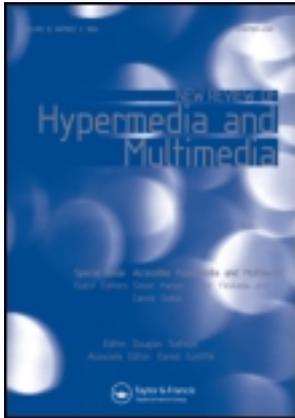


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Editorial

Jeremy Hunsinger^a & Adrienne Massanari^b

^a Department of Communication Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON, Canada

^b Department of Communication, University of Illinois, Chicago, IL, USA

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Editorial

Introduction

We inscribe cultures, their artifacts, and their praxes into and through virtual worlds; these new and old spaces of imagination and transformation allow humans to interact within a co-constructed simulated space. Within these spaces, culture is circulated, replicated, and simulated with the creation, representation, and circulation of meaningful experiences. However, virtual worlds are not novel in regard to the operation of culture, nor should we make the mistake to assume that they are novel in themselves. Virtual experiences have been around in some respect for hundreds of years, and virtual worlds based on information technologies have existed for at least 40 years. The current generation of virtual worlds such as *Second Life*[®] and *World of Warcraft*[®], with roots over four decades old in studies of virtual reality, computer supported cooperative work, artificial intelligence, hypermedia, sociology, cultural studies, and related topics, provide for rich and occasionally immersive environments where people become enculturated within the world sometimes as richly as the rest of their everyday lives.

The everydayness of virtual worlds generates their general cultural aspects. The fantastic possibilities that are frequently realized in world are grounded in the lives of their participants and exist within the realizable grounds of everyday culture. But those fantastic experiences would not be fantastic without the comparable performance of the normal and everyday. The cultures of virtual worlds are performed in the daily practices in these virtual worlds. The cultures are generated within and through interactions among participants. And, as new individuals inhabit and enculturate these spaces, cultural meanings are made, remade, concretized, deconstructed, and frequently contested. However, while culture may be shared within and between each virtual world, it is hardly unitary. Subcultural practices often arise quickly and may dramatically reshape the dominant culture(s) of the space, or simply become complicit into the everydayness of the virtual world unobtrusively. There are as such cultural ebbs and flows constituted by subcultures that create a plurality of possible constructions through which the participants of the world can co-construct their cultural milieu.

This extension of culture through and within worlds is not meant to say that the cultures in world are discrete to those worlds, because there is leakage between worlds, virtual and real, as culture in all worlds relates to the same possible subjects. Within the world, however, the creation of culture is agentic, both from the perspective of the user, but also from the world designers. These designers build the locations of culture and establish its

boundaries. However, virtual worlds are not immune to or inoculated against the same political–economic forces that transform culture in the “real world”—in fact, virtual worlds bring to the fore an entirely new set of complications. The question of who has the right to (re)make culture in virtual worlds is especially salient, especially in light of the fact that these spaces are often co-created by “users” and “designers.” In a sense, both groups bring their cultures with them.

Defining virtual world culture(s)

Prior research into the nature of virtual worlds often highlights the complexity of these spaces and the interactions they enable. Definitions of virtual worlds vary; from Richard Bartle’s (2003) focus on persistent environments, containing user controlled and nonuser entities, to Edward Castronova’s (2005) relatively expansive idea of *synthetic worlds* as “crafted places inside computers that are designed to accommodate large numbers of people” (p. 4) to Mark Bell’s (2008) definition that focuses on the networked nature of these spaces, “a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars, facilitated by networked computers” (p. 2). Mark Steven Meadows (2007) adds to the discussion the idea that there are multiple virtual worlds, the most popular foregrounding either social interaction (spaces such as *There* or *Second Life*[®]) or game interaction (*Eve Online*[®] or *World of Warcraft*[®]). The former encourages interaction through emergent rule sets where the “goal” is social standing within the virtual world; the latter uses objective, preset rule sets where goals are clearly outlined and prescribed by the designers. In her synthesis of previous research conducted in/on virtual worlds, Celia Pearce (2009) offers a set of features they share, arguing that they are “spatial,” “populous,” “contiguous,” “explorable,” “persistent,” “inhabitable,” and that they require embodied identities (avatars), encourage consequential participation, and are cohesive in their esthetics and rules (p. 18–20).

Often, research into virtual worlds emphasizes their “otherness”—that is, that these spaces sit apart from “real life.” The idea of the “magic circle” (Hunzinger; Salen and Zimmerman 2003) borrowed from game studies has provided an intriguing, if problematic, lens through which virtual worlds can be understood. Yes, the rules within the spaces (whether explicit or implicit, defined or emergent) enable, constrain, and otherwise prompt certain actions to take place, but these spaces are not completely set apart from the “real world” (as Jordan 2009 and others have argued). As the papers in this special issue suggest, it is the very permeability of virtual worlds—how they reflect, challenge, and otherwise remix cultures that exist in other spaces as well as how they give rise to entirely new cultures—that makes them fascinating and important sites of study.

What might be the focus of studies on virtual world cultures? Some focus on the social interactions these spaces enable (Taylor 2006), motivations for individual participation (Yee 2006), or the economies that grow out of virtual

worlds (Castronova 2005, Dibbell 2007). Other research investigates “subversive” behaviors in virtual worlds, such as cheating (Consalvo 2007) or grieving (example), and the ways in which these both shape and challenge existing (sub)cultures within and outside the virtual space. Still other work focuses on the ways in which virtual world cultures (re)produce social and political inequities around race/ethnicity (Leonard 2006, Nakamura 2009), sexuality (Shaw 2009), and disability (Trewin *et al.* 2008). Scholars investigating these spaces face multiple challenges, however, grappling with a complex object of study that may dramatically shift from moment-to-moment, but is rarely archived in any meaningful way. And, since virtual worlds embody a multiplicity of interactions, from textual, verbal, nonverbal, to interactional, all shaped through the world’s technological affordances, our understanding of these spaces is necessarily partial.

Given the vast complexities of virtual world cultures, how then do we go about understanding them? Scholars have taken various approaches. Most have relied on ethnographic methods such as participant observation, depth interviewing, small-scale surveys, and just generally spending significant time in the space rigorously recording observations and field notes (Taylor 2006, Nardi 2010, etc.). Others have used more novel approaches, such hybrid ethnographies that specifically connect online and offline observations (Jordan 2009), or network mapping to understand play patterns and social relationships (Williams *et al.* 2006) or scripts or bots that allow researchers to examine how in-world nonverbal behaviors (Yee *et al.* 2007) reproduce behaviors seen outside virtual world spaces. As the newer methods are progress toward being well-established ways of producing knowledge in virtual worlds, researchers are engaging in virtual worlds research in many new fields, creating more methodological understandings and certainly even more methodological challenges.

Special issue papers

The articles in this special issue engage with the complexities of culture in virtual worlds in a number of ways. Besides focusing on different virtual world environments, including *Second Life*[®], Xbox Live, and *Guild Wars*[®], the authors engage with these spaces in methodologically different ways, but describing, exploring, and theorizing about virtual world culture remains of primary concern.

Burcu Bakioglu’s “Negotiating Governance in Virtual Worlds: Grief Play, Hacktivism & LeakOps in *Second Life*[®]” problematizes the typical assumptions around “trolling” and “grieving” behaviors in virtual spaces. Bakioglu’s investigation of several trolling groups active within the 4chan and *Second Life*[®] communities suggests that while these informal groups appear from the outside to engage in these behaviors for humorous or disruptive purposes, undergirding much of these actions are hacktivist tendencies that question our assumptions of critical issues such as governance and privacy within virtual cultures. Bakioglu highlights how the very design of *Second Life*[®]

(and concomitantly, other virtual worlds) may encourage these kinds of activities—even if they are overtly discouraged by the designers. Additionally, the author suggests that these acts should be examined contextually within a larger framework of other hacktivist actions such as Wikileaks and warns against scholars dismissing grieving without a critical look at the ethical stance such actions may imply.

“Deviant” behavior and how it is defined within virtual world cultures is also the focus of another article in this special issue: Kishonna Gray’s “Deviant Bodies, Stigmatized Identities, and Racist Acts: Examining the Experiences of African-American Gamers in Xbox Live.” Gray argues that much of gaming culture privileges male Whiteness as a normative default, and her analysis of play within the Xbox Live space argues that racist dialog becomes a normal way of interaction between players who are presumed White. This dialog proceeds according to an unstated script: first, the “deviant” player’s race is questioned; then, the player is harassed or grieved (possibly by multiple other players); and finally, the situation either diffuses or escalates into a “virtual race war.” Gray’s respondents normalized this behavior as merely a frustrating, but everyday occurrence, and rarely complained to the Xbox Live authorities. The offending players, however, often justified their racist speech by suggesting that they were either not actually racist, that the game space allowed for/encouraged this kind of speech (“it’s just a game”), or that they used these same words indiscriminately, regardless of race. And, Gray argues, by perpetuating the stereotype that African-Americans are not gamers, the video game industry may be indirectly implicated in these kinds of interactions, as it continues to label certain players as more legitimate or valid than others.

The permeable nature of virtual worlds and “real life” spaces is explored in Jean-Francois Lucas, Tracy Cornish, and Todd Margolis’ “To a Cultural Perspective of Mixed Reality Events: A Case Study of Event Overflow in Operas and Concerts in Mixed Reality.” The authors focus on two music events that occurred simultaneously in mixed spaces, both in *Second Life*[®] and offline, to better understand the ways in which virtual world cultures are (re)making cultural events. As they argue, events in virtual spaces both replicate and provide a new set of challenges of those that occur in “real life.” For example, both spaces are necessarily limited—a physical space by the size of the venue and safety codes—and virtual spaces by server performance. And yet, the virtual space affords different freedoms for audience members; a virtual avatar can be away from keyboard if the physical avatar (body) needs to use the bathroom or take a phone call during the performance—an action that would be impossible (or at least perceived as rude) during a “real world” performance. The authors note that the unique possibilities of mixed realities events have not been fully realized, perhaps due to their “newness” and/or the technological challenges (and benefits) they present.

What is the nature of virtual world cultures that are in transition? Michael Scott’s “A Monument to the Player: Preserving a Landscape of Socio-Cultural Capital in the Transitional MMORPG” investigates how players of

Guild Wars[®] responded to the Hall of Monuments—a virtual space in which their accomplishments could be viewed—that was intended to bridge the gap between two versions of the MMORPG (*Guild Wars*[®] and *Guild Wars 2*[®]). Scott notes that players had differing attitudes towards the Hall of Monuments; some believed it merely a “vanity” space, whereas others engaged in new activities because of the achievements that the space preserved visually. However, many noted the importance of preserving the “ancestral” heritage of the first version of *Guild Wars*[®], suggesting that it served an important function as a representation of capital (cultural and otherwise) players had accumulated in the virtual space. But Scott’s work also emphasizes the multiplicity of meanings that players/residents create in virtual space, and the challenges of preserving a sense of heritage in a space that continually transforms.

These research projects all demonstrate the vibrant and close empirical research occurring in virtual worlds research and suggest possible directions for future scholarship. Virtual worlds research is ever expanding as more people use these spaces both for leisure and for local and remote work. Indeed, the similarity between virtual worlds research and other socio-technical spaces may be the biggest lesson of virtual worlds in the end. This is because virtual worlds research is fundamentally research about people and their infotechnics. And while those infotechnics may have affordances that allow certain behaviors and practices to manifest more or less easily in the virtual world, it is always people (or their extensions, such as bots, scripts, environments, or designed spaces) that are acting in that world. These actants allow the users of the world a breadth of experiences, from both the mundane to the fantastic. It is to these agencies and the co-constructed experiences in the spaces that constitute virtual worlds that the future of research in this area should address. From user experience, to open design, to governance of user actions, to social and group interaction and everything those fields can cover, virtual worlds research needs to be pursued.

This special issue attempts to address one field within virtual worlds research, that of cultures, because all virtual worlds develop a culture that is seems uniquely their own but really is likely derivative of any number of cultures, and possibilities. We wish to use this special issue to contribute to virtual worlds research—to indicate the possibilities of the future of virtual worlds both for us in our everyday lives—but also to build a platform where future research in the field will keep culture in mind.

Jeremy Hunsinger

*Department of Communication Studies
Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON, Canada*

Email: jhuns@vt.edu

Adrienne Massanari

*Department of Communication
University of Illinois, Chicago, IL, USA*

Email: amass@uic.edu

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