THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF VIRTUAL SPACE

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ABSTRACT

The MMORPG, Second Life, is explored in an attempt to understand the social meaning imbued in the construction of its environment. Second Life enables its users to contribute to the creation of its virtual spaces, altering the landscape in which their interactions are embedded. Drawing upon and developing the concept of "themeing" it is argued that this ability allows for the creation of a virtual milieu rich in symbolic meaning though disconnected from the power relations of capitalist modes of production. The spaces of Second Life are, instead, given order by their residents, which allow such spaces to retain a benign and culturally sensitive quality that cannot be achieved in the real world built environment.

Computer mediated communication is increasingly pervasive and arguably altering the texture of everyday life. Its various expressions—email, instant messaging, chat rooms and websites—change the way individuals relate to one another and perceive the world. One type of virtual environment, called a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), uses a three-dimensional platform which provides a real world quality that is lacking in other modes of computer mediated communication. One popular MMORPG, Second Life, allows users not only to escape the constraints of their real world identities—via
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avatars—but to contribute to the construction of its built environment, altering the virtual landscape in which their interactions are embedded. Drawing upon and developing the concept of “themeing” (Gottdiener, 1997) this paper explores Second Life in order to better understand what significance virtual world space construction holds and how it differs from similar real world processes.

Second Life was launched on June 23, 2003 by San Francisco based Linden Research Incorporated, commonly called Linden Lab (Sege, 2006). It was inspired, in part, by the science fiction book Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson (1992). Stephenson’s novel depicts a metaverse or virtual world in which real people are represented by their avatars in virtual space. An avatar is a virtual reproduction of oneself, the character one guides through the virtual world. Although Second Life resembles a video game, to refer to it as such would be misleading. It has no goal in the typical sense. There are no levels or obligatory objectives and no ending. One explores the virtual world by “teleporting” from island to island. Each is distinct, specialized to meet the various needs of its diverse residents. Ohio University, for example, has a virtual campus where courses are taught (Outlook, 2007). In a very different vein, aspiring musicians hold live performances in virtual nightclubs and cafes for anyone interested. There are science museums, shopping centers and parks all inside the virtual world. In fact, there are nearly 69,000 users, called residents, logged into the virtual world at any given time (Second Life, 2008). Ultimately, it functions as a platform for communication and socializing. Other popular MMORPG’s include World of Warcraft, There, IMVU and Active Worlds. Aside from the sheer volume and variety of its virtual spaces, what makes Second Life worthy of exploration, compared to other such MMORPG’s is the ability of residents to create and amend the virtual landscape themselves. Residents can construct,
manipulate and edit the built environment and the objects inside as they see fit, transforming the virtual milieu.

Previous studies on such MMORPG's tend to fall within one of four categories: the social, referring to interpersonal relationships and interactions (Chee, 2005; Chang and Whang, 2005; Hakken, 1999; Herman, Coombe and Kaye, 2006); the psychological, referring to issues such as gender transformation in online communities (Battle, 1996; Ornebring, 2007; Wan and Chiou, 2007; Turkle, 1996; Krzywinska, 2006); the narratological, focusing on the story elements in such communities (Beusch, 2007; Klastrup, 2003; Martey and Stromer-Galley, 2007); and the technological, referring to the internal structure of rules and game play by design, sometimes specified as ludological (Lugo and Lossada, 2002; Jørgensen, 2004; Zerzan, 2007; Zackariasson and Wilson, 2004). This study differs, however, in examining the physical construction of virtual space and the social meaning embedded within it.

For example, while Krzywinska (2006) has written about the role played by mythology in the user manipulation of the environment in World of Warcraft and Herman et al. (2006) has examined the nature of cooperation and intellectual property rights within the gaming world, little has been said about user constructed virtual environments in relation to sociological treatments of space and the built environment. In order to initiate a discussion of virtual space as social space just as legitimate as any other, recognition of the most significant contributors to an understanding of social spatial construction is merited. Lefebvre's Production of Space (1991) and Gotttdiener's Social Production of Urban Space (1985) give this analysis its foundation. Their contribution to theory on the construction of the built environment provides the framework this work draws from. In particular, their conceptualization of the production of space as a physical manifestation of the internal dynamics of the social structure that created it. This concept, previously
applied to the construction of the real world built environment, may help in understanding the virtual environment as well. What follows is a brief description of some of my earliest experiences during an ethnographic exploration of Second Life and an application of sociological theories of space to those experiences.

Introduction to the Virtual World: Orientation Island

New participants begin their virtual Second Life experience on Orientation Island. The island’s purpose is to give new residents a sense of what the virtual world is like. It presents the opportunity to familiarize oneself with its controls and functions. In addition, it allows a chance to get to know the “feel” of controlling one’s avatar in a consequence free zone. In my first visit to Orientation Island, I felt anxious as the island loaded. I watched my avatar appear on the screen along with, to my surprise, a handful of other new residents. My virtual self dropped down onto the island, bent at the knees, then stood up motionless. We looked around at each other, pivoting from side-to-side as our real world selves touched the controls.

As I rotated around, a path came into view in front of me, I tapped the ‘up’ arrow on my keyboard and my avatar thrust forward. I walked toward the path, away from the group. After a short distance I stopped, turned around, and stood watching the others. Most were still slowly spinning, admiring the landscape, I think. Realizing, though, they could see me watching as easily as I could see them, I turned and walked off again. This moment illustrates how different Second Life is from a video game. A video game, however

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9 This ethnographic mode of MMORPG description can be further elucidated with reference to concepts of identity transformation and embodiment, and notions of the self in which the work of Erving Goffman and Mihály Csíkszentmihályi proves insightful. Although beyond the scope of this paper, such an analysis would contribute to a comprehensive understanding of virtual environments.
sophisticated, presents a world that must emerge from preprogrammed responses. The other individuals with which one interacts will repeat certain phrases and generally possess a mechanized, thus, lifeless quality. In Second Life, though, the residents really are people. Their actions actually come from real world individuals which imbues Second Life with a spontaneous quality; instilling in the virtual world a real world sensibility.

A key part of this “real world spontaneity” is the visual landscape of the virtual environment. The island is beautiful. It is tropical, and laced with walkways which weave through tall grasses and clumps of trees. The sky is cloudless and bright blue at its center, slowly fading toward an off-white as it approaches the perfect horizon. Flowers sprout in clustered patterns which resemble real world growth configurations. Through my headphones I could occasionally hear the deep gurgle of distant water. Eventually, I made my way to the shore and looked out toward the sea. I was struck by the presence of waves.

A Constructed Environment

The self-imposed need for residents to realistically reproduce the natural environment in a clearly virtual setting is an important attribute of virtual space. The nature/culture dichotomy virtually collapses: every natural object or force present in the virtual milieu is constructed through conscious effort to create a convincing real world sensibility. Over the course of several weeks I began to get the sense that the virtual world has a pulse, that it is a living, breathing environment. It’s not that Second Life is a realistic looking representation of real life. As mentioned previously, Second Life appears like a video game, realistic in a general sense, though wholly distinct from actual life. Once one spends a significant amount of time in the virtual world, though, an intriguing effect occurs: one’s eyes become accustomed to its visual representation. Of course, one still
remains conscious of its particular aesthetic but it grows so familiar one doesn’t see it anymore; it becomes a nonfactor. This facilitates virtual immersion in the visual landscape.

This immersion comes, in large part, from the atmospheric quality derived from subtle details in the virtual world which hint at a real world resonance. Weeds sprouting between the cracks in front of a building, for example, or the slight bobbing of a tree branch imply real world forces. These forces, however, are of course an illusion. The depiction of natural objects is meticulously constructed through the efforts of thousands of residents. Interestingly, since this world emerges from its residents, everything inside is the result of someone’s conscious decision. Real world environmental forces that furnish landscapes with tumble weeds, dripping water, and eroding buildings are intentionally created here. Consequently, the physical construction of virtual world space is embedded with a symbolic intentionality lacking in the real world.

As mentioned above, weeds—the unwanted grass one sees intruding on the edges of sidewalks—carry a certain symbolic significance. For instance, the outside entrance of an expensive new office building will not have any weeds growing. This isn’t the conscious effort of the building planners; rather, it’s a natural consequence of the office having been recently built. Regardless, when one makes this observation it doesn’t slip away meaninglessly. The absence of weeds ultimately becomes associated with the newness, hence success, of a company. So much so, the owners of an older building may allocate money each year to have the weeds removed. In this case a level of abstraction is added to the meaning of weeds—now that its absence is a conscious effort—illustrating its symbolic significance. Comparatively, an unsuccessful company won’t have the funds for superfluous spending and the weeds will creep in. However, what if weeds are growing in the cracks in front of a virtual building? Although exactly
what it may signify can vary, weeds obviously have a symbolic function here. In the real world, everyday life presents individuals frequent opportunities to make connections between uncontrollable natural objects like the weeds and potential symbolic meaning. These casual observations are second nature and rarely merit any real consideration, however. In fact, an observation may be so subtle and the judgment so reflexive that one barely becomes conscious of its presence. For example, a practical illustration of this process occurs when walking along an unfamiliar stretch of city blocks. As the buildings pass by and one enters into and out of various zoning districts, broken sidewalk blocks become more common, the patches of lawn are mowed less frequently and the chipping paint becomes more severe. The broken concrete, overgrown lawns, and chipping paint become instant, seemingly intuitive signs of economic and political undercurrents.

Inconspicuous symbols, which in the real world are noticed though barely noted, are value laden cultural signifiers in Second Life. What, exactly, does broken concrete, overgrown lawns, chipping paint or “weeds” mean in Second Life? What function does “Free Tibet” serve scrawled on a building in a virtual world without potential legal repercussions for graffiti? And does the presence of these symbols in the virtual world tell us anything about the meaning of their counterparts in the real world? The work of Mark Gottdiener may hold some clues. Expanding upon his earlier work on the social production of urban space (1985; 1991; 1997; 1999), which is, in turn, a development and application of Lefebvre’s central theses (1984; 1991; 1996; 2002), Gottdiener contends that a new form of space has emerged, beginning in 1950’s America, in which commercial spaces are increasingly “themed” to attract consumers. By this he means, for example, the decorating of restaurants such as Hard Rock Cafe or Planet Hollywood, or

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perhaps more obviously, attractions such as Disneyland or Las Vegas.

Gottdiener observes that the central problem faced by contemporary capitalists is no longer how to transform wealth into commodities in the most efficient way. It has been long understood that—since workers are also consumers—capitalists have an economic interest in paying their employees relatively higher wages, thus enabling workers to also purchase the goods they produce. Gottdiener argues that by the end of the 20th century a new facet in economic relationships had become most important. Not between a worker and their products, but between a consumer and their purchases. The emphasis in modern America is now on how best to transform commodities back into capital. Put another way: what is the most effective way to seduce consumers?

The themed environment has emerged as a way of answering this question. The built environment in Second Life is distinct, of course, because unlike the themeing which Gottdiener describes, this themeing doesn’t function to seduce consumers. How, then, does it relate to Second Life? The name, of course, Second Life implies an escape of sorts; a place to retreat from the conventional hum-drum of everyday life. In much the same way that Disneyworld presents itself as a fantasy world separate from real life. The modern marketing line for Las Vegas also captures this, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” These places promise an alternative reality in which one isn’t constrained by one’s real life identity. Las Vegas is a particularly striking example. The city is marketed as an environment where one is not only permitted, but even expected to act in a way at odds with what is anticipated from their everyday identity.

The depiction of Second Life as a tropical island paradise is a kind of themeing as well. Like Disneyworld or Las Vegas, however, the paradise is an illusion. Touching
the rock formations of Disneyland would reveal a fundamental irony, the illusion is, itself, a reality: they’re hollowed, painted plaster with scaffolding underneath. The bright lights which create day during the night in Las Vegas are running on a stream of money visitors lose there. The spectacular sights of Las Vegas and Disneyworld mask their actual social relations. The truth is, of course, that these are lucrative businesses which design their environments to make as much money as possible. Second Life, although it displays many of the characteristics of these environments doesn’t share this underlying capitalist function. There are some parallels. For example, some more involved residents do pay a monthly fee to own land in Second Life. This, indeed, resembles Disneyland: money is paid to enter an environment that removes one from everyday life. Though this fee is small and doesn’t account for the majority of those, like myself, who never paid a cent. What, then, contributes to the themed reading of virtual spaces?

The themed environments in Second Life are attractive to residents for two main reasons: one is the highly specialized nature of its virtual spaces and the other is its ability to provide meaningful space to its inhabitants, which, intriguingly, parallels the use of ancient themed environments. The logic used to orchestrate the running of Disneyworld or Las Vegas has one goal: whatever attracts the most people of the target demographic is best. If the themed environment is a carefully deployed illusion designed to hide true social relations, whatever theme makes consumers most eager to part with their dollars is best. There are no pretensions or standards; rather, the goal is to make the most money as possible. Disneyworld, then, will be immensely more profitable as a family friendly location than as one specifically designed for those in their 20’s. Las Vegas, likewise, will only stand to lose profits if it discourages working class people from participating. Second Life, however, has the ability of catering to a much narrower
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demographic. It is culturally exclusive in a way that an international attraction could never be. To better illustrate this I will present a detailed description of a Second Life location: Hippie Island.

Examination of a Virtual Themed Environment: Hippie Island

Hippie Island welcomes its virtual visitors with their slogan “Come Join the Revolution.” An advertisement shows a virtual hippy, complete with long blond hair, tight blue jeans and a psychedelic t-shirt next to a picture of a smiling Barack Obama, making clear its political allegiance. Visitors who teleport to the island find themselves, first, inside of an impressive building. The ceiling is high which gives the room a lofty, important quality. The inside is dimly lit and flower-like patterns slowly swirl around on the floor. The building is furnished with giant posters of Barack Obama. “Yes we can” slogans plaster the walls and direct residents to barackobama.com. Obama’s O-logo with red, white and blue stripes is sewn into the carpeting.

On my visit to the island I walked out of this building, down stairs and onto a wooden deck below. There I scanned the horizon. It was dusk—an unchanging dusk, I would later realize—and the surrounding island was dark with large, silhouetted trees rustling in the wind. There were Tiki lanterns on poles, peppering the lawn in front of me. An eagle in the distance was slowly circling round and came down to perch in a tree. The deck was appointed with comfy chairs and beanbags. A variety of items lay scattered on a long table. I surveyed them and found, to my amusement, drug paraphernalia. I strolled off the deck onto the grass and walked toward the trees. Old Volkswagen buses lay amongst picnic blankets and lawn chairs, decorated in peace signs and covered in bright paint. I approached the top of a small hill and was able to see campfires dotting the terrain in front of me. I casually twisted through the picnic scenes and
parked vehicles whose side doors all rested open, spilling out their contents onto the ground. Sprawled bodies accompanied most of these scenes, doing little but watching me walk past. As I twisted deeper into the woods I came upon a mother deer and her doe who stood frozen on the edge of a hill.

I made my way around the perimeter of the island and came upon mushrooms growing up around bushes and trees. They were giant, purple growths with yellow spots on top. Some of them came up to the height of my knees. I came upon a giant willow tree with thick limbs. I looked up into the tree to find a fort. A girl sat up there with pillows and blankets. From the tree drifted down a kind of colorful pollen that filled the air and floated away over the rest of the island. I passed by a small lake with a canoe pulled half way onto the shore and could hear the distant sounds of birds chirping through my headphones. A concert stage lay on the other side of the island. There were vivid, multicolored lights emanating from two areas in the scaffolding above the stage. They projected peace signs and cartoon-like flowers on the stage floor. Avatars dressed in hippy clothing loitered around on the stage talking to one another. I decided to circle back to the main building and found, at its rear, imported photographs from real world counterculture events. One of them consisted of two women at a concert, holding hands, gleefully spinning around each other with shoeless feet. Another showed tanned, skinny, long-haired kids sitting cross-legged on the ground talking.

I continued to explore and found more signs of a kind of hippie nostalgia. I kept wondering, though, what any of this had to do with Barack Obama. Aside from the initial advertisement and the huge posters inside, nothing appeared Obama-specific. I realized, though, the point: there is a certain idiosyncratic quality that made the contents on this island, including Obama, meaningful to its residents.
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The themed environment of Hippie Island unites elements that cater to a specific demographic which otherwise would not be addressed, especially in the top-down manner that characterizes postmodern urban spaces (see Davis, 1992 and Schiller, 1971, 1991). Second Life, in this case, serves as a perfect tool for uniting a division of individuals whose cultural perspective would not be addressed in other spheres. In this way, Second Life is able to give residents a fairly intimate, culturally exclusive experience otherwise lacking in the modern real world built environment.

The Freedom to Theme

In addition to this culturally exclusive experience, the themeing of Second Life also provides residents with a meaningful space distinct from those which typify the capitalist built environment and which, in some respects, parallels the logic underpinning ancient themed environments. Gottdiener describes the layout of a city in ancient Greece, “Classical Athens was constructed according to a combined cosmological and religious code that both situated the settlement in harmony with nature and endowed its buildings with homages to the gods. The entire city, its environmental space, and its buildings signified...the belief in the pantheon of Greek gods, so that its inhabitants lived within a sacred and meaningful space (p. 22).”

Gottdiener is not just showing how the themeing of environments has pervaded human settlements since ancient history. He is also demonstrating how, in ancient times, the internal system of societies rested significantly on religious beliefs. These beliefs, then, flowered in the physical construction of its spaces. In modern times, as the capitalist system has replaced the logic cementing human relations, themed environments have become an extension of that system. The difference, though, rests in the internal
dynamics of capitalism. The internal conflict at the heart of capitalism, between those who own the means of production and those who do not, underpins the modern themed environment. Ancient themed environments resonated on a more profound, spiritually infused dimension. Walking the layout of a city space was living one’s beliefs. African villagers, the Dogon, for example, constructed their settlements in alignment with a cosmological order that refers both to the axis of the world and to the genders of their people (Gottdiener, 1997). Their themed spaces were clearly as rich as ours with symbolic meaning, theirs, however, referenced a system rooted in the infinite rather monetary exchange.

Second Life, then, can be viewed as an escape from an escape. It is a way to leave the modern real world themed environment which is a physical manifestation of the conflict inherent in capitalism, and to enter into, instead, an environment which bears no antagonism at its heart. It is an environment constructed by someone with no motive other than to create an interesting space. The Second Life built environment is endowed with an intrinsic benignity. This foundational purpose, coupled with highly specialized content accounts for much of the pleasure derived from the Second Life lived experience.

Return now for a moment to the type of symbolism I illustrated earlier with the example of weeds. The annual removal of weeds from outside of a corporate office adds to the overall impression of the space. The washing of windows along with the mowing of grass, repairing of broken bricks and general upkeep enhance the impact of the building. The spectacle of a polished building functions in a hegemonic fashion to legitimate, enforce and reify the social relations in which it is embedded. What is it doing in Second Life, then? It is providing a shell of the built environment whose internal structures have been stripped away so new ones can take their place. The meaning of the
space can be reinvented and transformed. A decrepit inner-city is stripped of the oppression that created it. Instead, graffiti litters its buildings as a study in aesthetic construction. Dominating bureaucratic structures are undermined. The structure is left to be re-envisioned and new meanings eclipse the old ones. Internal social relations and their physicality in the form of the built environment are liberated in Second Life. One must ask, then: why copy the real world built environment at all? Breaking or transforming real world meanings and social relations can only be realized if one starts with an environment which captures those relations. A vital dimension of Second Life would be absent if every environment resembled a wholly imaginative and abstract location. It must align itself with the relations of the real world significantly enough in order to break them. In this way, Second Life is still dependent on the real world built environment for its significance and pleasure.

Conclusions

The virtual world is a way to transform the power relations embedded in the construction of real world space. The layout of the virtual world is not directed by profit seeking. It is, instead, a way to escape the antagonisms of that space while simultaneously enjoying the sensibility of its physical presence. For that experience to exist, however, it must resemble the real world convincingly. The weeds and similar symbols serve this function. They provide the patina that enhances the illusion. These symbols must be present to give the virtual world meaning. It enriches the experience and gives a level of sophistication and depth that would otherwise be missing. The presence of physically functionless but culturally significant symbols is vital for this environment. It must convincingly create the illusion of real world forces before it can make meaning out of breaking them.
The virtual environment is significant not only as an increasingly prominent mode of computer mediated communication, but also as a way for users to reorient their relation toward real world themed environments. The ability of users to construct and edit the built environment allows for the creation of a landscape rich in symbolic meaning, though disconnected from the power relations of everyday life. These spaces are, instead, given order by the cultural perspectives of their residents, embedding virtual environments with a benign quality and cultural specificity that could never be achieved in real world constructions. These virtual constructions provide freedom, paradoxically, from reproducing cultural conventions in the form of real world symbols. These symbols are then displaced from their position in a capitalist order and allowed to take on new meanings and significance in the virtual world.

REFERENCES


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