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Uncharted Waters

Maybe I should not have been surprised to find that *Uncharted Waters* is the name of an online computer game, and quite a popular, immersive one at that. If you are going to spend some time in a synthetic world, you might very well choose one where continents are still to be discovered, where daring and persistence pay off, and where mapmakers, if they want to say that some part of the sea is really scary, can do it by writing “Hic sunt dracones” —“Here be Dragons”.

I have always considered myself allergic to games in general and probably to on-line games in particular. (MMORPGs) “Massively multiplayer online role-playing games”? Out of the question. I assumed they were about people fighting each other with absurd weapons in hideous settings and no obvious point. Always men. In other words, I had no idea. It may have been the actual waters in *Uncharted Waters* that first made me think again. Even from the stills and walk-throughs, the screens for this game were nothing I would have associated with games at all, rippling in subtle waves of hatching, in rich blues and greens. Did the coding authorities know Hokusai’s prints? Did I mention that the game’s designers are Japanese?

The other reason for learning more had to do with history. *Uncharted Waters* is set in the so-called Age of Discovery, defined as 1500-1700. Players choose from a short list of avatars (the number of possibilities varies with the version). You can decide to be, say, Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, or English. You can buy a ship, hire crew, get supplies, trade, fight—or decide not to. Players develop online identities as fine navigators or shrewd traders, fearless explorers, fierce fighters or nasty pirates. The game has a reputation for historical accuracy. The currencies and prices match old records, for example, and the available maps of the world are as they would have been then, which is to say, very patchy. The promotions imply that you learn history by playing.

It is still escapist nonsense, I thought. History is not a game. But I *was* curious. The trouble is that people who do not know anything about games do not even know how to ask. There was someone I had met at the local homeless drop-in centre a few weeks earlier, though, who had built his first computer at age 8. I had talked to him a few times casually. This time I set out to find him. He is about 30 now, quiet, pleasant. He reads and writes English awkwardly, and that has affected his job prospects aversely for a long time. But as I soon discovered, he is perfectly fluent in computer code, jotting down notes like any writer might when something crosses his mind. And when talk turns to computer games, he lights up. He is focussed, fast and clear with

answers to questions about current software and forthcoming releases. Having grown up with single-player games, he has come to prefer MMORPGs. He tends to rate them by how immersive they are. Right now he is particularly enthusiastic about *Eurotruck Simulator 2* because of how carefully and thoroughly the designers have reconstructed details of European roads—topography, signage, laws, opportunities and risks. In the game, he owns a transport company with a number of employees and a lot of responsibility. He spoke about it with respect and concern, as though he lived there. For him it was obviously nothing, like what I had been calling a game: “virtual,” yes; but real beyond any doubt.

He was perfectly willing to help me get started in *Uncharted Waters*, despite being a bit dismissive of Mac users. I was hoping to shop for an avatar and go sailing on those shimmering waters. Only the game does not run on Mac. He smiled politely.

I am just about old enough to be this man’s grandmother, and may be as nerdy about English he is about code. I translate. Philosophy. From German. Only translating can also seem like a game sometimes. There are plenty of rules—two whole languages of them. There is a goal, pitfalls, dangers, an occasional surprise and — the thing I find essential — a way to be yourself, to “play” within the rules.

In my particular game of Translation, I often encounter a writer called Vilém Flusser—born 1920, died 1991. I should really say I recognize his avatar. He loved to translate. Maybe he needed to translate. He did a lot of it, in any case, graceful and assured moves from German to Portuguese, to French, to English, and sometimes back again, with the occasional brief stop in Latin or Italian. In conventional “reality,” his native language was Czech. But in the Translation game his avatar never goes near it. In real life, he grew up in Prague, lived briefly in England, then Brazil for 30 years, then back to Europe. By that time, he had abandoned the whole idea of “home” and considered himself a nomad. Usually he appears as a philosopher, complete with regulation beard and tweed jacket. He can be a bit flamboyant sometimes, but perfectly credible, obsessed as the best of them with big issues: truth, knowledge, freedom.

Flusser was not the first philosopher to think of languages as games, or to think that sometimes the goal of a game could be to figure out what the rules are. He did not live long enough to get acquainted with a MMORPG. But he did describe a future world in which reading and writing have become exotic skills and people lead their lives in synthesized environments, tapping keyboards with their fingertips. You might say he predicted, thirty years ago, not only that there would be a virtual environment such as Eurotruck Simulator 2, but also that its immersive quality would depend on exchanges between players. He called it “play,” too. Players of the future, he thought, would be so absorbed in what they were doing they would forget to eat and sleep. He loved it -- and dreaded it. He wanted to be able to translate between old and new games. But it

was too late for him to learn to think in algorithms, too difficult to master the new codes and have the dexterity to play with them. He began to see himself stuck in a small archipelago of natural languages, able to imagine, but not to explore the uncharted waters of a new world.

To chart such waters is, presumably, to find routes between, say, and *Eurotruck Simulator 2* and English, or the other way around, from worlds made in language to worlds made in code. A game called *Walden*, for example, promises “a first-person simulation of Henry David Thoreau[s] experiment in self-reliant living at Walden Pond,” an experience Thoreau first “simulated” in writing, in the book called *Walden*. Maybe such heroic efforts to translate between synthetic worlds hold something of the terror and allure of sea explorations in early modern times. Maybe that is how one start-up virtual reality company came to call itself *Here Be Dragons*.