

Michael Kodiak
STS 145
March 20, 2002

Crafting a World

Understanding the Preeminence of *Warcraft* in the Real Time Strategy Genre

Janet H. Murray, in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, discusses the role of the computer and the Internet in the future of the narrative. During this discussion she proposes three interrelated aspects that are imperative to a successful narrative. The first of these is *immersion*; Murray explains: “*Immersion* is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek...the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality” (98). An immersive computer game must then take the gamer into a world that is very clearly not his own. After immersion comes *agency*, fundamentally, “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (126). The game world, while remaining distinct from the real one, must act and react in an incredibly realistic way. The final attribute put forward by Murray is *transformation*. This is the ability of a narrative to allow the observer to actually become something else; it is in this category that the computer stands out as a narrative medium. Computer games have the power to put the player behind the controls of nearly anything a designer has the will to create. These three aspects can be used for more than the explicit purpose of understanding narrative. Immersion, agency, and transformation provide a microscope by which we can come to a better understanding of the engaging power of various games.

One of the most engaging strategy titles known to the computer gaming world is Blizzard Entertainment’s *Warcraft*. While only two stand-alone *Warcraft* titles were released in the mid 1990’s, the game’s resilience and popularity have led Blizzard to

begin production on two more *Warcraft* games. Why have these games outlasted other very similar rivals? By coming to understand *Warcraft's* origins and influences, and the evolution of ideas therein, we can better comprehend the series' success.

Strategy games have been a centerpiece of entertainment throughout the history of man. From the deceptively simple *chess* and *go* to the simply deceptive rules of *Kriegspiel*, strategy games have historically been an attempt to simulate war (Lowood). As man has attempted to more realistically recreate war as sport, the rules and complications of his games have grown proportionally. The computer's processing capabilities make it the natural platform on which to play strategy games. It does not come as a surprise to find that there are vast numbers of computer strategy games and of these the majority are variations on the war game. The two primary purposes of war games are education and entertainment. While in any particular game these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, there are many games that are specifically designed for one purpose or the other. Most war games intended for education are operated by the military, not available to the public, and are therefore beyond the bounds of this paper.

Computer war games for the purpose of entertainment take many forms. Foremost among these is turn-based strategy (TBS), and its descendant, real-time strategy (RTS). These two genres present numerous fundamental differences despite their similar origins. Mark Walker, in his series of articles describing the computer strategy genre on GameSpy.com, expands on a few of these differences. One of the basic conflicts regarding game play is the balance of strategy versus tactics. Essentially, a player's strategy governs his overall plan of attack while tactics direct the ins and outs of each individual conflict. Walker concludes, "By and large real-time strategy games are long

on strategy and short on tactics. The inverse is true with turn-based strategy and wargaming.” This disparity is based in part upon the nature of artificial intelligence in games. In a RTS battle the player often does not have the time, or the capability, to click on and maneuver each unit individually in order to maximize effectiveness. Often the units are sent into battle and both players must sit back and hope that the AI allows their previous planning, strategy, to prevail. During a TBS encounter the player has the time to meticulously arrange every unit for each interaction. Of course, the computer can also take its time. As Deep Blue has shown, this can lead to disastrous consequences for the strategy gamer. An additional difference between TBS and RTS is found in the nature of the action that takes place. Walker uses Sid Meier’s *Civilization* series as an example for the TBS genre: “*Civilization III* put the game inside our heads. Yes, the on screen action is fun, but even more fun is exploring the abundant economic, military, and diplomatic strategies that the game presents – an exploration that takes place primarily in your head.” In short, the TBS genre has traditionally been more immersive than its real time counterpart. However, RTS puts all of the action right before your eyes. It is, by its very nature as a continuous game, more realistic and better able to facilitate transformation. In the end, it would seem that it is this more spontaneous and transformative style of game play that appeals to consumers. When all is said and done, sales are what matter most in the entertainment industry, and sales indicate that the RTS genre is more popular than its TBS counterpart on a scale of nearly four to one (Walker).

Westwood Studios’ production of *Dune II* in 1992 was not the first appearance of RTS; nonetheless it has been argued that *Dune II* established the standard for the genre. Rob Pardo, the producer of *Warcraft III*, comments, “I feel that *Dune II* was the mother

of the ‘modern’ RTS genre...Most RTS games today can find many of their design roots in this game.” (Walker). *Dune II* supports 256 color VGA graphics and is played from a top-down 2-D view that has become nearly universal throughout the genre.



Screenshot courtesy of <http://www.duneworld.org>.

There are three integral aspects of game play in *Dune II* that have become standard to mainstream RTS. The first of these is resource gathering and management. The act of gathering resources is inherently one of agency, for in our capitalist society it is not believable to obtain a benefit without a price. *Dune II*, staying true to its origins, makes spice the valued resource that must be gathered, stored and used to build/buy new units and structures. The construction of new units and buildings is a second defining aspect of game play. The need and ability to design a base and choose which units to build offers a sense of personalization and variability that completes the immersion of the game world. The third aspect that *Dune II* successfully incorporates is the inevitable conflict. After collecting resources and creating units it is finally time for the player to test his mettle as the leader of his house. By stepping into the role of leader of House Atreides, House Harkonnen, or House Ordos, the gamer completes the act of transformation. The integration of collect, create, and conquer has defined the modern RTS genre.

Inspired by *Dune II*, Blizzard Entertainment released its first RTS title, *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans (WI)*, in 1994. This game took the player out of the future and into a medieval fantasy world complete with wizards, warlocks, archers, and knights. The Tolkienesque theme combined with “cartoonish” 256 color VGA graphics opened the RTS genre to a new cross-section of gamers while simultaneously making the game more immersive. *Dune II*'s portrayal of a possible future of mankind is a constant reminder that the game is just that, a game. *WI*, on the other hand, is designed on the premise that the game world could never be our own, and therefore its fantastical nature is more acceptable, and thereby immersive. Staying within the established bounds of collect, create, and conquer, *WI* expanded the range of tactics through units capable of hand to hand combat, ranged combat, and spell casting. The inclusion of multiple player races, humans and orcs, completed the fantasy illusion and created a new standard for the industry. While *Dune II* successfully incorporated one or two unique units to each of the different houses, it was *WI* that allowed players to compete against each other with completely different buildings and units. Included with *WI* was the capability of head-to-head play via modem, serial cable, and IPX network. The inclusion of online multiplayer support, while somewhat limited, is only a shadow of what would later become Blizzard's ultra popular *Battle.net*. The success of Blizzard Entertainment's first foray into the RTS genre was only a taste of things to come.

Building upon the success of both *Dune II* and *WI*, Westwood Studios gave birth to the popular *Command & Conquer (C&C)* world with *C&C: Tiberian Dawn* in 1994. Heralded as the “Computer Game of the Year” by the Electronic Computer Trade Show (ECTS), *Tiberian Dawn* was the first installment of the best selling computer game

strategy series of all time, as recorded by the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Staying within the comfortable futuristic vein established by *Dune II*, the *C&C* titles take game play and display to the next level. While *Tiberian Dawn* uses VGA graphics, the later titles would make the upgrade to SVGA. The battle environments are richly detailed, showing off graphics that are superior to previous games. Compare the following two screenshots of, first, *WI*, and second, *Tiberian Dawn*.



Screenshot courtesy of <http://www.blizzard.com>.



Screenshot courtesy of <http://www.gamezilla.com>.

Another improvement is the realistic unit interaction. There is nothing quite like the satisfaction of ridding your opponent of his pesky foot soldiers by running them over with a tank. This is one of the more explicit manifestations of agency, and is representative of many improvements to be found in *C&C*. In between the single player missions are dramatic cinematic sequences that provide the engaging narrative on which the *C&C* series is built. These sequences, while very well crafted, are actually a break from game play and remind the player that he is playing a game taking place in either a very unlikely or impossible future. This break represents a flaw in the immersiveness of *C&C*. Nonetheless, Westwood did succeed in improving game play and including a superb single player narrative. Beyond this, one of their more prominent accomplishments was in the multiplayer arena. *Tiberian Sun* included both two-player modem and four-player network support. Building upon this success, Westwood included two game CDs in its 1996 release of *C&C: Red Alert*, one for the Allies and one for the Soviets. Gamers could, for the first time, compete in two-player play without the need to purchase two copies of the game. These capabilities allowed the Westwood to accomplish its impressive economic feats.

One caveat in regards to Westwood's sales success is that there are already four *C&C* titles with an additional one nearing completion while Blizzard has only produced two standalone *Warcraft* games with a third slated to come out in June. Based upon this variance in the number of games produced, the longstanding popularity of the *Warcraft* world becomes even more remarkable. One pillar that this popularity is based upon is *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness (W2)*, released in 1995. Immediately after going gold *W2*

began to win accolades. It was hailed as the “Game of the Year” from sources as varied as *PC Gamer*, to *MacUser*, and in categories ranging from “Best Overall”, to “Best Internet”, “Best Strategy”, “Best Multiplayer”, and “Best of After Hours”. What is it about *W2* that has made it such a popular game?

It would seem logical to begin this exploration from a location that has proven to be one of *C&C*'s weaker points. In *W2*, Blizzard makes use of the cinematic cut-scene to aid the development of the single player narrative. However, these scenes also serve another purpose; the cut-scenes flesh out the unique fantasy world that is completely unfamiliar to the average player. *C&C: Red Alert* inevitably fails to do this because it is taking place in our world with a conflict between Allies and Soviets that has been experienced, however vicariously, by nearly all of today's gaming audience.

Complimenting the unfamiliar nature of the fantasy world is the “cartoonish” graphics. *C&C* effectively uses realistic graphics to portray its units so that they are recognizable and therefore more immersive to the gamer. An attempt to realize *W2* with realistic graphics akin to *C&C* would have been disastrous because the fantasy genre by its very nature is unrealistic. The following screenshots illustrate the difference between *Red Alert* and *W2*.



Screenshot courtesy of <http://www.gamezilla.com>.



Screenshot courtesy <http://www.blizzard.com>.

The cartoon-like graphics are easily accepted by the gamer and thus facilitate his immersion into the fantasy world. While *C&C* rehashes what is already known, or at the least expected, *W2* unveils a captivating new world for the player to engage and explore. The uniqueness of the *W2* world was aided by its use of SVGA graphics; in this arena

Warcraft preceded *C&C*. The immersion of the *Warcraft* world is greatly aided by its graphics and single player cinematic sequences.

There are also numerous aspects of *W2* that stand out as direct improvements in the field of agency. Foremost among these is character interaction; when one clicks on a unit the character gives an incredibly appropriate response. True to both the unit and the genre, these responses take many forms. While a *Peasant* may respond “Yes Mi’lord”, a *Knight* will charge into battle saying “For the King!” Either of these responses would be appropriate for the *Destroyer* (a battle ship), but instead it is given responses like “Set Sail?” and “Aye, Captain”, both of which are unique to its nature as a sea going vessel. The fantasy world is made more complete by the comments of the *Elf Archer* who responds: “Your Eminence?” and “For the Alliance!” Along side the varying responses given by the units is the various vocal inflections that each unit has. Corresponding with the stereotypes of the genre, the *Peasant* talks slowly and sounds like something akin to a simpleton, while both the *Footman* and *Destroyer* carry English accents. The *Knight* and the *Mage* use deeper voices that are somehow appropriate to the greater importance and power that they wield. Perhaps the most unique aspect of unit interaction are the varying responses that a unit will give as the gamer continues to repeatedly click on it. Repeated clicking causes units to react in varied ways, most often with annoyance, which results in a humorous sequence that complements the light hearted nature of the “cartoonish” portrayal of the *Warcraft* world. One such exchange with the human *Footman* follows:

- 1st click: “Mi’lord?” (normal response)
- 2nd click: “Your Orders?” (normal response)
- 3rd click: “Yes sire?” (normal response)
- 4th click: “Make up your mind!”
- 5th click: “Are you still touching me?” (mildly annoyed)
- 6th click: “Don’t you have a kingdom to run?” (extremely annoyed)

7th click: “I *do* have work to do.”

8th click: “Join the army they said.” (sarcastically)

9th click: “See the world they said.” (sarcastically)

10th click: “I’d *rather* be sailing.” (exasperated, and ironic because the *Destroyer* uses the same voice)

Suddenly the units have become more than just icons to move around the screen. By responding in an unexpected yet delightful manner, agency is used to give the units personality and intrigue the gamer on a new level. At first it may seem as though a critical flaw has been by the *Footman* when he responds “Are you still touching me?” because this appears to be a breach of the immersive world through a direct reference to the game interface (the pointer used to select units is a hand). However, this response is achieved only through a repeated action that inherently acknowledges the world and unit as little more than characters in a game and therefore this breach of gaming etiquette is quickly forgiven and indeed rewarded with a quick laugh. Another manifestation of this repeated clicking phenomenon is found in the *critters* that dot the maps as harmless ambient life. *Critters* take the form of animals like sheep or seals and when clicked on repeatedly they explode. This apparently inappropriate and random response does however serve a purpose. First, the inappropriate explosion is only achieved through an equally inappropriate action by the gamer, and thus, in a manner similar to the vocal response of units, this response does not hamper the immersion of game play. Secondly, the presence of numerous critters in small area would make it difficult to build structures. Due to the fact that their purpose is to enhance the fantasy world while not affecting game play, the ability to manually remove them from the game is a valuable addition. The interface between the player and game units has been designed with a degree of agency that greatly surpasses the predecessors of *Warcraft II*.

Blizzard vastly improved upon the multiplayer capabilities of *Warcraft* with the release of *W2*. *W2* supports up to eight people per game via modem, IPX network, or direct connection. However, *W2*'s innovation was giving gamers the ability to install spawned copies of the game onto their friend's computers. While a spawn is not a full version of the game, it is capable of multiplayer play if used in conjunction with the full version. One game CD can play simultaneously with up to three spawned copies, making it possible to involve four people with one purchase. While Blizzard's efforts in the multiplayer arena thus far are commendable, the advent of *Battle.net* in 1997 changed the very nature of multiplayer play. *Battle.net* is a free online arena where players of the various games developed by Blizzard can chat and initiate multiplayer games. Through *Battle.net* it became possible to play a multiplayer game of *W2* at any hour of day with people around the world. This arena also facilitated the creation of an official ladder by which each player's win/loss record could be tallied and the online gaming community could recognize the best players. These capabilities are vital to the replay value of nearly all games in the RTS genre. When single player campaigns are exhausted, the gamer inevitably decides to test his skill against a human opponent. The ability to constantly compete against new people allows for infinite variation and thus infinite replay value. *Battle.net* was not the first online game server, but nevertheless it revolutionized the RTS genre.

Transformation thus far in the history of the RTS genre has been limited by the lack of a character with which the player can readily identify with. An inclusive narrative and the ability to choose to play as a specific House/Race/Nation is the extent of the transformation enhancing properties found in these early games. Blizzard Entertainment

recognized this deficiency and in 1996 released an expansion pack to *W2* entitled *Warcraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal (BDP)*. *BDP* offered numerous new single player missions, some of which incorporated the revolutionary control of hero units. These units have unique names, are much more powerful than normal units, and are integral to the plot lines of the single player scenarios. The gamer has been given a unit that is clearly superior to others, a unit with which he can associate himself. This enhancement, among others, prompted *Computer Gaming World* to name *BDP* the “Game add-on of the year” in 1997 and was a first step towards Blizzard’s most recent endeavor. The concept of the hero unit has been cultivated in *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos (W3)*, slated for release in the first half of 2002. In *W3*, heroes increase in strength through play, can acquire items, gain new abilities at the direction of the player, and are able to single-handedly turn the tide of pitched battles. The hero has become more than simply an extra-powerful unit; the hero, as a precisely developed incarnation of the gamer, is a catalyst of transformation.

Warcraft III is a revolutionary addition to the *Warcraft* world on many levels. Clearly, the inclusion of heroes will have a vast influence on game play. Blizzard feels that this influence is great enough to warrant the creation of a new genre, Role Playing Strategy (RPS), to include *W3*. However, at a fundamental level *W3* very definitely follows in the genre defining vein of collect, create, and conquer. *W3* remains a steadfast adherent to RTS despite Blizzard’s vaunted claims to have created a new genre. As a member of the RTS genre, *W3* makes vast improvements. Utilizing the *Havoc* engine, *W3* more realistically portrays object interaction and in doing so greatly aids the feeling of agency. Making a large step in the area of graphics, this title requires a 3D accelerator

card and supports both Direct3D and OpenGL. This requirement is particularly noteworthy because RTS games have traditionally been 2D games. The graphics superiority evident in the following screenshot sets a new precedent for RTS.



Screenshot courtesy of <http://www.blizzard.com>

The graphics presented in *W3* are everything that a gamer in today's special effects glutted society could want. *W3* also comes with complete *Battle.net* support and currently allows up to 12 players to play simultaneously on the same map. Blizzard plans to embrace the popularity of multiplayer play through the inclusion of multiple ladders and tournaments on *Battle.net*. The incorporation of these landmark improvements will undoubtedly carry the popularity of the *Warcraft* series into the twenty first century.

Analysis from the basis of immersion, agency, and transformation, reveals how *Warcraft* has surpassed its predecessors and competitors. Where graphics and cinematic sequences did little to help, and in some cases damaged, the immersiveness of other games, in *Warcraft* they were very appropriate and successful in creating a new reality to engross the player. Agency in *Warcraft* has been aided by both the logical and comical responses of the various objects with which interaction is possible. While transformation remains relatively uniform throughout earlier RTS games, *W3* completes a large step forward that was foreshadowed by *BDP*. The evident dominance of *Warcraft*, combined with its consistent superiority in the field of multiplayer support, illustrates how the series has risen to its preeminent position in the RTS genre.

Despite its position at the head of RTS, Blizzard Entertainment is not content to let *Warcraft* remain there. Expanding on their tradition of exceptional multiplayer support, and taking the hero concept to its transformative extreme, Blizzard is currently developing a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) called *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. While it is possible that this game is merely an attempt to cash in on the success of other games in the MMORPG genre, it is also likely that Blizzard is acting upon some deeper insight they have had regarding the direction of the gaming industry. The astounding success that MMORPGs have found overseas makes this choice of genre for the future of *Warcraft* an intriguing one. Is *WoW* stepping too far away from *Warcraft's* origins in the RTS genre as it attempts to fulfill Blizzard's perceptions of gamer desires, or is it a more prominent manifestation of trends within the gaming industry? In any case, the future of *Warcraft* will be one worth watching.

Bibliography

- Blizzard Entertainment. <http://www.blizzard.com>. 2002.
- Clair, Brian. http://www.avault.com/reviews/review_temp.asp?game=redalert. *Review of Command & Conquer: Red Alert*. 2002.
- Clair, Brian. http://www.avault.com/reviews/review_temp.asp?game=warcraft2. *Review of Warcraft 2*. 2002.
- Kaltenbach, Kai. <http://www.gamezilla.com/reviews/r/rasingle.asp>. *Review of Command & Conquer: Red Alert*. 2002.
- Lowood, Henry. STS 145: History of Computer Game Design. Lecture: *Military Gaming and Simulation*. Feb. 5, 2002.
- MobyGames. <http://mobygames.com/game/sheet/gameId=1377/>. *Warcraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal*. 2002.
- MobyGames. <http://mobygames.com/game/sheet/gameId,371/>. *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*. 2002.
- Murray, Janet H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 1997.
- Schrank, Chuck. <http://www.gamezilla.com/reviews/c/c&c.asp>. *Review of Command & Conquer*. 2002.
- The World of Dune. <http://www.duneworld.org/games/dune2.html>. *Dune II*. Web Designer: Alex Dunkel, 2000.
- Walker, Mark. <http://www.gamespy.com/articles/february02/strategy1/>. *Strategy Gaming: Parts 1-5*. Feb. 25 – March 1, 2002.
- Westwood Studios. <http://westwood.ea.com/>. 2002.