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Editor's Corner

Virtual Worlds Round Table

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By being an online journal, the JVWR allows for the inclusion of some pieces that might not otherwise fit a standard journal. This was the thought behind bringing together a group of virtual world scholars to discuss a series of questions and share their thoughts. Meeting in Second Life, Nick Yee (PARC), Liz Losh (UC Irvine), and Sarah Robbins-Bell (Ball State University) were gracious enough to share their thoughts on the study of virtual worlds culture.

1. What are contemporary virtual world researchers getting right, and what do you see them getting wrong in relation to studying culture?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): I'm fascinated by how we can break the rules of social interaction in productive ways in virtual environments because they hint at how these worlds might be engineered for certain outcomes at community levels. At the simplest level, we can wonder what might happen if a smart AI inserted "thank you" and "please" intermittently in chat. Or for example, in There, when you would collide with another user, the system would show the two of you moving around each other. So work my colleagues are doing at Stanford or Jeff Hancock's work exploring this fluidity is really interesting to me.

On the flip side, I think we've all become too much of WoW/SL fan boys and that we're not paying enough attention to other worlds that are out there.

Elizabeth Losh (Malaise Etoile): I'm not sure I can presume to answer a question about "culture" since I am not a social scientist or someone trained in ethnographic techniques, so I'm always hesitant to use the word "culture" with too much authority. But one of the things that I think virtual world researchers are getting *right* is that they get beyond the literacy paradigm that has dominated so much research on digital cultures. Despite the importance of someone like

James Paul Gee, I'd argue that the literacy model is a kind of trap that ignores a lot of future political and legal complications for the inhabitants of virtual worlds, particularly when user agreements are so one-sided. In other words, there are not recognized rights to literacy in the same way that there are mutually agreed upon (and periodically contested) rights of speech, assembly, association, belief, property, due process, contractual consideration, et cetera. That is why I think that people like Ren Reynolds and Greg Lastowka are getting it right by examining how these issues operate. Another thing that I think virtual worlds researchers are getting right is that they are looking at a wide swath of users. I think too often studies of the future of digital communication and content-creation are overinvested in "digital youth" research. A lot of this phenomenon has been driven by granting agencies and philanthropic foundations, of course, but a lot of it is also driven by a very problematic romanticization and exoticization of childhood. In contrast, I'm interested in how adult stakeholders, policy makers, and authority figures are also using (and sometimes misusing) these technologies. This is why the research being done about virtual worlds is often so important, since the people sitting around this virtual table have really bucked this trend by looking at spaces that are designated for adult communication and content-creation, which includes sexually explicit adult behaviors.

Sarah Robbins (Intellagirl Tully): It is easy to see the activities in virtual worlds as separate cultures from the analog world and to treat the behaviors as something new and never seen before. Researchers have recently begun to not only see the cultures of virtual worlds as extensions of analog culture but have also done the opposite in enlightened ways and have begun to expose cultural elements unique to virtual worlds which may inform analog culture in new ways. I believe this balance allows us to learn more from virtual worlds than we were capable in the past when virtual worlds were treated as foreign, separate spaces. However, the field of virtual worlds study is still in its nascent form. We still have much to learn about how to analyze what we observe. Virtual worlds research is a rapidly growing multidisciplinary field and because of the speed and widely varying approaches there are still mis-communications and mis-connections among the research being published. The work is moving forward at such a fast pace that many of the fundamentals have yet to be established. Shared definitions, research methods, clearly defined assumptions and approaches will be necessary for the field to create a cohesive body of research. Until we do this our discussions of culture will not cohere into a conversation but will be seperate attempts to explain the same phenomenon.

2. Is VW culture valid to study? It may be easy for us to see the value but how can it be applied to a larger context, or should it be?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): I think there are actually three separate research areas here for quantitative folks. One is studying VW interaction for the sake of understanding how people behave online. Second is using VWs as a platform to study social behaviors at a level and precision not possible in physical labs. But the third and most interesting is understanding how avatars and virtual interactions can change how we behave and interact face to face.

So for example, I've run studies where people given avatars in a VW are subsequently asked to pick partners in an ostensibly unrelated secondary task. We found that people given attractive avatars in the VW later selected more attractive partners as potential dates. And one of my colleagues at Stanford, Jesse Fox, found that watching your own avatar running on a virtual treadmill increases the likelihood of a participant exercising in the real world.

Elizabeth Losh (Malaise Etoile): I think Amy Bruckman is right that the discussion about virtual worlds should include Facebook and other more heavily trafficked sites for computer-mediated communication in which participants may feel a very strong sense of telepresence, even if it isn't an "embodied" online experience with an avatar and 3-D navigable space.

Sarah Robbins (Intellagirl Tully): I have to strongly disagree with Elizabeth here. Facebook and other social applications may offer telepresence and a sense of shared space but they are *not* virtual worlds and deserve their own analysis based on their distinct affordances as do virtual worlds. The culture that develops on a social network is created and supported by very different forms of communication than form culture in a virtual world. Both spaces are too new to be compared in this way. We should endevor to understand the uniqueness of each before we try to lump them together. I conceed that there are developments that are common to both (synchronous and asynchronous global connections, unique methods of communication, and so forth) but combining them under one umbrella gaurantees that we won't arrive at a good understanding of either.

3. Early research on virtual worlds stressed the prominence of alternative cultural expressions (e.g., furries, identity play, etc.). Do you see such groups as still prominent, as dominant, or as diminishing in importance in contemporary virtual worlds?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): It's almost surprising how mainstream a lot of worlds are now. I think what Second Life showed was that when people are truly given free rein over their world that there is a surprising (or perhaps unsurprising) amount of suburban houses and shopping for fashionable jeans.

I think there's a shift over to understanding what these virtual worlds mean for people who are not seeking alternative expressions. For example, how do virtual worlds figure into a family that plays together (such as in T.L.'s sopranos paper)? How do virtual worlds become a place where real world tensions get played out (like the national tensions in FFXI or surrounding gold farmers)?

Elizabeth Losh (Malaise Etoile): Currently, I'm doing more research about forms of computer-mediated communication in which people assume an identity that is understood as mirroring many aspects of their real-life social roles and even physical appearance. It may be a younger, thinner manifestation of self, but it's still a representation grounded in conventional ideologies about authenticity and credibility and social status. That's why I've also been doing some related work on Facebook games and alternate reality games. These forms of play and interaction also raise interesting questions about politeness for me, which I think is still understudied, because there is often more work done on "trust" than on "face."

Sarah Robbins (Intellagirl Tully): It was easy for early research to focus on facets of virtual worlds that were most distinct, exotic, and easy to encapsulate. It is understandable that unique cultures such as furries and Goreans (which exist in the analog world but are difficult to gain access to) would be the first focus of VW culture research. But there's an underlying idea here that gets missed. These cultures are prominent in some virtual worlds for a specific reason: they represent cultures which are less mainstream in the analog world and benefit from the identity affordances of virtual worlds. This facet of VW culture is too important to bury under exotic discussions of groups labeled as "deviant." In discussions of *Second Life*, for example, it's

common for those who don't use the technology to ask questions about these kinds of cultures because these are the ones that have been discussed in the media. Goreans raise a whole lot more eyebrows than users who are building learning simulations. Furries sell more papers, get more clicks, than do experimental architects. I, for one, am glad to see signs that the media coverage and research is maturing in its focus and has moved past the easy, titilating topics to uncover the underlying meaningful cultural developments.

4. What cultural norms, if any, do you see developing in the virtual worlds you study, and are they different from real world norms? Will we see a breakout of VW cultural norms into the mainstream?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): Cultural norms differ a great deal across game worlds (even) because the rules so heavily shape how players interact with each other. In *EQ*, character dependence and the severe penalty for death made asking for help a cultural norm. In WoW with inline maps and third-party databases, asking for help only gets you yelled at for being a newbie and not looking it up on Thottbot yourself. It's not the cultural norms that develop but understanding what social architectures facilitate different norms that really interests me.

Elizabeth Losh (Malaise Etoile): I'm studying the contemporary manifestations of the classical *res publica* or what Bruno Latour calls the process of "making things public" when environments for deliberation, debate, and consensus-building are staged by using computational media. In doing this, I see myself as part of a much longer critical tradition that goes back to the rhetoric of Greece and Rome and its concerns with embodied communication, which takes into account not just the orator and what he says in the context of a particular occasion but also the rules constraining his mode of delivery and the surrounding architectural space. So I guess I'm looking at how the mainstream informs VW cultural norms rather than vice versa.

5. What differences and similarities have you found between game-based and social-based virtual worlds?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): That's a really big question and I haven't done direct comparisons between the two so I'll let the others weigh in here.

Sarah Robbins (Intellagirl Tully): While there are always exceptions, users of MMORPGs have shared goals. They are all, at least passively, participating in a game with its rules, laws, and the expectation that everyone wants to succeed (i.e., avoid character death and achieve higher levels). Because of these shared goals, users share a literacy about one another's actions. For example, if I see an avatar battling a monster in *Warhammer Online*, I can safely assume that the player behind the avatar hopes to win the fight, to gain the experience points for defeating it, and that they will be glad if that experience earns them a higher level. Social virtual worlds have less of this shared literacy. If I see an avatar in Second Life editing his or her appearance I have a basic understanding of what they are doing. I know that they're changing clothing or some other aspect of their avatar's appearance. I don't know, however, why they're doing it. They aren't, for example, putting on new armor to raise their hit points as they would be in *Warhammer*. They may not even be changing their avatar to be more attractive. Without a shared goal system, cultural literacy is more difficult to develop.

6. What methods are best suited to studying culture in virtual worlds? Are our methods keeping up with the technological developments of virtual worlds?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): I think on both the quantitative and qualitative fronts, we are being swamped with data and most of us don't have the tools or processes to deal with it. Transcriptions have always been difficult to analyze, but now the difficulty isn't in the transcription, it's in what to do with 100 mbs of automatic chat logs. And when Dmitri Williams asked Sony Online for their server-side data, they sent him a hard drive with five terabytes of data. It takes just as long to set that data up in an accessible format as it does to analyze it.

I think one important lesson is to be careful what you wish for. One powerful lesson we learned from PARC's PlayOn project was that even six variables was a lot to analyze. With large datasets, you need to have a set of research questions in mind and take only the slices of data you need. You need to be very disciplined about what to do with the data.

Elizabeth Losh (Malaise Etoile): I guess my main worry is that there aren't enough humanists doing good virtual worlds research now. So I am sometimes starting to find myself the lone humanist at the table, although there are situations where philosophers are included. Even reviewers for the Association of Internet Researchers, which has a history of interdisciplinarity, are explicitly asking for data sets and statistics that exclude people who do not do quantitative research. For example, I think there have been some good arguments made for the value of training in literary analysis by Ian Bogost (about translation and adaptation) and by Jeffrey Bardzell (about the role of sensibility and comparative judgment in making sense of online experiences). I might even argue that the failure of Castronova's *Arden* I was not just a failure of budget, management, institutional investment, or design and computational expertise, but a failure to establish a constructive dialogue between the humanists associated with the project and the social scientists and computer programmers on the team. (I'm not saying that this is necessarily Castronova's fault either, since humanists have been reluctant to articulate the rule sets of art and literature in any kind of programmable way since structuralism has gone out of fashion). I'm not saying there's no good work being done in the digital humanities, but I do think that it tends to be about representing and organizing information with maps and databases rather than engaging with the questions raised by virtual worlds.

Sarah Robbins (Intellagirl Tully): I agree completely with Elizabeth. Computer mediated communication and culture have become increasingly qualitative arenas of research. I think that this may be due to the data collection methods that computers make possible. When we can easily collect gigabytes of data to be analyzed, qualitative research begins to look "lazy" or "antiquated" which is wrong. I am trained as a rhetorician, a largely qualitative and theoretical field, and as I conduct more research in virtual worlds, I feel increasing pressure to move toward quantitative methods. There is a distinct danger in relying on huge qualitative data sets just because they're suddenly available to us. We begin to look at culture at a macro level and forget the important insights that micro level research can provide.

7. Castronova predicts an exodus to VW's to escape from harsh realities. Will the current economic crisis draw people to VW's or push them away because it is seen as an expense?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): I think it'll increase the likelihood they'll be in virtual worlds because it's a really small monthly expense compared with other ways of hanging out such as going to a movie.

Sarah Robbins (Intellagirl Tully): I don't know that more people will "escape" into virtual worlds, but I do think that with the increasing expense and inconvenience of travel, more people may turn to social virtual worlds as places to convene conferences and conduct other business.

8. Can we still talk of "player types" or identity-based categories for virtual world participants (e.g., women users, killers/explorers, and others)? Are there other ways of identifying who plays and why/how that are more productive, and does the approach differ by the type of world studied?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): I've never believed in buckets, but I think a shift to a notion of a set of varying motivations allows us to better appreciate the multiple motives of individual players. And it's not a case of saying someone who scores high on Socializing isn't Achievement oriented, as much as allowing for all possible combinations. They can be high on both, high on one, or on neither.

Elizabeth Losh (Malaise Etoile): Personally, I'm tired of studies of gender difference, even though I know that much of this research was originally backed by feminists and designed to validate the behavior of gamer girls or female content-creators to break down the stereotypical view of technology equaling testosterone and to expand the repertoire of player types.

9. How is voice changing VW culture?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): Dmitri Williams has a paper with the interesting finding that voice doesn't bring everyone closer. It just makes it easier for people to figure out who they find annoying and who they find agreeable.

Elizabeth Losh (Malaise Etoile): I generally don't use voice channels in computer-mediated communication on principle, so I can't speak to that issue as a user but can address it as a critic. I recognize that the voice channel is important for conveying empathy and humor and a whole range of human emotions. But having that added bandwidth of voice also conveys information about age, gender, class, status as a linguistic minority, and even ethnicity and regional membership that invites discrimination. Furthermore, vocal communication compromises the privacy of the channel of communication in ways that privilege people who have the resources for being the lone occupant of a given physical space. There's a lot of truth to Virginia Woolf's idea of having a room of one's own. I think text-only can be liberating for many people, as it was for women who were early novelists in the English literary tradition (like Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, or the Brontë sisters) and early readers who were covertly reading letters and other texts that were conduits of news and information that patriarchal authority might have been disinclined to allow. That might change with mobile technologies, of course.

10. What must future virtual world researchers focus on, in order to better understand the culture of virtual worlds?

Nick Yee (Snowdrift Heron): Several things. Looking beyond WoW and SL. Exploring longitudinal data to understand how the real and virtual interleave and change each other over time. And while the data deluge can be overwhelming, there are also many potential innovations in terms of leveraging the systems themselves to collect data that wasn't possible to collect before.

Sarah Robbins (Intellagirl Tully): Before we can focus on the cultures of virtual worlds, I think we need to focus on the culture of virtual worlds research. It's developed in this kind of spotty transdisciplinary way. Many fields approaching the same object from many different angles. My work attempts to create some kind of shared lingo, a shared foundation so the dialogue between researchers can be more productive. So our findings can talk to each other rather than past each other. We don't need new methods; we just need to establish some shared paradigms so our research can better form a cohesive conversation.

Keywords: virtual worlds; research methods; culture; Computer-Mediated Communications.