

Creating Second Lives

Community, Identity and Spatiality
as Constructions of the Virtual

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Afterword

Virtual Worlds and the Research Question

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century's second decade, the study of virtual worlds stands at a fascinating crossroads. Not only are the number of virtual worlds expanding at a dizzying pace; 'genres' of virtual worlds continue to expand as well. This runs the gamut from those organized as games to those set up for training or education (including those combining all these domains); from those aimed at children to those aimed at adults or the whole lifespan; from those aimed at specific languages or world regions to those global in membership; and from those designed for greater photorealism and immersion to those designed with increasing simplicity so as to be accessible via social networking sites (like Facebook) and mobile devices.

For researchers, the upshot of these continuing transformations is that we face substantial challenges in tracking how virtual worlds come into being and alternately grow, stabilize, shrink, or go out of existence. One source of the difficulty lies in the fact that these shifts can be due to combinations of in-world developments, interactions with other virtual worlds and online technologies, and effects of physical-world socialites local, national, regional, and global in scale. There is thus a pressing need for further research from a range of methodological and theoretical approaches—including the fields of media and communications studies, as the contributions to this volume demonstrate. Whereas understandable concerns with design, social impact, and politics often direct conversations about virtual worlds into a quest for conclusions and definitive pronouncements, it is crucial to linger in spaces of inquiry. The greatest barrier to a more informed, contextual, and relevant understanding of virtual worlds is not that we have failed to obtain the right answers, but that we too often fail to pose the right questions, thereby steering our research programs into wild goose chases for solutions that will never come.

What makes crafting effective research questions trickier than it might at first seem is that like most forms of contemporary technology linked to the Internet, virtual worlds often fall prey to a 'hype cycle' that alternately heralds them as nascent agents of total social transformation, or dismisses

them as faddish contrivances with but ephemeral significance. Both caricatures are obviously false; as is usually the case, the truth lies between or even beyond such polarizing extremes. It is in a less dogmatic middle ground that we can forge new paradigms for virtual worlds research, and even hazard some future trajectories. Yes, virtual worlds are here to stay and will play significant roles in human sociality worldwide. No, we are not at the cusp of some Matrix-like future in which virtual worlds displace actual-world socialities. As the number of virtual worlds grows, we will find not a unilinear evolution but a broadening range of sociotechnical forms. Some persons will spend time in virtual worlds as a means to escape some aspect of their actual-world lives; others will spend time in virtual worlds in ways that augment, extend, or collaboratively interact with the actual-world lives of themselves and others; but most persons will probably do both in some fashion, because fantasy and continuity need not preclude each other. Beyond such broad observations, it will prove most productive to set hype cycles aside and turn from both evangelists and naysayers, so as to reflect on promising questions for virtual worlds research in the future.

VIRTUAL, ACTUAL, AND REAL: IMBRICATION AND DISTINCTION

Perhaps the most crucial area for continuing virtual worlds research involves forms of imbrication and distinction between virtual worlds and the physical world. (As in my other writings on virtual worlds, I distinguish virtual worlds from the 'physical' or 'actual' world; I do not use the phrase 'real world' analytically, because virtual worlds and other online technologies are decidedly real technological formations with real socialities and social effects.) This issue of imbrication and distinction—pivotal because it highlights the novel contribution of virtual worlds—continues to be one of the greatest sources of misunderstanding and needless posturing in debates over the significance of virtual worlds for human life. Too often, terms like 'blurring' or 'convergence' are used to construct a teleological narrative in which ostensibly separated virtual and actual worlds tend inexorably towards unification.

This narrative is doubly wrong. First, virtual worlds and the actual world do not begin from a position of separation. Of course, the selfhoods and socialites that form within any virtual world can be distinctive to that virtual world. For instance, two people can meet in a virtual world and have meaningful social interaction (from falling in love or starting an in-world business to playing a game of checkers) without any need for those two persons to have met in the actual world beforehand, or any need for those two persons to meet in the actual world alongside their virtual-world interaction. But whereas virtual-world sociality can thus be distinct from actual-world sociality—exhibiting cultural logics that have taken form in-world and are thus not directly derived from any particular actual-world

culture—this distinction does not mean utter separation. At a fundamental level, virtual worlds are predicated on actual-world bodies, computers, and electricity for their existence. More directly, as in cases of culture change elsewhere, virtual world cultures do not appear out of whole cloth: every time persons enter virtual worlds they bring beliefs, practices, and subjectivities from the actual world. From assumptions about gravity and gender to practices of commerce and altruism, virtual worlds are profoundly shaped by actual-world cultures. Because persons in virtual worlds come from myriad actual-world cultures and then create and are affected by emergent cultural logics taking form in-world, virtual-world sociality can never be reduced to actual-world sociality. But a narrative of originary separation ending in blurring or convergence elides the fundamental and ongoing influence of actual-world cultures on virtual worlds (not to mention influences of virtual-world cultures on the actual world).

Alongside the mistaken presumption of an originary separation, a second flaw in teleological narratives of convergence is that there is no endpoint in which actual and virtual worlds ‘blur’ into an indistinguishable morass. Without necessarily displacing computers, mobile devices like cell phones and tablet computers will increasingly represent key modalities for engaging with virtual worlds. Yet even when using such mobile technologies, people will remain quite clear as to when they are online and offline. Indeed, the whole point of online worlds in the first place is that they bring something to the table, so to speak; if they overlap completely with the actual world, why bother with them at all? Instead of blurring, what we find are increasingly complex and multifaceted forms of indexicality and communication between virtual worlds and the actual world (and also between various virtual worlds, as well as between virtual worlds and other online technologies like social networking websites and blogs). The imbrication and even overlay of virtual worlds and the actual world does represent to some degree a departure from earlier virtual-world technologies. Even in such earlier cases, however, separation between virtual and actual worlds was less a function of technological capability than linked to elements of role-playing or gaming that used a ‘magic circle’ of rules to create a sense of distinct sociality (Carillo Masso; Huizinga 1950: 57).

Virtual world researchers can ask productive and relevant questions in regard to contextual imbrication (rather than complete amalgamation) if they deploy paradigms for analysis and design not beholden to this teleological narrative of purportedly discrete virtual and actual worlds moving towards total fusion. Forms of artistic practice can play an important role in framing these questions (Sermon and Gould). In turn, such research contributes to ongoing efforts to better understand what constitutes the ‘virtual’ itself. This includes the vital question of what aspects of virtuality are unique to virtual worlds, versus what aspects draw upon longstanding notions and experiences of virtuality in the actual world (Sherman).

CREATION, COLLABORATION, CONTROL

The foundational feature of virtual worlds is that they are places. Because a place can in theory be inhabited by a single person, there is no definitional barrier to the existence of virtual worlds with a sole inhabitant. But just as few actual-world places have only one resident for very long, so virtual worlds are almost always places of sociality, interaction, and intersubjectivity. The fact that virtual worlds are places means that they can be construed not just in terms of globalized online networks, but in terms of localities and even partially as nation-states (Sherman). Another set of crucial research questions, then, involve asking after what new forms of culture and society might be in formation in virtual worlds, how such forms of culture and society differ within virtual worlds (at a subcultural level) and between virtual worlds, and what differences and continuities exist between forms of culture and society in virtual worlds and in the physical world.

Although the notion of creation obviously has a long history, researchers continue to point to distinctive forms and consequences of creation and creativity in virtual worlds, not least because of their fundamental role in the forging of virtual world spaces themselves (Boellstorff 2008: 205–11; Muse). Indeed, the very title *Creating Second Lives* flags this centrality of creation to virtual-world subjectivities and socialities. Drawing upon cultural domains ranging from religion to capitalism and the figure of the artist, notions of creativity have strong consequences for selfhood in virtual worlds. In addition, creation is rarely a completely solitary endeavor, online or offline. As a result, a promising avenue for future virtual-world research addresses questions of collaboration and participation (Sermon and Gould). Because virtual worlds (like other places of sociality) are never wholly egalitarian, questions regarding how forms of virtual-world governance and social control are constituted and implemented, and often in ways that trouble easy divisions between owner and user, are of great importance (Burgess; Malaby 2006).

TEXTUAL AND GRAPHICAL SOCIALITIES

As I have noted elsewhere, one common misunderstanding of virtual worlds involves the assumption that they must be graphical, as the misnomer ‘3D web’ indicates (Boellstorff 2008: 91–92, 2010: 127). However, whereas purely textual virtual worlds exist—as could virtual worlds based entirely on sound, smell, or some other sensory input—vision continues to dominate virtual-world socialities. This means, for instance, that notions of the landscape and control over a naturalized visual field will pose a continuing set of important questions for virtual-world research (Boellstorff 2008: 89–96; Clark; Muse).

The dominance of visuality in virtual worlds has important consequences for embodiment, which plays a vital role in forms of cultural difference like sexuality, race, and gender (Boellstorff 2008: 134–38, 2011; Carrillo Masso; Doyle; Fizek and Wasilewska; Gee 2008; Nakamura 2007; Sundén 2003; Taylor 2002; Yee and Bailenson 2007). Because the procedures to create avatar bodies and virtual-world objects are often linked or nearly identical, a crucial area for continuing research involves questions like the imbrication of body-fashioning and architecture (Ensslin). Such research can help us better frame notions of ‘social constructionism’ in the actual world; virtual-world socialities make apparent the cultural work that ‘constructs’ actual-world human landscapes in contexts of political and socioeconomic inequality.

Whereas visuality is thus clearly central to virtual worlds—and likely to become even more so, given the growing power of graphics cards and growing bandwidth of Internet connectivities—it will be crucial to develop research foci beyond questions of visuality itself. For instance, an attention to the role of text and narrative in forms of presence, immersion, and belonging can helpfully reframe the effects of visuality (Sermon and Gould), and contribute as well to questions of gender and other aspects of selfhood (Carrillo Masso).

CONCLUSION: THEORY AND METHOD

No domain of human life is exhaustively understood or researched to completion, and culture is always a historical fact, changing over time. In the case of virtual worlds, however, we encounter a novel modality of human sociality for which the maxim “‘cultures’ do not hold still for their portraits” (Clifford 1986: 10) is particularly opportune. So often it seems like our object of study is running ahead of our tools to comprehend it.

In such contexts of rapid change and exciting but oftentimes bewildering conceptual upheaval, crafting the right theoretical toolkit for the research questions at hand can be challenging indeed. It is precisely in such circumstances that a turn to method can be useful. A turn to method is not a turn away from theory; it is a turn to the core substantive issues that animate theory. Because theory is by definition an abstracted explanation for something, gaining a better understanding of that ‘something’ is crucial for effective theory, and it is through our methodologies that such better understandings emerge. I have found attending to questions of method crucial for developing research questions and theoretical insights (Boellstorff 2008, chapter 3; Boellstorff et al. forthcoming). With regard to virtual worlds, the fields of media and communications studies are, in turn, valuable not just for the answers they provide and the questions they pose, but for the methods they contribute. It is precisely through such kinds of engagements that a robustly interdisciplinary virtual worlds research community has taken

form, holding the promise of a responsive and powerfully insightful set of insights that will help illuminate the emergent cultures of virtual worlds and their social consequences—online and offline.

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