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Beyond That “It’s Just a Flesh Wound...” Kind of Feeling: A Medieval Game¹ Proposal

Part of the journal section “Forum: Falling into Medievalism”

Carol Robinson, “Beyond That ‘It’s Just a Flesh Wound...’ Kind of Feeling: A Medieval Game¹ Proposal”

In his book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee argues that “the power of video games, for good or ill, resides in the ways in which they meld learning and identity...,” and he cautions that this power can be used to miscommunicate wrong ideology (such as might be found in a neo-Nazi game that encourages the player to conduct ethnic cleansing (199). However, Gee advocates “understanding the ‘play’ of identities and perspectives as they work for and against each other in the world, now and throughout history” (200). The art – or accident, as the case is more often to be – of successful miscommunication of the medieval in videogames has its origins in earlier media, yet the art and technology of special effects and other video technology have been able to catch up to, perhaps even out-do, the printed word in generating the most ultimate of fantasy dream-states. Such is one video game situation: a kind of neomedievalism,² an almost socio-psychotic “disease” of the post-modern, pseudo-adolescent, pseudo-intellectual, who sits in an armchair and practices a purposeful perversion of medieval codes, ethics and life. The neomedieval video game is projected through a highly filtered lens that has been polished by contemporary fashions of commerce, morals, ethics, beliefs, politics, weaponry, clothing, hair styles, modes of behavior, and other cultural codes. Yet, I don’t wish *to get medieval* on contemporary medievalist video games, partly because they offer implications for such wonderfully creative opportunities. Instead, after I make a few observations, I would like to propose *Terra Incognita* – a neomedieval video game that is based upon a role-playing board game created by a few frazzled professors engaged in play with their teenagers on the occasional Friday night. This game exploits the possible benefits of schizoid, miscommunicated history and mythology for a more positive, perhaps even nurturing, effect. But first, there are those few observations to be made.

Let’s begin with Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam’s *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974) because it seems to have had a vast influence upon the development of neomedievalist videogames and other media, even if only accidentally. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is one of very few contemporary medievalist media that not only picks up on a nostalgia for and misrepresentation of medieval England, but tries desperately to deconstruct the numerous miscommunications while also communicating to us just how “crazy-stupid” such nostalgia really is, particularly for post-colonial Americans. Take, for example, the start of the Black Knight scene. After watching the Black Knight defeat the Green Knight, Arthur says in his most stately voice, “You fight with the strength of many men, Sir Knight.” And yet the knight says nothing in return. The awkward moment of silence is stopped when Arthur attempts to communicate again, “I am Arthur, King of the Britons.” Gaining no reaction yet, he continues, “I seek

the bravest and the finest knights in all the world to join me in my court at Camelot." This failed attempt at conversation serves as a deconstruction of the Hollywood made, mythical, rhetorical pattern of conversation between king and knight. It is a parody of the exaggerated majestic conversations attempted in such films as the widescreen blockbuster, *Knights of the Round Table* (1953). Indeed, the film makes fun of numerous medievalist films, from the adaptation of the Broadway hit musical, *Camelot* (1967) to the Disney adaptation of T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* into the children's cartoon feature, *The Sword in the Stone* (1963).

However, this communication against successful miscommunication does not seem to have been, itself, entirely successful. Going beyond the parody, the Black Knight comes to represent all enemies and all enemies are, well, silly. Conversely, the Black Knight also comes to represent ultimate stoicism, again to the point of silliness. For the neomedievalist, this silliness is so much fun that he/she wants to repeat it.³ In other words, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, represents a kind of post-modernist medievalism, a reaction against modernist nostalgia for a pre-angst, pre-neurosis, over-simplified-life of the fantasies of the Middle Ages – such as can be found in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novel trilogy. Many medievalist video games represent a neomedievalist response to that post-modernist medievalism.⁴ The humor becomes a cliché, which becomes a new, perverted illusion of reality. Neomedievalist works lose the indignant attitude and enthusiastically alter the medieval universe to make it whatever they want, without deception, without shame, and in total, blatantly proud denial of reality.

The silly knights and king of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* have been made absurdly serious. Now, the Black Knight, or someone like him, can "always win" because he has earned enough health points to keep going (*Dungeon Siege*, 2001). ("Running away, eh? You yellow bastard. Come back here and take what's coming to you. I'll bite your legs off!") King Arthur, or someone like him, can command thousands of expendable troops without question of loyalty (*Medieval Total War*, 2002). ("I mean, if I went round saying I was an Emperor because some moistened bint had lobbed a scimitar at *me*, people would put me away.") Even those who are more like the French Knights can find a cheat code in order to machine-gun everyone down in a 007-styled sports car whenever needed (*Age of Empires 2*, 1999). ("Fetchez la vache!") A not-so-brave knight can be automatically equipped with a six-gun as part of the formal structure of the game (*Arcanum*, 2000).⁵ ("When danger reared its ugly head/ He bravely turned his tail and fled./ Yes, brave Sir Robin turned about/ And gallantly he chickened out.") Indeed, rather than being arrested by 20th century British police, a Sir Lancelot "wannabe" can attack space alien goblins (*Dungeon Siege*). Finally, the knight or king almost always looks great in any of these games. ("Who's that then?" "I dunno, must be a king." "Why?" "He hasn't got shit all over him.")

Monty Python and the Holy Grail, in its comedic way, points to and exaggerates the less subtle becomings of some of these cinematic myths about the medieval nobility in order to take issue with the subtle becomings of both popular and academic myths about medieval knighthood. That is post-modernist medievalism. Games such as *Dungeon Siege*, however, take that absurdist juxtaposition to the extreme: it is still humorous, but now there is no longer a serious historical correction pointed out through the humor. That is neomedievalism. It's as though *Star Trek's* Captain Jean-Luc Picard has violated the Prime Directive (or as the Black Knight would say, "None shall pass!") and created an alternate medieval universes. It is the theory of contemporary physics *gone medieval*. The Pythonesque protest has been drugged. The fragmentation of fragmented history has been glued back together with all the cracks showing, and pieces misplaced or remade, and the neomedievalist gamer says, "Dude! This is awesome!"

Perhaps it *is* awesome. French thinkers such as Paul Ricœur, Michel Foucault, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze have all made various arguments to support the idea that there is no such thing as documented history – *histoire*, as the French language suggests, is a story, a work of fiction. Values affect truths and fictions as much as truths and fictions affect values. As Michel Foucault argues, “Between archaeological analysis and the history of ideas there are a great many points of divergence” (138). Between the archaeological analysis made in the discovery of King Arthur and the history of ideas about him and his Round Table is a wide and deep construction of various truths and fictions, a sort of communal schizoid construction of myth and history.

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari declare, “History is made only by those who oppose history (not by those who insert themselves into it, or even reshape it)” (296). When the French Arthurian character Lancelot du Lac was inserted into medieval British romances, for example, history was not being made or even re-made. Such revisions of legends, factual or fictional or both, are a part of a history’s state of flux that flows freely back and forth over the boundaries of truth and fiction, and so it is perhaps the tantalizing relationship between truth and fiction that keeps the tradition, in this case of the Arthurian legends, alive. (Another name for this process, of course, might be propaganda.) Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari argue, “It is always possible to try to explain these *blocks of becoming* by a correspondence between two relations, but to do so most certainly impoverishes the phenomenon...” (237). In other words, a myth does not evolve; it is not a linear structure. “If evolution includes any veritable becomings,” they argue, “it is in the domain of symbioses that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation” (238).

The communication of those valued truths and fictions (or of those fictions of values, or of those truths of values) becomes a very complicated issue -- the blending of any combination of mythos and logos is usually complicated. And when communication is unsuccessful (either purposely or not), that miscommunication, whether it is taken as a truth or fiction, becomes the substitute communication. This is not a question of evil and good, of some horrible media corporation manipulating the masses. It is, after all, quite possible that the corporations (or, on a smaller scale, the film makers, videogame makers, novelists and other storytellers) are trapped by their own miscommunication, as well as by their own illusions of reality. The line between imagination and paranoia becomes very fine, on both a personal and social level. But such a schizoid mishmash of communication and miscommunication, of truth and fiction, and of the real and the ideal, may not necessarily be a bad thing (even if it is a seemingly perverted blending of mythos and logos).

The vast majority of, for example, American medieval films were usually modeled after the Western genre – where all the cowboys had starched clean shirts and none of the wives (and none of the whores) were dirty. American makers of medievalist films merely reinforced the 1950s Hollywood myth. Indeed, such films were following the then dominating mode of western filmmaking, the Hollywood Classical Style, a style that consistently melded reality with fantasy to create (if it is a good film) a realistic escape. For example, it is unfortunate that the makers of the CinemaScope blockbuster, *Prince Valiant* (1954) seemed unable to anticipate just how ridiculous it would be to put a really, really bad wig on Robert Wagner and then direct this man to leap around like a boyish goofball as he portrays the Viking Prince Valiant. Even more ridiculous was Sterling Hayden portraying Sir Gawain as a "John-Wayne-ish" cowboy-knight who -- if I remember correctly -- says such things as, "Well, bust my beef balls!" In other words, particularly in response to the harsh realities of World War I, World War II, the

invasion of Korea and the invasion of Vietnam, such films were intended (whether or not they were successful) to serve as an escape from everything that is filthy and nasty, including death.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail makes fun of this false media myth of the sparkling-clean cowboy-knight who is so brave that, when confronted with the fact that his arm has just been chopped off, he responds with the argument that, "It's just a flesh wound." That's post-modernist medievalism. Thirty years later, at a time when holier-than-them crusades are being led once again in the Middle East, such a value is being perpetuated in both film and videogames through a more neomedievalist approach. However, now neomedievalist video games seem to triumph "It's just a flesh wound!" as a sort of cartoonish achievement, and the gesture of such violence is harmless because, even though the parody is lost, it is still very clear that this image gesture is just a form of miscommunication that can be repeated and fixed (reprogrammed and played) over and over again.

Motion pictures – be they films or video games – are highly gestural. The semiotic film theories of Pier Paolo Pasolini argue that film is gestural in both image and sound, and these gestures (of motion pictures, music, talking, image and sound effects) conform to a system of meaning, even if that linguistic system is unique only to a particular film (167-185). Deleuze argues that Pasolini's semiotics were way ahead of the theories of others, such as those of Christian Metz or Umberto Eco, (*Cinema 2*, 227). For example, Pasolini attempted to support his argument by citing sign languages as examples of visual gestural systems of language, but unfortunately he cited this example at a time when the world's roughly 150 naturally evolved sign languages were not even recognized as language systems by most linguists. In arguing that films are individualized and unique systems of both audio and visual gestures (often akin to the idea of a language of a single person), one realizes that film is a rhetorical monologue. One may then argue that video games are also complex language systems, the rhetorical structure turns out to be a dialogue. Like most sign languages, motion pictures (films and video games alike) are geometrically spatial and concept oriented; like most spoken languages, motion pictures (films and video games alike) are also linear and structure oriented. Video games help us to see this better than film because the dialogue format allows us to see exchanges of expression and actions (limited as they currently are) – exchanges of gestures.

But these exchanges of gestures are fragmented, closer to the fragmentation (or schizophrenia) of true conversation. Deleuze observes, "Psychiatrists have studied the conversation of schizophrenics, with its mannerisms, its interactional bringing closer and putting at a distance, but all conversation is schizophrenic, conversation is a model of schizophrenia, not the other way around" (*Cinema 2*, 230). The essence of conversation – small talk – was initially discovered, according to Deleuze, by novelists Marcel Proust and James Joyce, and it is noteworthy that both authors are contemporary with the beginning age of film (*Cinema 2*, 231). However, argues Deleuze, cinema *invents* sound conversation (beyond small talk), as well as the visual or readable interactions which correspond to conversation. The American comedy serves to illustrate this point in the way that filmed conversations:

...fill space, in increasingly numerous and delicate conditions which on each occasion cons, and constitute the 'right form', bringing together talking speed and the space shown. Everybody talks at once, or the speech of one person fills the space so well that it reduces the other to vain attempts, stammerings, efforts to interrupt.... An actress like Katharine Hepburn reveals her mastery in the sociability stakes through the speed of her retorts, the

way that she disorients her partner and ties him in a knot, the indifference to contents, the variety or reversal of perspectives through which she passes. (231-232)

But such schizophrenia is not limited to just conversations in comedy. The genre does not define the process. In cinematic conversations, Deleuze observes, "Interests, feeling or love no longer determine conversation, they themselves depend on the division of stimulation in conversation, the latter determining relations of force and structurations which are particular to it" (230). This can be illustrated by another comic scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

FRENCH KNIGHT: Ha ha! Hello! Smelly English K...niggets.. and Monsieur Arthur King, who has the brain of a duck, you know.

[Arthur and Bedevere look up to the top of the castle.]

We French persons outwit you a second time, perfidious English mouse dropping hoarders... how you say: "Begorrah!"

ARTHUR: How dare you profane this place with your presence! I command you, in the name of the Knights of Camelot, open the door to the sacred Castle to which God himself has guided us!

[Arthur to Bedevere]: Come!

FRENCH KNIGHT: How you English say: I one more time, Mac, I unclog my nose toward you, sons of a window-dresser, so you think you could out-clever us French fellows with your silly knees-bent creeping about advancing behavior? [Blows a 'raspberry' at them.] I wave my private parts at your aunties, you brightly-colored, mealy-templed, cranberry-smelling, electric donkey-bottom biters.

While one side of this argument is clearly further fragmented by representation of differences in language and culture, the communication is clearly antagonistic (no danger of miscommunication, despite the "bad" English). "This is why," argues Deleuze, "there is always something mad, schizophrenic, in a conversation taken for itself (with bar conversations, lovers' conversations [or in this case, haters' conversations], money conversations, or small talk as its essence)" (230). It is fragmented: microscopic meanings adding up to a whole that may or may not make sense, but we certainly take the effort to take some sort of meaning from it anyway, even if it is only to shake our heads in bewilderment.

The same process happens in well designed video games, including medievalists games. Not only do video games provide a type of rhetorical dialogue, both between characters and between the game and the gamer that maintains this schizophrenic view, but they feed back into the rhetoric of medieval fantasies of war, of love, of sex, of magic potions that can take us on magic journeys, and even of Rock 'n Roll. Within this context, it is easier to see how conducive the fantasy genre is to making the ideal seem real. In the communication range of motion pictures (film to video distance conversations), film attempts to draw its audience into this two-dimensional world of characters on the screen through one-way monologue that contains the madness of their conversations, usually for relatively short periods of

time: the viewer can see and listen, but cannot participate in the madness. Video games, however, turn the audience member into a character within the motion picture framework – an entrapment within the fantasy, including medievalist fantasies.

Gilles Deleuze notes, "The less of a pre-existing social structure there is, the better is revealed, not a silent natural life, but pure forms of sociability necessarily passing through conversation" (*Cinema 2*, 230). The pre-existence of a social structure in Great Britain, for example, might make the communication of social values in her former colonies much more subtle, perhaps. Daniel Czitrom notes a "tension between the progressive or utopian possibilities offered by new communications technologies and their disposition as instruments of domination and exploitation" (184). Medieval video games reflect a harkening back to not only a bizarrely "capitalized" feudalism, but also to a perversely "democratized" feudalism. And very often, the medieval life is infiltrated with the pleasures of contemporary technology and commerce, though sometimes disguised as magic or chance happening, such as the sudden discovery of a magic weapon of mass destruction.

In an age of increased access to information, some of us are actually becoming less and less aware of our surroundings, blinding and deafening ourselves to reality, losing ourselves in techno-medieval conversations with machines. It is better than drugs, and possibly just as addictive! What a way to make a profit. Still, I do not wish to conclude that either medievalist fantasy or video games are a bad thing, so I had better start defending them.

In defense of some forms of schizophrenic thought: I am not a psychologist, but I suspect that these are healthy and higher levels of thinking as long as they serve as mere rough drafts of expressed thought. Indeed, madness is often associated with higher intelligence, and while I do not wish to argue that madness is a good thing, clearly more difficult thinking can be maddening. In that sense, perhaps much of modern media, films and videogames in particular, help to train the mind for such multiple levels of thinking in more coherent ways? The challenge is to recognize the fine line between communication and miscommunication, which is yet easier to see than the fine line between truth and fiction, but perhaps more difficult to see than the fine line between reality and fantasy. Above all, certainly it can be more difficult (at times) to see than the fine line between the ideal and the real. Such challenges could be embraced by videogames, helping one to learn to appreciate such fine lines.

These challenges are a part of the role-playing board game, *Terra Incognita*, a board game designed by three adults and three teenagers.⁶ Someday I would like to adapt this (yet unpublished) game into a video game because it celebrates neomedievalism in constructive ways. This game crosses time and space, from pre-history to fantasies of the future, but so far we have mainly focused upon the Middle Ages and Ancient Rome. I plan to only describe the Middle Ages part as it might be adapted into a video game. But first, I have to describe the basic structure.

As a board game, the parts are made up of a plastic coated map of the world, a few maps of some fictional lands, a plastic coated grid for close-up geography, a wide assortment of different sided dice, small figurines for the players, and any toy or figure I can sneak out of the kids' rooms when they aren't looking (to play creatures and beings that the players encounter). With some good math work and some good graphics work, the physical structure can be easily adapted into a video game program. The dice are used to determine a wide variety of factors, from character development to the degree and likelihood of certain events happening. So far, the game's structure perhaps does not seem differ too much from

other role-playing board games. However, I think it is crucial to point out that the vast majority of these games are focused upon power: power in battle, power in government, power in wealth, power in sex, . . . , and *Terra Incognita* is not.⁷ While we are still designing its complexities, this game seems to be developing into the idealization of ideals.

Torben Grodal observes, for example,

Video games may have some high-order motivations, but for a series of reasons games will often also have a strong focus on the execution of low-level (sub)goals like simple navigation and handling processes. An intro to the game may provide the superior motivation, say, to crush an evil empire, and this will provide motivation for the lower-order processes (131).

The hope of *Terra Incognita* is to rise above such strong and over-simplified directions. In his game, Grodal says, "The basic story experience consists of a continuous interaction between perceptions (I see a monster approaching), emotions (I feel fear, because I know or feel that monsters are dangerous), cognitions (I think that I better shoot the monster), and action (the actual motor act of shooting that changes the motivational emotion fear into relaxation)" (131). This is the kind of complexity we hope to achieve with *Terra Incognita*, at the minimum; however, we also wish to recognize that, to take Grodal's example, the image or word "monster" does not always mean "danger" and the communication of that through the game may be misunderstood. So, I ask you, which is more absurd: to assume all enemies are always enemies, or to question and even poke fun at everything, including enemies? After all, it's only a game.

Violence is discouraged; in fact, we are debating whether or not unnecessary violence should be somehow punished. (It might be, for example, that the character committing the violence becomes extraordinarily weak and otherwise vulnerable). Also, the characters themselves are highly complex. The character sheets are becoming detailed enough to recognize such traits as physical and mental disabilities and talents: learning disabilities, autism, deafness, a gift for numbers, a gift for diplomacy, a gift for business, a homosexual; a bisexual; an individual able to reproduce by him/herself, It is not that war, politics, business, or even sexuality have been removed; they have been qualified.⁸ Like many other RPGs, the game can be about its about personal and sociological growth, but this growth is not about growth in power. *Terra Incognita* has many medieval creatures, but there are also some unique and original creatures, such as Aqua Sapiens, a man-woman who lives best at the bottom of an ocean, but is able to live above ground, never wears clothes, has blue scales, and tends to be very romantic/chivalrous. Developed by a teenager, I believe this creature is a response to recent recognitions of gender identity issues that would surely have been condemned by a medieval Christian church. The game has some occupations not typically found in other RPGs, such as the Dragon Tamer, who works to domesticate dragons for practical uses. There are also the conventional creatures, including conventional medieval/fantasy ones, but they too have been pushed to much greater psychological depth. Regardless, each character developed must be done so with much detail; the character "sheet" is huge, and growing (Appendix 1).

This game (in board game or video game format) is intended to be beneficial on sociological, psychological and cognitive levels. History, of course, has been thrown completely out the window. Yet, there is a certain degree of neo-realism to the historical aspect in that the game attempts to recognize

possible realities that may have been suppressed by scribes of history. Any sort of polished contemporary fashions of commerce, morals, ethics, beliefs, politics, weaponry, clothing, hair styles, modes of behavior, and other cultural codes are ignored or reacted against as much as possible. Finally, another central focus of the game is upon the lines between reality and fantasy, between the ideal and the real. Ideally, we will go over the history of that place and time and work to understand ways that history might have been altered. However, history, the most serious part of the game, is also the smallest part. Fantasy is interspersed with medievalism, another neomedievalist aspect. Actually, reality is also thrown almost completely out the window, only to be used in a perverted sense.

In other words, the game might be situated in a particular time and place, but it will knowingly go against the grain of supposed truth, creating an alternate universe, or at least an alternate existence. In terms of entertaining what history might have been: in this sense, by somewhat clearing the so-called documented slates of history and mythology/fantasy, the players are encouraged to open themselves to possibilities of both history and fantasy, a sort of precursor to critical analysis. A lot of what we have worked on, however, has been idealized attributes of both characters and situations, and the ideal is not always good, but it is certainly always complex. For example, a useful one is working out an economy to suit all possible situations. What is a cow worth in terms of wooden coins? What is a ring worth in terms of parts of a cow? The game strives to respond to the current cynical views of reality with humor and idealization. Characterization is so developed (Appendix 1) to the point that players are responsible for maintaining accurate depictions of various aspects of the physical, cognitive, psychological, spiritual, and emotional traits: skills, talents, disabilities, neuroses, perceptiveness, empathy, senility, sanity, beauty, sexuality. The setting affects the plot, and plot development is subordinate to the whims and struggles of the characters as they exist in the setting. Because the gestural set-up of the game is structured upon a semiotics of the relationship between character, setting, and idealizations, *the fantasy of the medieval is more important than the realism; it becomes a schizoid construction of miscommunication and communication of truth and fiction, reality and ideology, the real and the ideal*. That is neomedievalism. (In contrast, modernist medievalism stresses the importance of realism of the medieval, including medieval fantasies and myths; post-modernist realism points out the absurdity of trying to attempt such so-called "realism" in the first place.)

Here is an example of the board game being played right now. There are five characters, all of whom were determined by various rollings of various dice for characteristics; these determinations would be made by a computer in the same randomizing fashion:

- Star: This Aqua-Sapiens has a blue, scaly body, both lungs and gills (on his chest), both male genitalia and female genitalia, and seems to be most comfortable under extreme physical pressure (such as at the bottom of the ocean), but can handle being on land, reluctantly. Star is highly romantic and adventurous and tries to be friends with everyone.
- Squeezot: This tom-boy is also a Were-Tarantula; she can turn into a tarantula at will, but also must become one when the moon is full. She is tough, blunt and tends to keep to herself, telling others to mind their own business.
- Mary Katherine: This girl looks sort of like she might have once been a soldier, but who can know for sure? She doesn't share much information about herself, but she has a gift for diplomacy when she decides to use it. She can sometimes be very sweet, sometimes rather evil; she might be bi-polar. One moment, she will be offering some nice favor to another character, and the next moment, she will be nasty and even life threatening.

- **Zixdroing:** This prissy elf is obsessed with obtaining jewelry. The prissiness, however, seems to be melded with a gift for excellent self-defense with a bow and arrow. She is very clever, of noble birth, and a bit of a snob who seems to be your friend only if she can take advantage of you.
- **Schnicklefart:** This not-too-bright, very loving, very gentle centaur tends to do a lot of stupid things, but he means well. He has a really big heart and seems to find niceness in everything, even when it is not there.
- As the one running the game, I try my best not to be too involved, to be more like a computer than like a god, so I don't really know the characters (much less what is on their data sheets). This is also different from more traditional role-playing board games, and it is probably even different from much of the closed-source operating system computer video games generated by such companies as Microsoft. In other words, in a video game, my role not only disappears into the codes of game engine script, but the script will be open-source, allowing for changes in the rules and the limitations by any of the players.

Currently, the characters are just outside Peniche, Portugal. The period is the late 1400s. They have a dead body hidden in the ship, waiting to be delivered to its family (with the hopes of being reimbursed for money this individual owed them). Very little is known about why each character has joined the troop or what goals they have, though I know for sure that Zixdroing is questing for jewelry and I think that Schnicklefart is just plain lonely. Zixdroing knows that Squeezot is a Were-Tarantula, and they've made some sort of pact. Schnicklefart is still recovering from a broken heart – he fell in love with a giant centipede. The game runs on an honor system. The blending of non-traditional fantasy with medievalism is part of what makes the above scenario neomedievalist. The psychological depth (both hidden and revealed) is another aspect. And the names of each character clearly make a mockery of more traditionalist medievalist names. Sarcasm and cynicism are a big part of the neomedieval nature of this game, but the bigger part is the general absurdity.

There are many advantages to turning this role-playing board game into, for example, a computer video game. If this were to be turned into such a video game, then the honor system could be strengthened. The data for each character, based upon the computer calculations (electronic dice rolling), would be stored and if someone "cheats" by going against the personality of the character, then the computer would respond, perhaps by notifying the other players. (The game wouldn't move forward until the players resolved the issue together.) Historical and archeological information could be made available for parts of the game that touch upon some level of reality. And, best of all, we would be able to see the characters animated through graphically detailed geography.

Here is an example of how *Terra Incognita* might look as a video game: I proposed a possible video game scene to the players, and they provided me with initial responses. I have drawn these on a storyboard to illustrate how it might look on a screen (Appendix 2). The group comes across a large, cute flying basset hound that is blowing and farting big, beautiful bubbles from both its mouth and butt. As the beast comes closer, however, the group discovers that the bubbles, once popped, have a rather rank stench to them. Since the group is still by the ocean, Squeezot (the Were-Spider, currently in human form) leans over the pier and throws up. Star, dives into the water and swims to the farthest depth it can go. Mary Katherine plugs her nose, looks rather annoyed despite her attempts to stifle it. "Mr. Dog," she says with slightly gritted teeth, "would it be okay if you stopped farting?" She also makes a

mental note (the player tells me) of where her dagger is stashed. Zixdroing checks the dog for jewelry while bitterly complaining about the stench. Schnicklefart sniffs and smiles at the basset's emissions.

As a video game, this scenario is a schizoid conversation between animations, the actions and words of one player are communicated through the animations of his or her character. The mixture of absurd fantasy with more traditional medievalism thus miscommunicates a kind of schizophrenic portrayal of reality. One might say "Anything goes!" and this may be true, but this neomedievalism at least strives to recognize depth of thought and depth of emotion, even if absurdity also abounds. One might argue that the game is a neomedievalist response to post-modernist medievalism in that it says, "Who cares! Let's have some fun!" But the response doesn't have to be shallow.

Absurdity is often a surface, after all, that usually covers deeper, more complex waters -- caused by whatever blending of mythos and logos an individual may construct in her or his subconscious and brings forth through created characters. In the supposed words of Richard M. Nixon, as projected at the beginning of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*: "The Characters and incidents portrayed and the names used are fictitious and any similarity to the names, characters, or history of any person is entirely accidental and unintentional." Yeah, yeah, yeah -- or as some of my students say, "WHATever!" The point is, how do we suffer or not suffer the incidents? The *Monty Python* team may have pointed out the absurdities through a post-modernist medievalist humor, but neomedievalism is capable of working with or through the absurdities by taking that absurdist humor to its highest absurdity. I believe that neomedievalism, however, also recognizes the vastness of the complexities of any reality -- be it the loopholes of a medieval economy or the inner angst of a troubled medieval pre-feminist female soldier. I guess the ultimate question becomes: 'If I could make the European Middle Ages 'better,' no matter the space-time continuum, no matter what universe, no matter what dimension of reality, what would I do?' It is all wonderfully crazy.

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APPENDIX ONE:

GENERAL INFORMATION:			
NAME		SPECIES	
BIRTHPLACE		RESIDENCE	
AGE RANGE/AGE		BIRTH DATE	
GENDER		SEXUAL ORIENTATION	
MOTHER'S NAME		MOTHER'S OCCUPATION	
MOTHER'S ORIGIN		STILL LIVING?	
FATHER'S NAME		FATHER'S OCCUPATION	
FATHER'S ORIGIN		STILL LIVING?	
1 ST OCCUPATION		2 ND OCCUPATION (?)	

3 RD OCCUPATION (?)		AVG. INCOME	
PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES (TALENTS & DISABILITIES):			
HANDEDNESS			
FOOTEDNESS			
LOOKS (GENERAL)	NECK SIZE	PANTS SIZE	
LOOKS (SPECIES)	SHIRT SIZE	SHOE SIZE	
	DRESS SIZE	HAT SIZE	
	SKIRT SIZE	GLOVE SIZE	
CAPE SIZE	SPEAR SIZE	STAFF SIZE	
SHIELD SIZE	KNIFE SIZE	CLUB SIZE	
GEN. ARMOR SIZE	SWORD SIZE	BOW SIZE	
GENERAL STRENGTH			
HEIGHT	WEIGHT	MASS	AVG. ENCUMBERING
STRONGEST	WEAKEST	ENERGY INTENSITY	ENERGY DURATION
DEXTERITY	GRACE	CLUMSINESS	AVG. ENCUMBRANCE
RIGHT HAND	RIGHT ARM	LEFT HAND	LEFT ARM
RIGHT FOOT	RIGHT LEG	LEFT FOOT	LEFT LEG
BELLY	BACK	BUTT	FACE
CONSTITUTION	TENDENCY TO VOMIT	TENDENCY TO SNEEZE	TENDENCY TO COUGH
GEN. MANIPULATION	HIDE ITEMS	RUN	ATTACK ABILITY:
JUMP	PICK LOCKS	SWIM	WIELD SWORD
CLIMB	ROW	SAIL	SHOOT BOW
WRITE	DANCE		WIELD KNIFE
DRAW	DEVISE GIZMO		WIELD AXE
TIE	CROUCH		WIELD:
UNTIE	RIDE		PARRY ABILITY:
GENERAL SENSES	SEEING	SMELLING	
TOUCHING	TASTING	HEARING	
GEN. PERCEPTION			
SCAN	TASTE PERCEPTION	LISTEN	AUDITORY PERCEPTION
TRACK	TOUCH PERCEPTION	SMELL PERCEPTION	TO BE SURPRISED

GEN. STEALTH			
CAMOUFLAGE	HIDE IN COVER	MOVE SILENTLY	TO SURPRISE

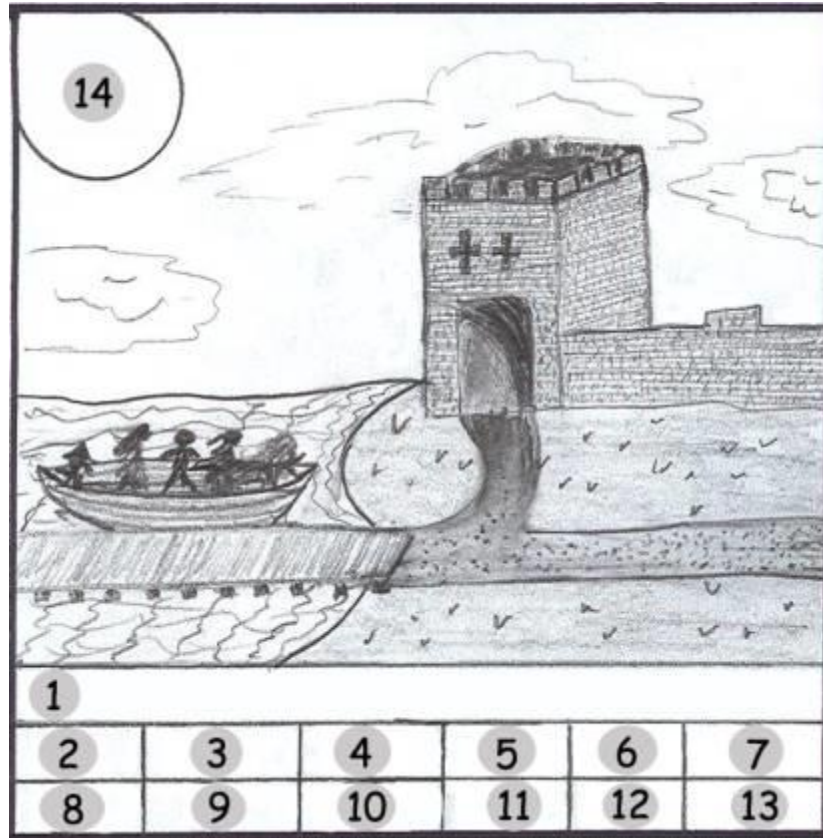
GEN. STEALING	PICK POCKETS		
GENERAL PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:			
INTELLECTUAL ATTRIBUTES (TALENTS & DISABILITIES):			
<i>GENERAL WISDOM</i>	<i>LEARNING ABILITIES</i>	<i>GEN. KNOWLEDGE</i>	<i>LEARNING DISABILITIES</i>
GEN. EXPERIENCE	INTUITION	LOGIC	DISGUISE
ABILITY TO GESTURE	ABILITY TO SPEAK OR SIGN OWN LANGUAGE	ABILITY TO READ OWN LANGUAGE	ABILITY TO WRITE OWN LANGUAGE
LONG TERM MEMORY	SHORT TERM MEMORY	SPEED OF LEARNING	DEPTH OF LEARNING
CONVINCE	BE GULLIBLE	LIE	BRIBE
FLATTER	CHARM	INSPIRE	DIPLOMACY SKILLS
LANGUAGE:	LANGUAGE:	LANGUAGE:	LANGUAGE:
SINGING	HUMMING	CHANTING	CLAPPING A BEAT
AUDITORY ART:	AUDITORY ART:	AUDITORY ART:	AUDITORY ART:
DANCE	ACT	TELL JOKES	MIME
PERFORMANCE ART:	PERFORMANCE ART:	PERFORMANCE ART:	PERFORMANCE ART:
TEACHING SKILLS			
PAINTING	SCULPTING	SEW/EMBROIDER	FASHION CLOTHES
VISUAL ARTS:	VISUAL ARTS:	VISUAL ARTS:	VISUAL ARTS:
MAKING JEWELRY	POTTERY SKILLS		
COOK	BUILD	CRAFT	CREATE
INVENT	DESIGN		
HOMELAND LORE	WATER LORE	PHYSICS	LAND LORE
FAMILY LORE	WET PLANT LORE	ASTRONOMY	DRY PLANT LORE
WORLD LORE	WET ANIMAL LORE	CHEMISTRY	DRY ANIMAL LORE
UNIVERSE LORE	WET HUMANOID LORE	BIOLOGY	DRY HUMANOID LORE

SPIRITUAL LORE	WET SPIRIT LORE	GEOLOGY	DRY SPIRIT LORE
ECONOMIC LORE	WET MONSTER LORE	ALCHEMY	DRY MONSTER LORE
POTION LORE	SPELL LORE	ASTROLOGY	MINERAL LORE

GENERAL INTELLECTUAL DESCRIPTION:							
EMOTIONAL & SPIRITUAL ATTRIBUTES (TALENTS & DISABILITIES):							
SPELLS?							
PSYCHOLOGY?							
SOCIOLOGY?							
SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE?							
EMOTIONAL & SPIRITUAL DESCRIPTION:							
OBJECTS AND ASSETS							
CONTENTS OF BAGS, JARS, & OTHER CONTAINERS				CONTENTS OF BOOKS, PAPERS, AND SIMILAR RECORDING DEVICES			
ITEM	VALUE/NUMBER	ITEM	QUALITY	SPELL BOOK		POTION BOOK	
MONEY (VALUE)		CLOTHING		SPELL	SCORE	POTION	SCORE
JEWELS (VALUE)		ARMOR					
MINERALS (VALUE)		PORTABLE SHELTER					
OTHER:		HEALING HERB					
OTHER:		HEALING HERB					
OTHER:		HEALING HERB					
DRY FOODS		POISON					
WET FOODS		POISON					
OTHER FOODS		POISON					
HEALING HERBS		SHIELD:					
POISONS		WEAPON:					
OTHER:		WEAPON:		MEDICINE BOOK		BOOK:	
OTHER:		WEAPON:		ITEM	SCORE	ITEM	SCORE
		SPELL BOOK					

		POTION BOOK					
		MEDICINE BOOK					

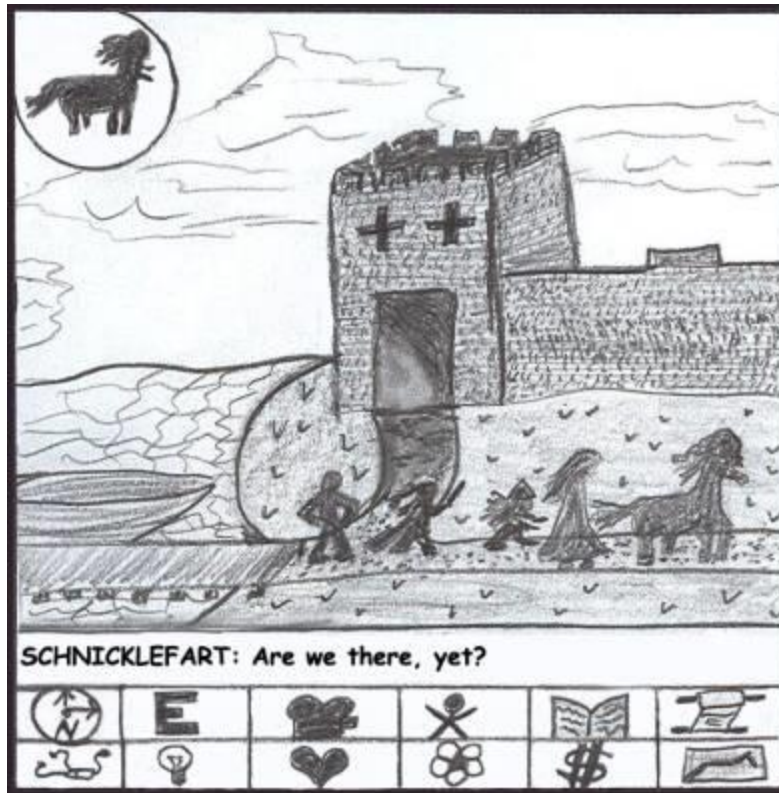
APPENDIX 2: ANNOTATED SAMPLE STORYBOARD FOR *TERRA INCOGNITO*




NOTES:

- **TEXT LINE:** Statements to and from characters are made here when the game is networked properly.
- **SPACE-TIME MAP:** Shows when and where character is located.
- **ENCYCLOPEDIA:** Provides comparison/contrast between actual history and current fiction.
- **CAMERA MOVEMENT CONTROLS:** Provides instructions for basic camera movements, controlled by the keyboard, plus some controls for non-basic movements (such as a super-close-up or an oblique angle view).
- **CHARACTER ACTION/SPEECH CONTROLS:** Provides instructions for basic character movements, controlled by the mouse and keyboard, plus some controls for non-basic movements. Provides text-type for sending messages from your character to another character, or to all other characters.
- **JOURNAL:** Keeps track of events that have happened and of plans; the player can add comments about the journey and related activities and plans.

- **CHARACTER & COMPANIONS LOG:** Here, the player can keep notes for and about his/her character, other characters, and related events, including a record of text messages shared with other characters.
- **CHARACTER PHYSICAL HEALTH:** Score and general information about the physical health, which can shift and also affect the other health levels (e.g., becoming stronger or weaker, talents, disabled, cured,...) of the player's character(s).
- **CHARACTER COGNITIVE HEALTH:** Score and general information about the cognitive abilities and disabilities (knowledge and wisdom levels), which can shift and also affect the other health levels of the player's character(s).
- **CHARACTER EMOTIONAL HEALTH:** Score and general information about the emotional well-being (sanity, happiness,...), which can shift and also affect the other health levels of the player's character(s).
- **CHARACTER SPIRITUAL HEALTH:** Score and general information about the spirituality (religion, intensity or fanaticism of beliefs, morals, ethics,...), which can shift and also affect the other health levels of the player's character(s).
- **CHARACTER ECONOMIC HEALTH:** Score and general information about the economic health (money, property,...), which can shift and also affect the other health levels of the player's character(s).
- **OVER-ALL CHARACTER GROWTH SCORE:** Score average of the Health scores (physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and economic) and chart of growth and decline.
- **SYMBOL OF CHARACTER CURRENTLY SPEAKING AND/OR TAKING ACTION.**

















ARRIVING AT: Medieval Peniche, Portugal; early 1400s

COMING FROM: Ancient Carthage








GOING TO: Medieval Iceland, to deliver the dead body of an individual who owes them money; the body is being delivered to her family; some characters are delivering the body for the adventure and because it is the right thing to do; others want the money.

↑ **JOURNAL** ↑

	E				
					




SQUEEZOT: Of course we're here, ya big, stupid horse....Hey! What's that in the sky?

	E				
					

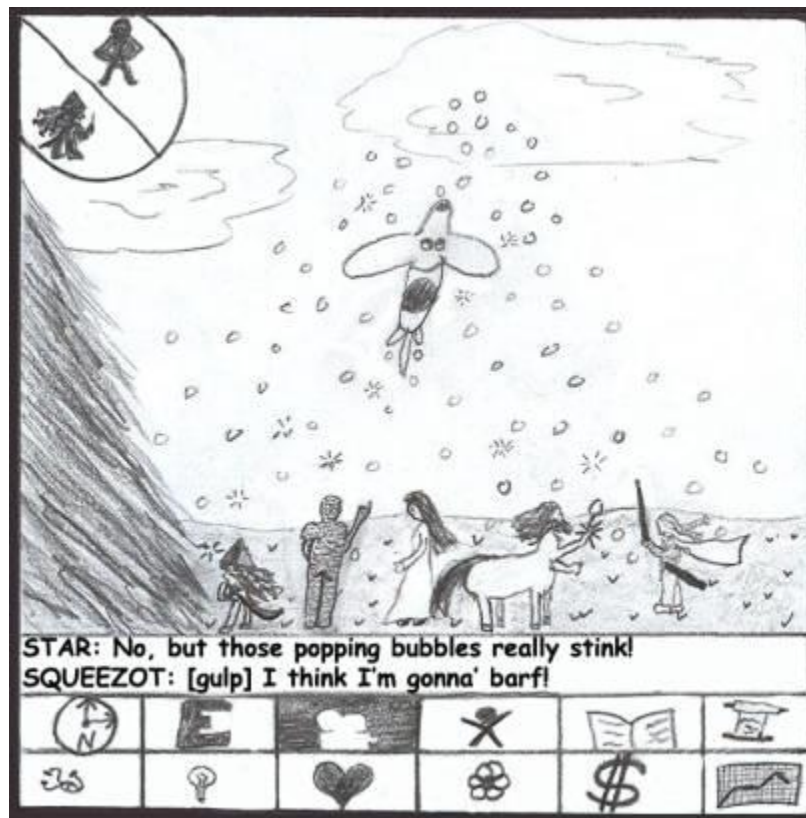
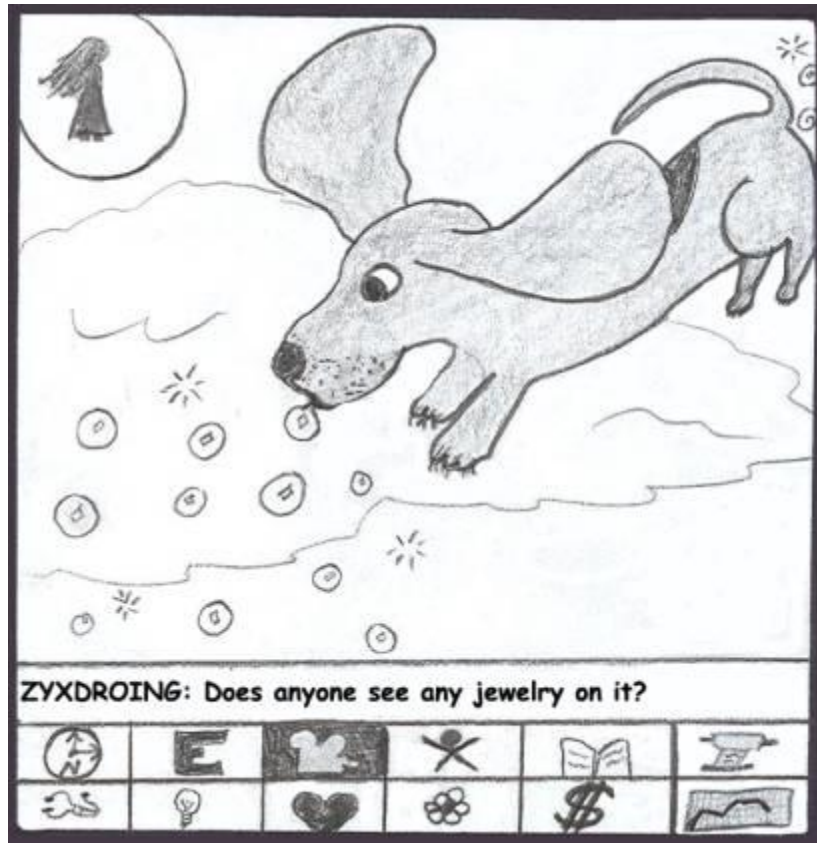
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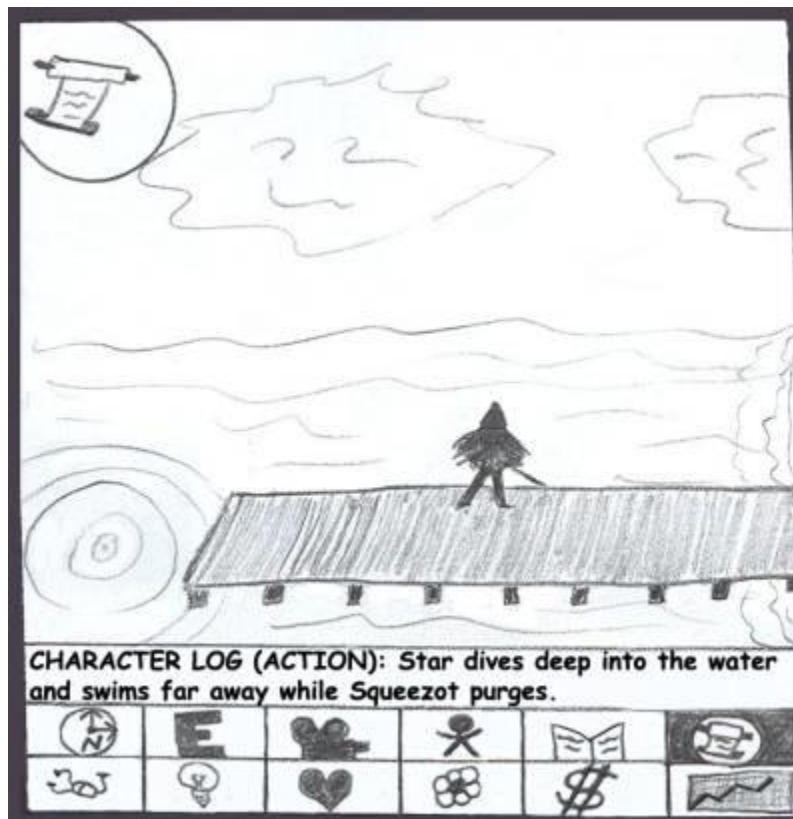
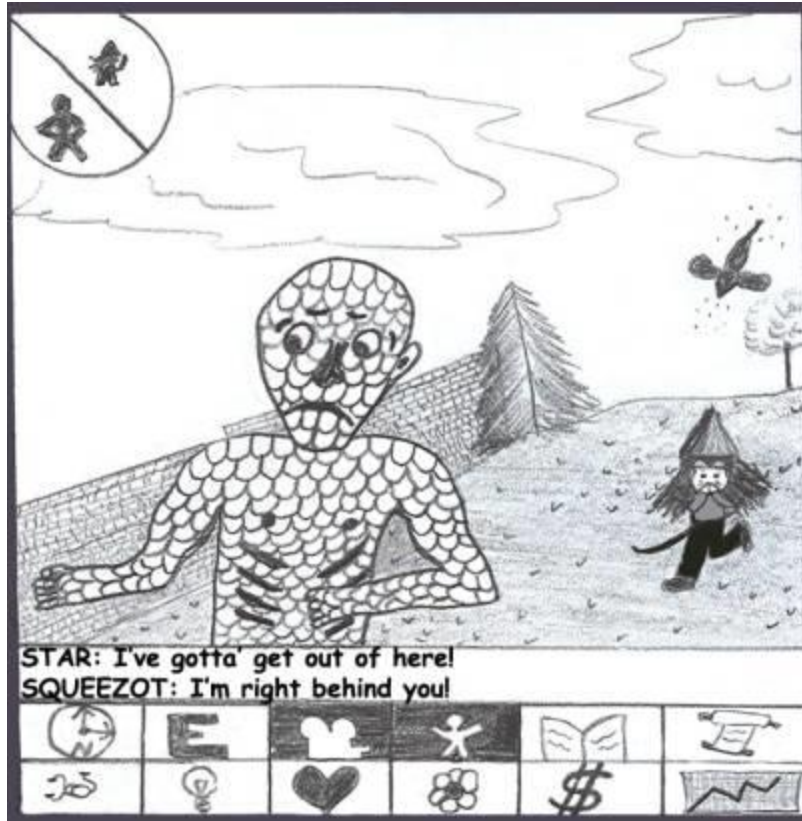
Medieval Portugal was a culture of constant social, political, religious, and economic changes. Northern Portugal, at the start of the Middle Ages, was a land of large estates owned by an ancient aristocracy and worked by serfs. The south, however, was frequently over-taxed for the sake of rebuilding and/or maintaining defenses against invading Muslims, whom they also invaded in return. Trade increased dramatically in the 13th century, but a political crisis in 1385 caused an economic crash so severe that the national gold standard currency was lost until new trade was established with West Africa in the early 15th century.

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE DETAILS](#)

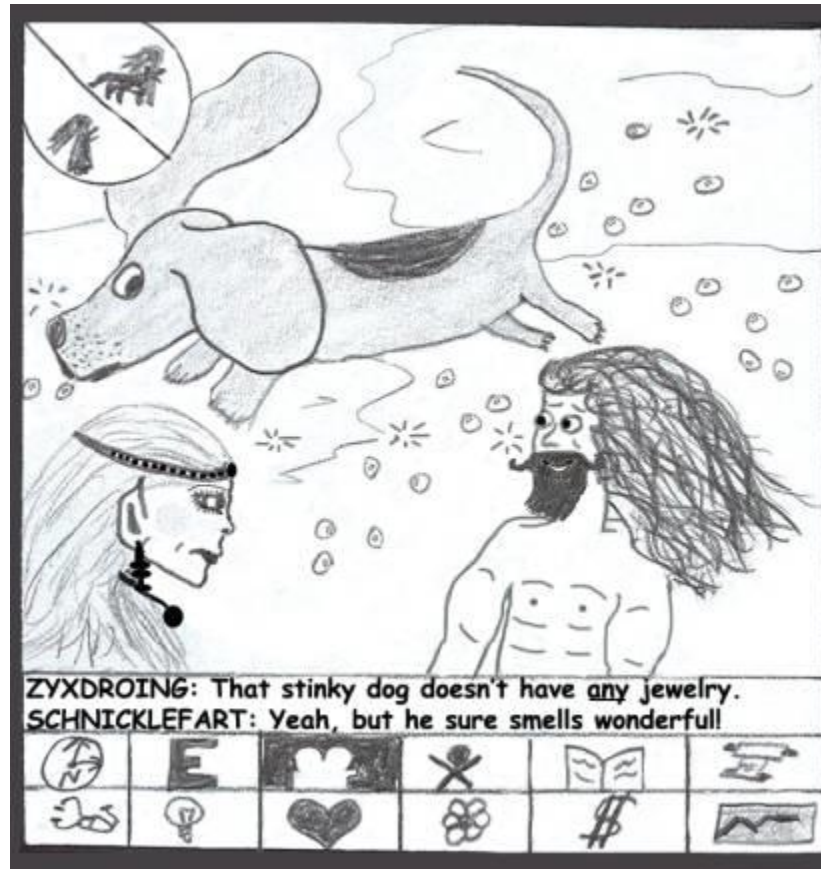
↑ **ENCYCLOPEDIA: Medieval Portugal** ↑

SCHNICKLEFART: Awww, look at the cute birdie!









While storyboards can only suggest movement, it is even more difficult, to suggest the velocity of movement: for body, camera, facial expressions, and text. This velocity and the chaotic order (also not well suggested in the storyboard) adds to the schizophrenic experience of communicating through and with a video game. Another aspect that hopefully does appear clear in the above storyboard is the blending of more modernist medievalism with fantasies and humor about the medieval, or neomedievalism.² Even some of the names suggest this post-post-modernist neomedievalist humor.

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¹ I would like to recognize that, while there are numerous types of video games – from computer formats to X-box and Gameboy – my focus here is primarily upon those designed for Windows and Macintosh computer platforms.

² For a good general description of medievalism, see Tom A. Shippey's definition at the Studies in Medievalism web site (<http://www.medievalism.net/about.html>). For slightly more detailed definitions of types of medievalisms, see the web site for Medieval Electronic Multimedia Organization (<http://faculty.trumbull.kent.edu/english/memo/memo.htm>).

³ Perhaps this is why so many of us followers of the Python films and television show have so much of it memorized?

⁴ The Python post-modernist medievalism was thus turned into neomedievalism when the film was adapted into the *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* video game. Al Giovetta provides insight into this older game: "'Spank the Virgin' gives points for spanking the fannies of virginal nuns and subtracts

them for whacking less than virginal wenches. 'Catch the Cow' guides eight knights out of the range of the cow Catapult and taunting knights. Get hit with a cow and you lose knights. 'Knights Kombat' gives you a chance to hack the arms and legs off the black knight or have your character dismembered." The Pythoners themselves also seem to be continuing along a post-modernist vein. There is Eric Idle's Broadway hit, *Spamalot*, and for another more serious example there is also Terry Jones' cryptic and cynical six episode analyses of the Middle Ages, featured on *The History Channel* in 2004, where he once again attempts to de-glory those medieval glory days.

⁵ *Arcanum* is interesting, too, because it is a blending of neomedievalism with steampunk (a retroactive of cyberpunk) science fiction genre of narratives.

⁶ *Terra Incognita* is currently a role-playing board game being continually designed and played by three teens and their parents (Kara Randby, Steven Randby, Ray Newman, Sara Newman, Scott Randby and myself). It was inspired by Peter Gareis' unpublished role-playing board game, *Wyrmscende*, roughly Old English for "Dragon Journeys". According to Gareis, his game is "... a bastardization of *Runequest*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Chivalry and Sorcery*, and bits and pieces of other systems, plus '[his] own research' (E-mail)." *Terra Incognita* is an extensive bastardization of this bastardization. Gareis' game, because it strives to remain faithful to medieval fantasies in the spirit of Tolkien, with a few twists on issues such as sexuality, is either a post-modernist or modernist medievalist work. (It's a good board game; I hope he publishes it some day. For more information, you can write to him at pgareis@mgc.edu.)

⁷ And for that matter, neither is Gareis' game. *Wyrmscende* is more focused upon character and narrative development. It can still be rather violent, but there is more depth and meaning to it (if that's possible). For example, when I used to play this game, I had one character who – based upon the role of the dice – was this beautiful, highly intelligent ogre. I decided she had to be a sort of *femme fatale*. She would seduce men (such as at taverns), lure them into dark places (such as a back alley), kill them, and then eat them.

⁸ Gareis' game also recognizes the need for more complexity in that *Wyrmscende* is more focused upon achieving a quest of some kind – be it to find St. Francis of Assisi to gain a certain piece of knowledge or to find treasure, but the quest is frequently interrupted by all sorts of intellectual, psychological, and physical diversions.

⁹ Apologies to Ray (Mary Katherine), Kara (Squeezot), Steven (Star), Sara (Schnicklefart) and Scott (Zyxdroing) if the above drawings do not sufficiently portray your characters.



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