Chapter 12

On the (Virtual) Road:
Applying the Travelogue Concept to Virtual Spaces

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ABSTRACT

In the US, travel writing and the travel novel have historically held important positions in the literary landscape –not only as self-help guides and conveyances for empirical information but also as vehicles for satire, social commentary and analyses of the human condition. John Steinbeck, Jack Kerouac and William Least Heat-Moon are just a few of the important 20th century authors who have made insightful use of this genre. Today, increasingly realistic virtual reality environments have been sculpted, imbued with creative content and populated with both artificial agents and real avatars on a scale that can be measured in hundreds of virtual square miles. In some cases, the content is thematic and designed; in others it has grown up spontaneously through the individual contributions and creativity of users and small groups. It is this spontaneous blossoming of art, culture and ideas sprawling across increasingly spacious and interconnected virtual landscapes that presents us with the opportunity to continue the tradition of the epic travel story across new virtual territory.

INTRODUCTION

The sun is shining in a blue sky with wisps of high cloud as a pair of tourists cruise down a stretch of open road in a blue convertible with the top down. Green grassy fields spangled with tiny golden flowers stretch out on either side, with far-off majestic snow-covered mountains gleaming in the distance. Wearing dark glasses, the passenger fiddles with the radio as her companion steers the car around a bend in the highway. The tourists pause often to take pictures as they explore the unfamiliar countryside. Around every curve is a new vista, or an interesting attraction to investigate.

A sign advertising an art gallery invites the pair to stop. Parking their vehicle by the side of the road, the two get out and stretch while surveying their surroundings. Passing through the glass doors of an ultramodern building, they move into a spacious, multi-storied interior festooned with artwork and sculp-

ture. As they browse through walls of art, the tourists chat about various pieces that they find particularly appealing, comparing impressions and sharing the experience. A music system plays a smooth jazz radio station for background ambiance. Finally, the two mutually decide to end their explorations for the day and dine. Bidding each other good night, they each quit their virtual reality client applications and shut down two computers that are thousands of miles distant from each other. All of this has been unfolding online. However, the tourists are real people. The artist and her art are real. The radio stations are real, or as real as an internet radio stations can be. Most importantly, the journey is real. It is unplanned, and the entirety of the experience is unknown and cannot be predicted by any one individual.

Given the history of continental exploration and expansion in the US, the advent of the automobile and the development of a nationwide network of interstate highways, it is unsurprising that the road novel has occupied such an important place in our literary landscape. The tale of an epic journey is by no means a uniquely American one, of course, but On The Road by Jack Kerouac, Travels with Charley by John Steinbeck, The Air-Conditioned Nightmare by Henry Miller and Blue Highways by William Least Heat Moon are just a few of the literary works that have used the concept of a travelogue as a vehicle, not only for descriptions of regional American culture, but often as a framework for social commentary and analysis (Talbot, 1999). In these and other novels, gifted writers have gone in literary search of the naive concept of the American Dream –in some cases finding it or parts of it, in others finding a more realistic glimpse into how the lives and communities of Americans have actually matured (Gipko, 2014).

Today we are harnessing technology which is rapidly evolving to a point where the virtual experience can seem to blend with the physical one. The concept of the avatar has developed from its cartoonish beginnings to a point where it is increasingly possible to identify with and to establish a sense of self with a digital identity (Avatars, 2011). New generations of digital natives are now forming childhood memories in which engaging and increasingly realistic explorations of video game worlds are an important

Figure 1. "The Mother Road," Second Life

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