world to seduce them, and no longer any rites challenging them to exist.

For us, only those who can no longer produce are dead. In reality, only those who do not wish to seduce or be seduced are dead. But seduction gets hold of them nonetheless, just as it gets hold of all production and ends up destroying it. (Baudrillard 1990 [1979], 84)

Seduction is, in Baudrillard's view, an opposite of production. What belongs to the order of seduction – to the order of the secret – production will materialise; what seduction plays with and hides, production makes visible. Made visible, the mysterious *appearance* of an object, a number, or a concept is reduced into something obvious. In the way that Baudrillard is here reversing the prevailing order by replacing the primacy of production with that of seduction, seduction itself is explained as a strategy of reversal: playing with the immanent reversibility of systems.

Etymologically, *seduction* is derived from the Latin *se-ducere*: "to take aside, to divert from one's path" (Baudrillard 1990 [1979], 22). The seductive game, thus, is leading the other from his truth. Threatening the very foundation of production systems and interpretative disciplines, seduction has always been banished from these discourses. According to Baudrillard, though, such banishment serves seduction well, as it can after all never obtain any real power. Seduction works only by reversing existing power. But as it reverses the existing power, it is nevertheless more powerful.

As seduction is opposed to production, it also opposes interpretation: countering the interpretative act by reversing and delaying it, in order to prevent any "final truth" from being reached. In the seductive game, to seduce the signs themselves is what counts, not the reaching of any truth. Eliminating seduction by attempting to replacing it with final, decisive meaning, interpretative discourse is the "least seductive of discourses":

> Not only does it subject the domain of appearances to incalculable damage, but this privileged search for hidden meanings may well be profoundly in error. For it is not somewhere else, in a *hinterwelt* or an unconscious, that one will find what leads discourse astray. What truly displaces discourse, "seduces" it in the literal sense, and renders it seductive, is its very appearance, its inflections, its nuances, the circulation (whether aleatory and senseless, or ritualized and meticulous) of signs at its surface. It is this that effaces meaning and is seductive, while a discourse's meaning has never seduced anyone. *All meaningful discourse seeks to end appearances*: this is its attraction, and its imposture. (Baudrillard 1990 [1979], 54)

It is the signs themselves that are seductive: empty, absurd, elliptical signs deprived of any meaning or reference. To grasp the seductive discourse, therefore, we need to understand and acknowledge "the power of the

insignificant signifier, the power of a meaningless signifier" (Baudrillard 1990 [1979], 74–75).

Every discourse contains something that will evade interpretation, and everything evading interpretation may function seductively: including the MUD quest, starting out as a total enigma.[8] Everything in the description of the room may be significant – and at the same time, nothing really *is* significant. Nothing leads anywhere at this point. When the player doesn't know where to start, every insignificant word may successfully fake significance. Gradually, though, the initial stage of helplessness is overcome, through examination, exploration, and interpretation. Fighting the seductive "secret circulation of meaningless signs" hermeneutically, trying to eliminate seduction and replacing it with meaning, the player sets out on her adventure.

Replacing the system of signifiers with an even more conventional order, seduction attempts to escape the terror of meaning. As seduction is rule-bound, it is set apart from the order of the Law: Abiding by its rule is at the same time to be free from the restraints represented by choice, freedom, responsibility, and meaning.[9] Every game is beyond the Law and also without any moral. This, however, implies that we should never interpret what belongs to the rule according to the Law.

This last principle presents us with a new methodological problem, this time connected to treating MUD quests as games: Although quests are rule-bound also in a formal sense, certain rules will nevertheless be defined and identified by way of an emerging narrative.[10] These rules cannot be treated as functioning beyond moral or the Law, even if they're set in a fictional universe. After all, they are identified through a contextual appropriation of meaning. From hermeneutics we know that interpretation and appropriation of fictional content never happens independently of the interpreter's life-world. Although there is no demand of interpretation reaching the life-world of the author of the text, there will of course be, also from the author's perspective, a life-world implied.[11] Taking into account the notion of the life-world and its necessary contribution to both writing and interpretation, it would make no sense to claim that the MUD quest is operating totally beyond the Law.

The challenge and seduction are similar, dual forms, Baudrillard writes, operating with meaningless signs but bound by a fundamental rule. Like the challenge, seduction is "never an investment but a risk; never a contract but a pact; never individual but duel [sic]; never psychological but

ritual; never natural but artificial" (Baudrillard 1990 [1979], 83). There is one difference between them though: Where seduction plays on weakness, the challenge addresses strength.

While the Law can be transgressed, the rule cannot. Violating the rule by not abiding by it is not transgression – it is simply to give up the rule and replace it with the order of the Law again. This is what the cheater does. Playing for profit, he's confusing risk with investment. "If games had a finality," writes Baudrillard, "the only true player would be the cheater" (Baudrillard 1990 [1979], 140). But as investment belongs to the order of the Law and not to the order of the game, the cheater is not even a player. Replacing the order of the rule with the order of the Law, he does not take part in the game. The quest solver who impatiently asks other players for solutions to puzzles instead of searching within the text itself is in a similar manner not really questing. When he asks other players for hints he confuses the process of playing (act) with the products of knowledge (meaning). Refusing to let himself be seduced by the text, indulging in the game for the sole purpose of playing seems to be of little interest to him. Instead, obtaining possession of the answers – possibly in order to advance faster – is what counts.

Through Baudrillard's theory of seduction, it is possible to identify some of the paradoxes of questing. If questing is a seductive practice, the quest product is in opposition to the questing process. Completing the quest turns it into a product, a finite entity that no longer contains any secrets or exercises any seductive power over the player. At the same time, questing would be meaningless, both in a literal sense and as a (part of the MUD) game, if completion wasn't an integral part of the contract. Similarly, while Baudrillard claims that searching for meaning in the seductive discourse makes no sense, there would be no point in questing at all if the promise of a meaning to be found would be excluded from it, that is, if we would seriously believe that all signs in the quest discourse are nonreferential signifiers meaninglessly circulating on the surface. While it is possible that the meaning of a discourse never seduced anyone, it is equally unlikely that the insignificant signifier could function seductively with its insignificance revealed. On the contrary, to be able to *appear* as this or that, it is necessary that it disguise itself, that is, that it conceal its non-significance. Although perhaps not referring to anything in reality (which in this case includes the fictional MUD world), the non-signifying signifier will always have to be pointing somewhere to function seductively. Faking significance,

it also promises meaning. The player who doesn't care about detecting this meaning cannot be seduced. Only the player who believes that there is something "behind" the surface, some secret to be disclosed, may enter the seductive discourse of questing.

At the same time, players who are not willing to indulge in the quest as a seductive practice but who encounter the puzzles forcefully as challenges to be overcome – who are playing for the sole purpose of reconfiguring the quest product, to obtain a final meaning – may also find it difficult to enjoy questing.

The strategy of Don Juan

In *The Literary Speech Act. Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, Felman uses Austin's division between performatives and constatives to analyse the Don Juan myth. According to Felman's analysis, the fundamental conflict of seduction in Molière's play is reflected in, and may be explained by, the characters' opposing views of the function of language. Examining the dialogues between Don Juan and the others, she finds that they appear to be dialogues "between two orders that, in reality, do not communicate: the order of the act and the order of meaning, the register of pleasure and the register of knowledge" (Felman 1983 [1980], 31). The secret behind Don Juan's seductive powers is to be found in the way he is using (or from the others' point of view, abusing) language. She explains:

> What is really at stake in the play – the real conflict – is, in fact, the opposition between two views of language, one that is cognitive, or constative, and another that is performative. According to the cognitive view, which characterizes Don Juan's antagonists and victims, language is an instrument for transmitting *truth*, that is, an instrument of knowledge, a means of *knowing* reality. Truth is a relation of perfect congruence between an utterance and its referent, and, in a general way, between language and the reality that it represents. [...] In this view, the sole function reserved for language is the *constative* function: what is at stake in an utterance is its correspondence – or lack of correspondence – to its real referent, that is, its truth or falsity. [...] However this may be, Don Juan does not share such a view of language. Saying, for him, is in no

case tantamount to knowing, but rather to *doing: acting* on the interlocutor, modifying the situation and the interplay of forces within it. Language, for Don Juan, is performative and not informative; it is a field of enjoyment, not of knowledge. As such, it cannot be qualified as true or false, but rather quite specifically as *felicitous* or *infelicitous*, successful or unsuccessful. (Felman 1983 [1980], 26–27)

In previous articles, I have argued that such a conflict between the order of the act and the order of meaning can be identified in quest-solving too (Tronstad 2001 and 2003): While solving a quest, we search for the meaning of it. When meaning is reached, the quest is solved. The paradox of questing is that as soon as a final meaning is reached, the quest stops functioning as a quest. When meaning is found, the quest is history. It cannot be done again, as it is simply not the same experience to solve a puzzle quest for the second time. In this, quests differ from stories, which may, in principle, be re-read a hundred times and still function as stories. This, I believe, is because stories in general belong to the order of meaning, together with Austin's constatives, while quests are basically performative: They belong first and foremost to the order of the act. When quests are solved, though, they stop functioning performatively. The solved quest thus belongs to a different order than the unsolved quest. Solved, the quest turns into a constative, it enters the order of meaning. This is why the text is experienced as exhausted when the quest is solved: not because it is fully interpreted, but because its primary function is performative, and not constative. It is the performative function of the quest that is exhausted, not the text itself. In principle, the text can now be enjoyed for its constative function.

This change in function can also explain why, from an academic point of view, quests are often approached as narratives: As researchers, we approach the quest retrospectively, after we've already solved it. Reading and analysing the logs from our questing practice, we already know what lead where, what was significant and what was not. Analysing the quest retrospectively, the context that was unknown to us during the questing process is known. There are no mysterious signifiers left, nothing that may lead somewhere, no seduction. Every part of the quest will now be judged and organised according to its contextual relation to the final meaning. Signifiers that are insignificant in relation to this contextual whole will most probably be ignored. A significant part, in other words, of what made the

quest "work" in the first place will escape us at this time. To ignore the performative's role in questing this way is, however, fundamentally to misjudge questing as a practice. As quests are acts before they are meaning, we must focus more attention on the way quests *act* to understand the way they work. Consulting the strategies of Don Juan – as another representative of the order of the act – is therefore useful in understanding how the performative aspect of questing may function.

With performatives, it is the promise – or more precisely the *broken* promise – that defines and motivates the character Don Juan, while confusing and frustrating his antagonists. Don Juan makes promise after promise, with no intention of keeping any of them. By continuously and intentionally breaking his promises, Don Juan abuses the institution of promising. This, however, is exactly what makes it possible for him to continue seducing, to continue promising: "Paradoxically," Felman writes, "the failure to carry out the promise makes it possible to begin it again: it is because the [...] promise is not kept that it can be renewed" (Felman 1983 [1980], 40).

"The trap of seduction [...] consists in producing a *referential illusion* through an utterance that is by its very nature *self-referential*: the illusion of a real or extralinguistic act of commitment created by an utterance that refers only to itself" (Felman 1983 [1980], 31). Playing with the self-referentiality of signs, Don Juan places himself beyond the law that the others in the play subject themselves to. His promises do not refer to any truth, constancy, or meaning: their sole purpose is to act upon the others. The felicity of their acting, however, requires that the others believe in their referentiality: "The act of seduction is above all an inducer of belief," as Felman writes (Felman 1983 [1980], 33).

"Don Juan in fact does nothing but *promise the constative*" (Felman 1983 [1980], 35). This is what quests do, too: They promise their solution, by promising meaning. But as disclosure of meaning also implies the end of the quest, it's necessary to frequently break the promise, in order to prolong the questing experience. Breaking the promise makes it possible to renew the promise. Playing with nonreferential signifiers that lead the player on meaningless detours, the quest acts as seducer: inducing belief that there is a meaning to be found, on the one hand; and contradicting, delaying, and playing against the player's urge for meaning, on the other.

In what follows, I will use the example of the *Tubmud* quest "The Realm of Witches Is in Danger," written by Ardanna, to illustrate how the

quest and quest objects[12] act as seducers during the questing process and also how the player counters this seduction by insisting on replacing it with meaning. Close examination of rooms and objects is fundamental to disclose the meaning of the quest:

> You walk along a long and dark corridor leading slightly downwards into the scary depths underneath the Grey Witch's castle.To the west, stairs lead up into the Entryhall. There are two obvious exits: up and east.

> examine stairs
The stairs lead upwards to brighter parts of Ardanna's castle.
> examine corridor
It is long and dark and might contain a hidden hint.
> examine walls
They are made of black stone. Maybe you should search the corridor, there might be something to find...
> search corridor
After a short glance around, you make out a tiny inscription on the east wall.
> read inscription
The inscription says: WIKKA PICCA MALEFIZ
A picture of no mean artistic value is drawn underneath. It shows a broom, a witchhat, a black witchcloak and a black cat arranged in a circle.
[...]
> east

> Five white candles illuminate this chamber with a flickering light. They stand on the corners of a silver pentagram, which is inlaid into the floor.
> There is one obvious exit: west.

> examine pentagram
Fine lines of a silver metal form a pentagram on the floor of this chamber. You could step into the pentagram and try out a conjuration....

> enter pentagram
Sadly you can't initiate the ceremony!
You don't wear the right attire or don't wield the right weapon!
The demon doesn't heed your call!
But you have become part of the magic ritual now...

Having searched the corridor and read the writings on the walls,[13] the player may already have a clue as to the correct "attire" and "weapon" required to initiate the ceremony. She'll have to leave the pentagram and continue exploring other rooms to be able to obtain the required items, however. When she has explored all the rooms, examined all the items and interpreted their correct interconnection, the player may finally be able to solve the quest. To have her interpretations thus confirmed – by solving it – is simultaneously finally to have defeated seduction. By detecting its final meaning, the player deprives the quest of all its seductive power, and turns it into a constative. Provided that there aren't still missing flags in the area, the player may now regard the quest space exhausted.

What is special about "The Realm of Witches Is in Danger," however, is that it actually – in contrast to most other *Tubmud* quests – provides multilinearity. It can be carried out in three different ways: as either a white, grey, or black witch.[14] It can hardly be carried out all three ways by one single character, however. The reason it cannot be solved in three different ways by one character is that the evil actions performed while solving it as a black witch will not be forgotten by the nice NPCs whose information the player may need to do it the white way. Yet, a player who refrains from performing evil actions will not receive the necessary help from the nasty witch. This multilinear structuring of "The Realm of Witches Is in Danger" – and the fact that the realm of witches also includes two other areas, Wikkaton and Delilah's Mansion, where a couple of extremely difficult puzzles may keep the player occupied for years – provides enough resistance to ensure that finding and resolving all potential hints is practically impossible. In this way, this particular quest cleverly evades the exhaustion of the text space that is normally experienced when all flags are found, and all points are gained; and thus it succeeds in keeping the performative alive. By continuing to promise after it has been solved, "The Realm of Witches Is in Danger" escapes the total transformation into a constative that is the destiny of most other quests.

Fizzlock's promises

Frankly, if the player is willing to cheat it is actually possible to solve the quest as a white witch after having solved it as a black, and thereby be able to hermeneutically exhaust more of the potential hints in the area.

The apparent impossibility to completely exhausting the text space of this quest is connected to the task of obtaining the grey witchcloak that is required to solve the quest as a grey witch. There are, however, indications that such a cloak may somehow be obtained. At the quest board in Wikkaton, for instance, there is an old note from a player praising the quest but in a sidenote complaining about the number of evil orcs he had to kill while solving it, in order to maintain his good alignment. The neutral alignment that he otherwise tended to return to, seemed to him to be the only one with which the quest cannot be solved. Ardanna, who is herself a grey witch, answers him:

> > read 17
> Re: good! but... (Ardanna, Mar 15 1995)
>
> Greetings,
> one can solve the quest when neutral, but (I admit) no hints are offered on how to obtain the necessary item, which makes it very difficult.
> But then again, even I wear it every now and then...:-)
> Ardanna
> [end of note 17]

Solving a scenario in Wikkaton, the player gets to meet a young grey witch who, if asked, can tell where she got her witchcloak. The player may then try to obtain a grey cloak the same way, which is difficult (I never succeeded). Another potentially possible solution is to find a way to get hold of the grey cloak the warlock Fizzlock is wearing.[15] Interacting with Fizzlock, however, may initiate a detour. Now, detours occur frequently in questing – being the result of a broken promise, they work to prolong the questing experience. In my opinion detours should therefore be regarded as not only a typical but in fact a required rhetorical feature of the quest genre. The detour initiated by Fizzlock, though, is exceptional because it used to have the potential of making "The Realm of Witches Is in Danger" a neverending quest – inexhaustible.

Trying out the various possibilities for interacting with Fizzlock, he'll sooner or later tell the player to give him "something useful" to receive important information about a "liquifying spell." Finding the right object to give him does, however, prove difficult. According to Fizzlock, nothing is useful: no object available in Wikkaton, no object from Ardanna's castle,

none of the objects available in the other related area – Delilah's mansion – or in the external quest rooms of the Zydonia quest related to this again.[16] As a result, the player may eventually end up regarding every object she finds in the MUD as something that could be potentially "useful" to Fizzlock. She will, in other words, instead of putting the quest behind her when leaving the quest area, extend the potential text space to be explored in order to solve the quest to include every single room in *Tubmud*.

The following two posts from the Wikkaton board illustrates how Fizzlock kept players busy for years trying to figure out the right thing to give him, hoping to finally be able to obtain that (eventually, as years passed and the collection of explorer points from the realm of witches gradually became more and more complete) last missing flag:

> read 22
Fizzlock (Vanguard, Dec 31 1998)

hi it looks like noone writes here and i never have:) so here we go. FIX FIZZLOCK! that is all:)

Vanguard
[end of note 22]

> read 23
Fizzlock II (Vanguard, Nov 12 2000)

Hi again,

Okay it's been almost 2 years now and hundreds of useless items given to old fizzy. Well i've not given up on this yet, i'll give him every moveable item in this mud..... i shall find what he wants one day:)

Vanguard
[end of note 23]

Almost a year after the second note was posted and three years after the first, the following replies are posted by Ardanna:

> read 24
Re: Fizzlock II (Ardanna, Aug 23)

Hiho Van,
back to Tubmud after several years I read your note) Alas I do not remember what the deal with Fizzlock is anymore(He is some kind of warlock in Wikkaton, isn't he? Well, if I can still remember how

to access the code, I will look at it. Thanks for using my board :)
Ardanna
[end of note 24]

> read 25
Re^2: Fizzlock II (Ardanna, Aug 23)

Hmmm, I think I managed to look at Fizzlock and it seems like he is
not finished, very sorry. No matter what you give him, he will not
take it. And alas I do not remember if Myxectbo ever got down to
writing "liquify" and he does not either. So if there are still any
wizzies around, and someone has the time, feel free to add some-
thing to Fizz. /Ardanna
[end of note 25]
[no more notes]

It's worth recalling Baudrillard's words on seduction from the dead quoted
previously in this essay: "For us, only those who can no longer produce are
dead. In reality, only those who do not wish to seduce or be seduced are
dead." Until the last note from Ardanna appeared, Fizzlock may have
been dysfunctional but only from the perspective of meaning. From the
perspective of performativity, this same dysfunctionality appears to be
exactly that which secured his abilities to act upon the player. In this per-
spective, it is possible to see how his dysfunctionality was in fact a prereq-
uisite for his successful seductive strategies. Unfinished and full of bugs,
Fizzlock bravely stood the strain and held the fort, keeping Wikkaton, The
Realm of Witches, and eventually the entire MUD inexhaustible to the
players. Years without maintenance, neglected by his creator, only made
him more stubbornly protective of his secrets. That he may now be fixed
and re-appear as a functional NPC is no remedy for the fact that he can
never return to the superior position he once kept – as this position of
course depended on him being totally empty: In reality, Fizzlock had no
secrets. Because there was no final meaning to Fizzlock at all, the player
could project potential meanings on him indefinitely. Until, that is, the un-
fortunate day when Ardanna after years of absence re-appeared in *Tub-
mud* only to put an end to it, depriving Fizzlock of his seductive powers by
exposing his true insignificance.

Using the perspective of seduction when approaching quests allows us
a shift in focus where the texts are examined in terms of effects rather
than meaning.[17] Meaning does in this perspective occupy a secondary

position: Functioning as a main motivation for the player, meaning must necessarily be postponed and evaded through the process of questing as it otherwise implies the termination of the quest. The example of Fizzlock illustrates in this respect how apparent meaning may reflect more significance than confirmed meaning does in the context of MUD quests. Quests and quest objects that reveal their actual significance easily are also easily exhausted. As soon as their meaning is disclosed, they stop acting seductively, effecting (re)actions from the player.

NOTES

1. I'm examining the quests of *Tubmud*, an LPMUD situated at the Technical University of Berlin.

2. See "Fictional context and human interaction in Internet games" (Tronstad 2000) and "Performing the MUD adventure" (Tronstad 2003).

3. According to Paul Ricoeur, interpretation is ultimately a question of understanding ourselves: "An interpretation is not authentic unless it culminates in some form of appropriation *(Aneignung)*, if by that term we understand the process by which one makes one's own *(eigen)* what was initially other or alien *(fremd)*. [...] I should prefer to say that the reader understands himself in front of the text, in front of the world of the work. To understand oneself in front of a text is quite the contrary of projecting oneself and one's own beliefs and prejudices; it is to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself." (Ricoeur 1981 [1972], 178)

4. Cf. Espen Aarseth's more general warning of treating games as narratives: "The narrativistic approach [is] unfortunate because it imposes an external aesthetic on the games, treating them as inferior narrative art, which may be redeemed only when their quality reaches a higher 'Literary' or artistic level." (Aarseth 2003)

5. Explorer flags are often connected to objects that must be found or to actions that are necessary to perform in order to proceed in the quest. Many of them will therefore be achieved "automatically" during the questing process. Some flags may nevertheless be overlooked, either because the player is cheating (by asking other players for hints, for instance) or because it is possible to solve the quest without finding the flag in question. (Flags are not visible and the only way for a player to know she found one is to check her score. As the score is updated only after a period of time, it may also be difficult to identify where exactly the flag was achieved.)

6. The score system in *Tubmud* is organised so that the players may be provided with information of missing points in the different areas on request.

7. In particular from the quest "The Realm of Witches Is in Danger" and its related areas Wikkaton and Delilah's mansion, created by the wizard Ardanna.

8. Or we may know something: that the realm of witches is invaded by rats, for instance, and that it's our task to find a way to exterminate these rats. We also know that there is probably a procedure already defined for how to do this, but we don't know the procedure, nor do we know where to start to get a clue how to proceed.

9. "Ordinarily we live within the realm of the Law, even when fantasizing its abolition. Beyond the law we see only its transgression or the lifting of a prohibition. For the discourse of law and interdiction determines the inverse discourse of transgression and liberation. *However, it is not the absence of the law that is opposed to the law, but the Rule.* The Rule plays on an immanent sequence of arbitrary signs, while the Law is based on a transcendent sequence of necessary signs. [...] Because the Law establishes a line, it can and must be transgressed. By contrast, it makes no sense to 'transgress' a game's rules; within a cycle's recurrence, there is no line one can jump (instead, one simply leaves the game). [...] [The Rule] does not carry any meaning, it does not lead anywhere; by contrast, the Law has a determinate finality. The endless, reversible cycle of the Rule is opposed to the linear, finalized progression of the Law. Signs do not have the same status in the one as in the other. The Law is part of the world of representation, and is

therefore subject to interpretation and decipherment. [...] It is a *text*, and falls under the influence of meaning and referentiality. By contrast, the Rule has no subject, and the form of its utterance is of little consequence; one does not decipher the rules, nor derive pleasure from their comprehension – only their observance matters, and the resulting giddiness." (Baudrillard 1990 [1979], 131–132)

10. An example could be the rule discussed in the next section, in which a player must choose whether she wants to assume a good, neutral, or evil witch identity to solve the quest. Identifying this rule is not a matter of "thinking like the computer" or even thinking like the programmer but rather trying to "think like the author": to try to identify the author's intentions with the quest as a potential story, or meaningful sequence of actions and events. Cf. Friedman's distinction. (Friedman 1999)

11. As far as the author of a MUD quest may be present, known to the player, and even interfere while the player tries to solve the quest, I think quests can safely be regarded as less autonomous in this sense than traditional literary works.

12. For an additional analysis of seductive quest objects, see "Semiotic and Nonsemiotic MUD Performance" (Tronstad 2001).

13. The inscription and drawing appear on three walls, with a slight difference in wording and colour: "WIKKA PICCA BENEFIZ," accompanied by broom, hat, a white cloak, and a black cat and "WIKKA PICCA FIZFIZ" where the cloak and cat depicted are in grey.

14. The colour is dependent on alignment: If the character is *saintly, good* or *nice*, it makes a white witch, if it is *neutral*, it makes a grey witch, and if it is *nasty*, *evil*, or *demonic*, it makes a black witch. Alignment is not permanent in *Tubmud*, it will change with the alignment of the monsters the character kills: killing *good* monsters, the character will gradually turn more and more *evil*; killing *evil* monsters, the character alignment will gradually move toward *good*.

15. At a point, Fizzlock had a peculiar bug that made him appear as an object rather than an NPC, which resulted in him not responding to the player's attempts of communicating with him. A fortunate side-effect was that during this period, the player

was able to "take" things from him, thus obtaining the grey witchcloak by "take cloak from Fizzlock." That the player was thereby able to solve the quest as a grey witch too did however not help her much in exhausting the text space – as there would still be a possible flag connected to obtaining the cloak the correct way. (After some time, this bug was fixed and from then on the player would have to interact with him as an NPC again.)

16. "The seducer knows how to let the signs hang. He knows that they are favourable only when left suspended, and will move of themselves towards their appointed destiny. He does not use the signs up all at once, but waits for the moment when they will all respond, one after the other, creating an entirely unique conjuncture of giddiness and collapse." (Baudrillard 1990 [1979], 109)

17. Certainly there are also challenges in quests that effect action and hinder exhaustion that are not seductive in this sense: monster slaying is an obvious example.

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Tubmud: telnet morgen.cs.tu-berlin.de 7680