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### **Journalism in Virtual Worlds**

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### **Abstract**

*This article is based on the idea that immersive journalism in virtual worlds, specifically in Second Life®, has similarities with online journalism. To sustain this premise, the literature reviewed will follow the debate about journalism on the Internet, writing and reporting across new media, and speculate on the idea that a new concept of journalism in virtual worlds is growing, as an example of a new trend in journalistic practice. Questions such as the legitimacy of new forms of journalism, and especially of the pertinence of new environments, where they may be put to practice, will be addressed. Consequently, the focus on this paper is journalism in 3D environments. The discussion will provide ideas of new trends on an old business.*

**Keywords:** cyber journalism, immersive journalism, digital immigration.

## **Journalism in Virtual Worlds**

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Second Life<sup>®</sup> has enjoyed a steady growth, throughout its existence. It has not yet become mainstream, but it generates a significant amount of revenue. Its many uses include education and e-commerce. This paper explores some practices within this virtual world that can be classified as journalism or some sort of news-making.

Participatory, grassroots journalism has exploded with the development, dissemination, and usability of Web publishing software (Kolodzy 2006: 217). Similarly, as citizen journalists have been gaining their stand in the real world, the possibility that the same may be happening in Second Life<sup>®</sup>, a world entirely built upon user-generated content, seems significant. Residents are interested in knowing what goes on in this immersive environment (Howard, 2006). Interactiveness, a feature of Web journalism (Stovall, 2004: 2) is also an important trait of journalism in virtual worlds. However, another trend is also observable, as individuals are “likely to become sources of information” and “provide valuable perspective to journalists who are new to a story and not part of the community they cover” (Stovall, 2004: 15). Ultimately, in the examples enumerated above, news values such as impact, currency, prominence or proximity (Stovall, 2004: 37) are identifiable in the information that is treated as news, in a journalistic sense. This is where journalism and news making enters. Some models of journalism are already established in Second Life<sup>®</sup>. Virtual bureaus, Web sites, blogs and even in-world newspapers are dedicated to covering the daily routines of avatars and events generated by users. This paper focuses on some examples: Metanomics, Treet TV, The Alphaville Herald, Metaverse Journal, CNN iReport, New World Notes, Metaverse Tribune and Metaverse TV. To support this trend, a group interview with some specialists on immersive journalism in Second Life<sup>®</sup> will be the source for some of the ideas drawn in the following sections, together with some literature on online journalism.

### **Online journalism from Web to virtual worlds: trends and perspectives**

Journalism is dealing with major changes due to the new, technological, interactive platforms being introduced, that make media content available continually, everywhere (Latar and Nordfors, 2009, p. 5). Virtual worlds such as Second Life<sup>®</sup> will be a very

important platform for the creating of new hybrid content (Thompson et al., 2010). These occurring changes are also supported by the fact that “technology and its influence on the society have fueled the charge to transform the current media model” (Friend and Singer 2007, p. 13).

Today the news website is the preferred area for cyber journalism. However, some new media industries, which have developed from the Internet, such as Twitter, Facebook or Google are not focused on producing content, but rather on disseminating it. This fact attests the separation between journalism and media, which means that “the latest generation of producers of journalism is no longer involved in the processes or infrastructures of mass communication” (Latar and Nordfors, 2009, p. 5).

Journalism is now entering new fields such as immersive journalism. Second Life<sup>®</sup>, as an immersive environment, could be compared to a small town of 18 million people where local news are the dominant paradigm (Thompson et al., 2010).

In spite of these structural changes in the process of news making, in order to maintain practices and identities, the essence of journalism remains to be described in “principles of journalism, such as those suggested by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) and the Committee of Concerned:

- Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth;
- Its first loyalty is to the citizens;
- Its essence is a discipline of verification;
- Its practitioners must maintain independence monitor of power;
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise;
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant;
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional;
- Its practitioners must be allowed to practice their personal conscience.

A new definition of journalism, focused on content, and separated from the media, where virtual worlds are emerging as important players, must keep in mind “the principles of journalism, and be based on the relation between journalism and its audience, rather than on its relation to the medium it uses for communicating with the audience” (Latar and Nordfors 2009, p. 23).

### **News and journalistic practices in virtual worlds**

The development of the Web has little to do with journalism, but much to do with news and information (Stovall, 2004, p. 2). An extension of this line of thought implies that the control of the information fluxes is in the hands of the end-user, the citizen, rather than in the hands of the news outlet, be it the newspaper, TV station or radio. In virtual worlds, it is possible to find instances comparable with traditional journalistic practices of one source aimed at many users. This section aims at illustrating some examples of traditional forms of journalism and new forms of news making in virtual worlds. They all convey original content and, in some cases, original reporting, representing the top level in the news content scale (Stovall, 2004, p. 16-20).

### *Metanomics*

Metanomics is a web-based show organized by Remedy Communications, a Canadian marketing agency based in Toronto. The company is a leading developer of immersive media technology, which it uses for training, education, and collaboration. Metanomics broadcasts a mixed reality show with interviews, from a physical location, with a synchronous presence in Second Life<sup>®</sup>, and an on-line live stream to the Web, allowing, at the same time, for any individual attending the show to ask questions to the host or the anchor. As Keltz stated “(...) you have these two thousand people who see it synchronously. They’re actually there, in the audience. And you have also thousands of people that might watch it live and in real time.” (Thompson et al., 2010). This way, a completely synchronous experience is provided with full interactivity with the audience. The virtual talk show is focused in linking participants in conferences in physical locations with avatars in Second Life<sup>®</sup>. Cornell University Professor Robert Bloomfield hosts the show, and it is broadcasted in partnership with Treet.tv (see below). It has been running for almost five years. This show takes advantage of the qualities of the Web (Stovall, 2004, p. 10): capacity, meaning that it is possible to host a quasi-infinite amount of information on a site, immediacy, flexibility, permanence, but, most of all, interactivity. Ultimately, this show is a good example of narrowcasting at a much lower cost (Thompson et al., 2010). Besides, it includes the possibility of positive feedback, by broadcasting the backchat after having filtered it.

According to Marty Keltz, “(...) Metanomics as it becomes the seminal form of what journalism will look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because it provides for a completely synchronous experience.” (Thompson et al., 2010).



Fig. 1: Metanomics show (Web interface on the left and Second Life interface on the right).

### *Treet. TV and Metaverse TV*

Treet TV is a company that works to provide content to virtual worlds viewers since 2007. It uses a collaborative production model allowing shows to be broadcasted into Second Life® and the Web (<http://treet.tv>). Shows include fashion, sports, music, news and special live broadcasts. The selection of content is based on editorial decisions that have to do with the perspective of good ratings or with the quality of the items themselves (Thompson et al., 2010).

The Metaverse TV is part of the Metaverse Broadcasting Company, dedicated to using virtual worlds to build and engage a global audience. This company includes the Metaverse Tribune - <http://metaversetribune.com/> - an online newspaper dedicated to virtual worlds.



Fig. 2: Treet.tv and Metaverse TV web sites.

### *Immersive Journalism*



Immersive journalism is an innovative form of news making. It allows citizens to put themselves in the role of participants in a certain event, by replicating it in virtual reality. This provides an opportunity for a spatial narrative through the concept of immersive reporting. The concept is based on the possibility of the user to role-play and act out a particular story, acquiring a different perspective, from a participatory point of view. It allows the rethinking of a story beyond a linear narrative (Stovall, 2004, p. 64). The need to find new information flows by new audiences (Kolodzy, 2006) is visible through the existence of an audience interested in this concept of immersive reporting. The first person experience of an event allows the participant to enter a virtually built scenario that represents the news story, which enables the viewing of the report in a first-person perspective. Images and sounds from the original story are used to keep the participant in mind that the experience is a nonfiction story. The story may be experienced in different points, but it doesn't shift. An example of immersive journalism is the video of John F. Kennedy assassination under the perspective of the killer, available at Immersive Journalism website (<http://www.immersivejournalism.com/?p=44>):



Fig. 3: John F. Kennedy assassination video clips (source: <http://www.jfkhistory.com>)

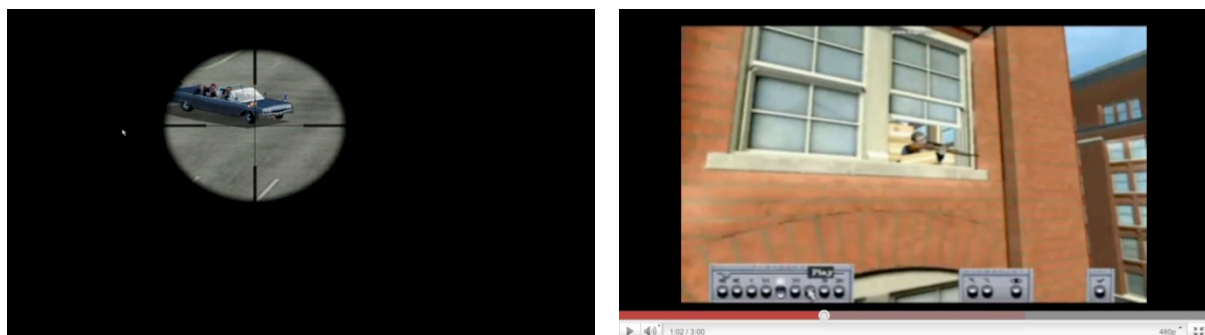






Fig. 4: Example of immersive journalism: the assassination of President Kennedy through the perspective of the shooter.

Another example of immersive journalism is the reproduction of the environment in the Guantanamo Bay prison. Both examples allow for the experience of the event according to the perspective of a different agent.



Fig. 5: Guantanamo Bay photographs (prisoner and cell).

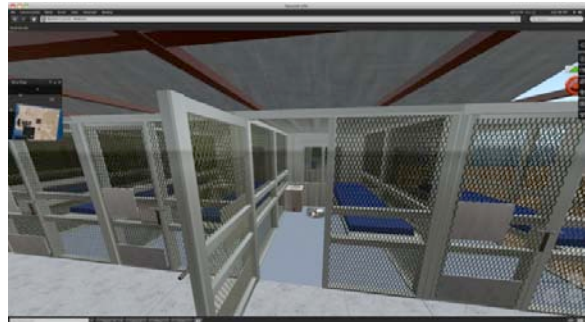


Fig. 6: Virtual representation of Guantanamo Bay, through a self-narrative process.

It is possible to reproduce the environment of Guantanamo Bay through a first-person narrative, in a virtual environment. The experience includes sounds and photos embedded in the virtual simulation, keeping the user in touch with the real situation.

### *Online Web-bases newspapers and blogs*

The Metaverse Journal (<http://metaversetv.com/>) is a Web-based newspaper-style Australian blog focused on the coverage of events about business, education, health and general news related to virtual worlds. Similarly, The Metaverse Tribune or the Virtual Worlds News report events or facts that have a direct relation to virtual worlds. Their focus is somewhat different from Metaverse, since they are mainly aimed at technological advances within virtual environments. The Alphaville Hearld (<http://alphavilleherald.com/>), another on-line newspaper, was founded in 2003 and intends to observe and report social implication of life in the virtual world.



Fig. 7: The Metaverse Tribune, an online newspaper about virtual worlds.

The blog New Worlds Notes, by Wagner James is a landmark in the blogosphere of virtual worlds. Weblogs, though, for many, are not journalism. They do not include in many cases the traditional editing process. Nonetheless, they are a good example of the interactiveness of the Web (Stovall, 2004, p. 33).

### *Participatory journalism in Second Life®*

CNN, through the iReport model, allows the participation of virtual citizens in the making of the news. CNN introduced citizen journalism in Second Life® (Thompson et al.,

2010). News audiences are seeking and demanding news from different outlets and in different channels, including new and innovative technological channels (Kolodzy, 2006, p. 217). The news inflow is noticeable, and as of June 18, 2010, the site includes 74 different entries, starting in February 11, 2008 until June 17, 2010. The latest "stories from Second Life", as referred in the project (it is noticeable the absence of the word 'news' or 'reports') include the 2010 FIFA World Cup™, and news related to the oil leak in the Mexican Gulf.

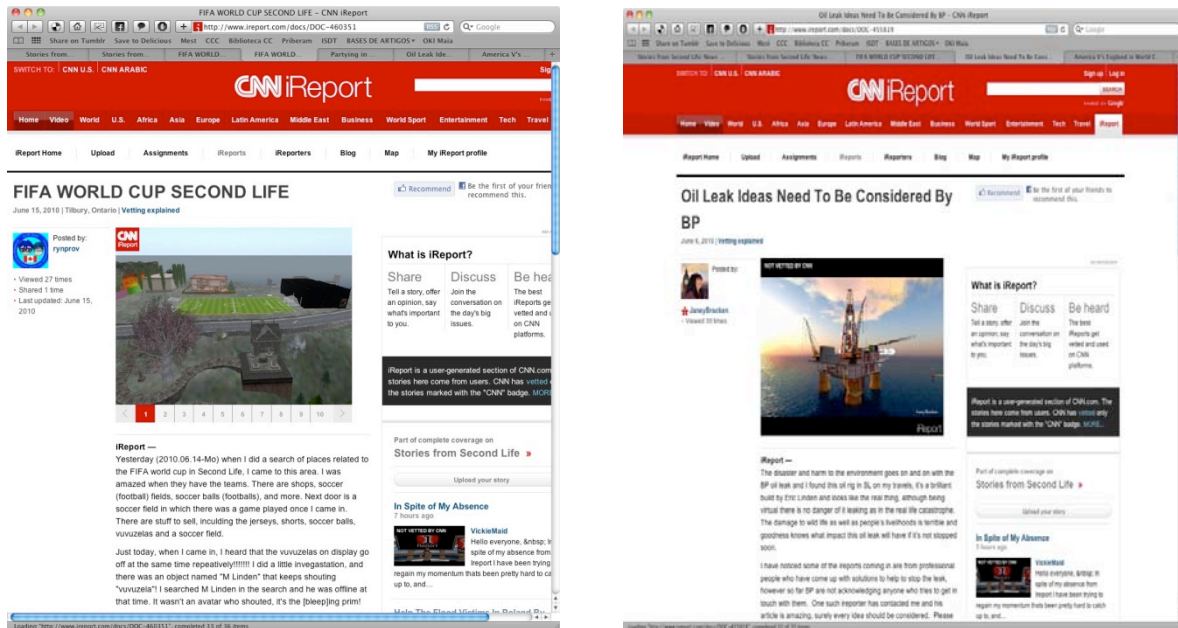


Fig. 8: CNN iReport examples.

There is no gatekeeping process, as stories are not edited, screened or fact-checked. Participatory, grassroots journalism has exploded with the dissemination, and usability of Web publishing software (Kolodzy, 2006). This is also true in the Web 2.0 environment. The most important news stories, that have a significant impact, will be cleared by CNN and made part of CNN's news coverage. This attitude of curating content is a form of validating the information, and it significantly improves user-generated content, considering that the CNN brand suggests a high standard of news content, making it a desirable brand to be associated with. In today's communication and journalism model the curator and the gatekeeper are in the same dimension of the community (Thompson et al., 2010). iReport is a good example of this merging process.

## Conclusion

Journalistic culture is adapting to new technologies, but also to new organizational structures, including user expectations of input (Friend and Singer, 2007, p. 35). In Second

Life<sup>®</sup>, journalism can be seen from the perspective of how information is collected, from a variety of news media and how news is been created as people interact with those platforms (Thompson et al., 2010).

In virtual worlds, there are several practices of journalism, as was explained in this article. The real news in Second Life<sup>®</sup> are the interactiveness and the immersive experiences. Immersive journalism is also about real facts, and their repercussion on the virtual environment. As Marty Kelts explains, the role of the journalist is just changing media. Journalists could take a photo of a burning building or Tiananmen Square or the uprising in Egypt and that is news. But news is not the same as journalism. But the ownership of the news is no longer exclusive to journalists.

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