Virtual worlds don't exist

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Abstract: I argue that much of MMO-related scholarship is implicitly based on a dichotomous "real world vs. virtual world" model, which is heavily influenced by the "magic circle" concept in game studies. I show a number of shortcomings in this perspective and propose an alternative perspective based on Anselm Strauss's social worlds (Strauss, 1978). The alternative perspective unbundles users from the technological platform and places MMO-centered social worlds in context with other worlds like religion and workplace.

1. INTRODUCTION

[T]his book is not about analogies. We won't tell you that devising business strategies is like restoring an ecosystem, fighting a war, or making love. Business strategy is business strategy and though analogies can sometimes be helpful, they can also be misleading. Our view is that analogies can be an effective way to communicate strategies, but they are a very dangerous way to analyze strategies.

Shapiro & Varian, *Information rules*

In academic literature, certain online games and services are referred to as "virtual worlds" and compared to cities (Taylor, 2006: 21), countries (Castronova, 2006b) and most frequently, the Earth (e.g. Castronova, 2002; Castronova, 2006a; Nash & Schneyer, 2004, Lastowka & Hunter, 2004). Such language is intended to communicate the scale and complexity of these systems and the activities that take place within them. But the powerful metaphor also affects the conceptual framework from which researchers draw their research design. Since I attempt to argue in this paper that the term virtual world invites inaccurate assumptions about the entity it describes, I will refer to massively-multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) and similar open-ended environments using the less popular term *MMO* (massively-multiplayer online).

By any measure, academic interest in MMOs is growing. According to a "virtual law bibliography" put together by Greg Lastowka, three times as many articles were published in 2007 as were in 2006.[1] To guide and focus research efforts related to

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[1] http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2008/03/virtual-law-b-1.html

MMOs, several research agendas have been put forward. For example, Caroline Bradley and A. Michael Froomkin suggest using MMOs to conduct legal experiments that would be too costly to carry out "in the real world" (Bradley & Froomkin, 2004: 103). Edward Castronova argues that MMOs are the "social science equivalent of a petri dish, or a supercollider" (Castronova, 2006a: 170). Robert Bloomfield advocates the development of a special MMO for the purpose of education and research in business disciplines (Bloomfield, 2007). Most recently, David Bray and Benn Konsynski attempt to outline opportunities for researching "intra-world and inter-world practice and behavior" from several disciplinary perspectives (Bray & Konsynski, 2007).

The problem with these agendas and various other MMO studies is that they are based on a dichotomous "real–virtual" perspective to MMOs. In her extensive study on the real–virtual boundary around *EverQuest*, T.L. Taylor concludes that "To imagine we can segregate these things – game and non-game, […] virtual and real – not only misunderstands our relationship with technology, but our relationship with culture." (Taylor, 2006: 153) From a practical point of view, the dichotomous model is an inaccurate description of the situation and may lead the researcher to building their research on false assumptions.

In this paper, I present new arguments against the dichotomous perspective and proceed to suggest an alternative based on Anselm Strauss's social world perspective (Strauss, 1978). I use the following structure: In part two, I describe the dichotomous perspective by focusing on exemplary works. In part three, I plot some data points that the current model has difficulty coping with, using literature and my own observations. In part four, put forward a new model that claims to account for the data better. Finally, in part five, I discuss what implications the new perspective carries for research.

This manuscript has been written from scratch in a span of two weeks, so a lot of mistakes and omissions surely remain. For the same reason it is also quite verbose. I beg the reader's patience and forgiveness.

2. VIRTUAL WORLDS VS. THE REAL WORLD

Virtual worlds are now a reality. Virtual worlds allow everyone to create a digital character representing themselves and interact with other computer-generated individuals, landscapes, virtually-run global businesses, and in-world institutions in real-time. Fascinatingly, both endogenously produced economies and social orders are emerging in these virtual worlds. Political candidates are campaigning in virtual worlds, while some sales of virtual assets are producing demand in the real world for equivalent items.

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Most academic discourse concerning MMOs contains an implied dichotomy: *virtual world* versus the *real world*. This particular way of conceptualising the situation can be

seen as heritage from two earlier traditions: games and the Internet. In Internet discourse, use of terms such as "IRL" and "cyberspace" illustrates thinking where network-mediated communication is conceptualised as activity and space distinct and separate from the affairs of the "meatspace". A very explicit and influential expression of this thinking is John Perry Barlow's *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (Barlow, 1996). The essence of Barlow's manifesto is that a new world is emerging on the Internet, and that it is quite distinct from the old one. The word "world" is repeated in the text thirteen times.

In computer game parlance, developers and gamers have obviously long been using the term "world" when discussing games such as *Civilization*, but in this use it is more of a label than a statement regarding one's conceptualisation of reality. The conceptual dichotomy I am talking about can be found among players of role-playing games, who use the terms "in-game" and "out-of-game" to draw a line between "the game" and "the rest of the world". In more scholarly circles, this boundary is known as the "magic circle". The concept is associated with Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, who defined play/game as follows:

> [A] free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.[2]

This "magic circle" view of games has been influential in contemporary game studies (see e.g. Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). According to Lin and Sun (2007), this view entails treating the game as "a world independent of the everyday real world." The best play experience is achieved when the game is "insulated from or opposite to the utilitarian characteristics of the physical world" (Lin & Sun, 2007: 336). Many game researchers have since joined in the discussion to argue in support of or against the view (e.g. Copier, 2005).

In crossdisciplinary studies on MMOs, two authors who explicitly invoke the magic circle concept are Edward Castronova (2004) and Greg Lastowka (2007). Lastowka deals with the question of how law should deal with new MMORPG-related legal issues, such as real-money trading of virtual assets. Lastowka's main argument is that play does not "conform to the reason and logic of 'ordinary life'", and that law must consequently treat game activities differently from "ordinary life".

> When a sumo wrestler enters the "magic circle" of the *dohyo* or the professional boxer enters the space and time of the bout, the rules of what social behaviors are desirable and forbidden are suddenly, radically changed. Violent and powerful

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[2] Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo Ludens.* Boston: The Beacon Press. Quoted in Copier (2005: 6).

physical attacks against another person, which are normally forbidden by law and social norms, become the obligatory mode of conduct. (Lastowka, 2007: 8)

Inspired by Huizinga's ideas, Lastowka makes a clear distinction between MMOs and the outside world. "[W]hile MMORPGs have some things in common with weblogs and social networks, they are also very different from other forms of online activity", since "MMORPGs are *games*" (Lastowka, 2007: 3). According to Lastowka, courts and lawyers already understand the special status of the golf course and the baseball field, and they should now extend the same understanding to MMORPGs. Courts should set aside conventional rules in favour of the "rules of play".

Castronova, one of the most cited authors in MMO studies, argues in *The Right to Play* (Castronova, 2004) that all humans have a fundamental need to play. To define what qualifies as play, he refers to Huizinga:

> For Huizinga, nothing can be a game if it involves moral consequence […] if some consequence really does matter in the end, the game is over. In fact, the only act of moral consequence that can happen within a game is the act of ending the game, denying its as-if character, spoiling the fantasy [...] (Castronova, 2004: 188-189)

The urge to play is "buried very deeply in our psyches, well below rational thought and somewhat above the urge to eat and have sex", and if the need goes unsatisfied, terrible things happen (Castronova, 2004: 202-203). Virtual worlds, Castronova argues, are a great place to satisfy this need in a safe way. "They are worlds much like our world, and humans are beginning to spend many hours in them, playing games" (Castronova, 2004: 189). The only problem is that the real world is "seeping" into these worlds. This makes acts of "play" meaningful in the "real world", spoiling the game and depriving humans of their right to play. Castronova concludes that impermeability of the magic circle should therefore be protected by law.

Works that do not explicitly invoke the magic circle usually implicitly adopt similar dichotomous perspectives. In *On the Research Value of Large Games* (Castronova, 2006a), Castronova forgoes "seeping reality" and suggests that virtual worlds can be independent societies:

> Until now, it has not been possible to take all of society as a research object [...] Thus, although we might believe theoretically, historically, and ethnographically that society operates a certain way, and we might have small-scale experiments that support our beliefs, it has generally not been possible to observe whole societies under controlled conditions. Now however, with the advent of synthetic world technology, it is indeed possible to replicate entire societies and allow them to operate in parallel. (Castronova, 2006a: 163)

As a demonstration of this research method, Castronova observes that players in *EverQuest* and *Dark Age of Camelot* end up converging in certain meeting places even

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though no such place has been agreed on beforehand; a result predicted by game theory. For Castronova, this "indicates that the theory of coordination games does indeed operate on a large-scale level in human societies." (Castronova, 2006a: 179) Castronova thus positions virtual worlds as a kind of computerised doppelgänger of Earthly societies.

The doppelgänger perspective also permeates a recent article on multi-disciplinary research opportunities in virtual worlds by Bray and Konsynski (2007). According to Bray and Konsynski (2007: 24), "Virtual worlds allow everyone to create a digital character and interact with other computer-generated individuals, landscapes, and virtually-run businesses. Both endogenously produced economies and social orders are emerging in these virtual worlds." Bray and Konsynski do not follow Castronova's isolationist view, focusing mainly on *Second Life* and discussing "inter-world practices and behaviour" extensively, but they do imply that virtual worlds are host to a great variety of virtual versions of real-world phenomena: virtual business, virtual cities, virtual inhabitants, virtual revolution, virtual citizens and virtual laws, to name a few. The word "virtual" is repeated 245 times in the 9-page article.

Bray and Konsynski's work as well as other discussions above suggest that the virtual world–real world dichotomy so prevalent in MMO scholarship can be broken down to a number of dimensions. One set of dimensions identifiable from the discussions is the following:

- Virtual space vs. real space
- Population of a virtual world vs. real-world population
- Virtual identity vs. real identity
- Relationships in a virtual world vs. relationships in the real world
- Virtual social structures vs. real-world social structures
- Virtual economy vs. real economy
- Virtual commodities vs. real commodities
- Virtual law and politics vs. real law and politics

In the next part, I will examine each of these dimensions in more detail, visiting some well-known holes in the theory and pointing out a few new ones.

3. POKING HOLES IN THE SKY

Virtual space vs. real space

The most concrete dimension of the real–virtual dichotomy is space. MMOs are designed to simulate geometrical space in one way or the other: *Habbo Hotel* consists of rooms and hallways, *World of Warcraft* ('*WoW*') servers contain seas and continents, while *EVE Online* ('*EVE*') carries a small galaxy of stars. While users must necessarily remain on Earth, all their actions are directed towards these simulated spaces. Thus users and scholars alike have come accept the simulations as distinct spaces for most intents and purposes, with the necessary caveat of them being computer mediated.

But the demarcations of virtual space are not unambiguous. In addition to the plains and planets of *WoW* and *EVE,* players make their presence known on discussion forums, chats, voice communication servers and video sharing sites. Johnson and Toiskallio (2005) describe how *Habbo Hotel* spills over to user-maintained fan sites and fanzines. If a researcher was to limit their scope to the MMO server only, they would certainly miss a lot of what constitutes the "world" where the action is played out. At the same time, many of these media could equally well be described as belonging to the real world.

Yet even in the core of virtual space, real space cannot be ignored. Guilds in *WoW* and corporations in *EVE* recruit members based on the continent and time zone where they reside in. For *WoW* raiding guilds it is important that members can be online simultaneously for an extended period of time. For *EVE* alliances engaged in war over territory, it is vital that members are available to keep guard at all hours. Thus it is common for corporations to advertise that new members are sought in e.g. Western Europe or U.S East Coast. In battles over space stations, warring parties try to cause engagements at times that are inconvenient for the opponent. Combs (2008) was notified by his *EVE* alliance superiors that "sleep is cancelled". Real geographical location cannot be ignored in discussions that ostensibly only touch on the virtual space, and vice versa.

Other *EVE* warfare tactics that invoke the real world are logging out when attacked to avoid confrontation, and using a massive number of ships to slow down a server so much as to make any conflict impossible. Server lag is also frequently experienced in a solar system called Jita, because it is a favourite trading spot. This out-of-game phenomenon has lead to Jita taking on a bad in-game reputation.

Virtual population vs. real-world population

The population of a virtual world would be useful to know for purposes such as comparing real and virtual spaces, for calculating *per capita* macroeconomic indicators, and for generalising from samples to obtain population-level aggregates, but it turns out that the population of a virtual world is a more ambiguous concept than the population of a country. Castronova (2006b) equates population with the average number of avatars concurrently logged in (which may be slightly larger than the number of concurrent users, since some users may simultaneously use several accounts). He also introduces the concept of a "resident": a user who agrees with the statement "I live in Norrath [the name of the fictional world of *EverQuest*] but I travel outside of it regularly" (Castronova, 2006b).

However, measuring concurrent users yields small population figures and large *per capita* indicators[3], and is conceptually questionable on the basis that sleeping people are not deducted from real population figures. Castronova (2002) develops an alternative approach, the idea that when people spend a lot of time in a virtual space, their impact on

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[3] E.g. "GNP per capita somewhere between that of Russia and Bulgaria", much quoted in the media.

the real one is so diminished as to become negligible. How to measure this and where to draw the line is difficult, however. Thus in Castronova (2006a), he equates the population of a server to simply the total number of users (avatars, actually); not just concurrent or those who log in frequently, but all.

The latter approach prevails in other sources as well. Bray and Konsynski state that *Second Life* has 7 200 000 "participants" (Bray & Konsynski, 2007: 18), which is probably based on the "Second Life residents" figure published by the MMO's operator Linden Lab. But journalist Clay Shirky (2006) has drawn attention to the fact that the "residents" figure is highly misleading. It measures the total number of accounts created, and since creating an account is free, it includes multiple accounts by the same people, accounts that were created and never used, and accounts that are no longer used. Thus Bray and Konsynski's "participants" include e.g. people who tried the MMO once and never logged in again.[4]

Some efforts are underway to create comparable active user statistics for MMOs, but one difficulty is that the amount of play that qualifies as "active participation" varies between different MMOs. In any case, such figures are not the same as the population of a virtual world.

Virtual identity vs. real identity

One dimension of the real–virtual dichotomy is found in individual identity. According to Castronova (2006b), virtual worlds "give you a freedom that no one has on Earth: the freedom to be whomever you want to be." The underlying idea is that people have two identities, one for the real world and one for the virtual world.

However, it seems that these identities refuse to stay separate. In *EVE Online*, an MMORPG set in the deep space of far future, where all memory of Earth is lost, many players choose to prominently display a national flag, presumably corresponding to their real-world nationality, on their avatar's profile. The flag is drawn using coloured character blocks and is sometimes accompanied by suitable mottos. A more mundane example of real-world identity in MMOs is the fact that many users, if not most, use the MMOs' communication features to discuss their lives, recent events and things they are interested in. And even when discussing MMO-related issues, the language they use and the values and attitudes their discourse reveals reflect their real-world identity for all but the best role-players. Castronova (2005) suggests that in the future the problem might perhaps be solved with a very advanced AI translator:

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[4] Bray and Konsynski also state that *Entropia Universe*, a sci-fi themed MMO game, has 500 000 "virtual inhabitants". They do not cite a source for this information, but the game's website (http://www.entropiauniverse.com/en/rich/5357.html) contains the following statement: "With participants from all over the globe, the online community has grown to over 500 000 participants from over 220 countries on Earth." The latter figure seems surprising, given that only 193 countries are generally internationally recognised. Perhaps the missing 27 are virtual countries.

The sentiment of "Hey man there's this big-a$$ dragon right behind you, get moving" must be understood and then re-rendered as "Hail, friend! The fire-breathing beast approacheth! Avaunt!" (Castronova, 2005: 90).

However, while a translator can change words, it cannot change intention and attitudes behind those words; attitudes that are very much 21st century and not part of e.g. a medieval identity. Movement obviously happens the other way, too: players' accomplishments, experiences and relationships in an MMO carry over to "real identity" (e.g. Taylor, 2006; Fung, 2006). Furthermore, there is the question of how unitary a virtual identity can be considered, considering practices such as alts, account sharing (Taylor, 2006: 47) or the "spy metagame" in *EVE Online* (Combs, 2008).

Relationships in a virtual world vs. relationships in the real world

Even allowing that identities do not respect the real–virtual boundary, it remains that social relationships in which these identities engage are sometimes wholly computer-mediated. At least since Rheingold's *Virtual Community* (Rheingold, 2000) no-one has doubted that friendships mediated by computer networks can be as deep and meaningful as those acted out face-to-face. But it is equally well recognised that distinguishing between "real world friends" and "virtual world friends" can be difficult.

Some relationships are obviously carried from the physical world into an MMO and vice versa. According to Johnson and Toiskallio (2005), approximately a quarter of all Finnish 10-19 –year-olds visit *Habbo Hotel* regularly. Teens can play with friends at school, go home, log into *Habbo Hotel* and continue playing with much the same friends. Taylor (2006: 52-55) describes family members playing *EverQuest* together (see also Williams et al, 2006). Pinckard (2006) describes how business acquaintances gather in *WoW* to enjoy their free time, discuss business and build networks, much in the same way as some others do on golf courses. Fung (2006) and Huhh (2007) discuss gaming cafés and "PC bangs" where players and guilds interact with each other face-to-face while at the same time participating in an MMO. Guilds and MMO publishers also frequently organise player gatherings and conventions.

In addition to face-to-face-meetings, guild communications take place on discussion forums, instant messaging services and even on regular phones and SMS messages. One incentive for expanding MMO-mediated relationships into other media is the increased trust it can build. *EVE* in particular is a high-stakes game where allies may want to get quite intimate before relying on each other extensively (on *EverQuest*, see Taylor, 2006: 46-47). Such relationships are not easily described using a real–virtual dichotomy.

Social relationships also include antagonistic ones. Propaganda and intimidation directed towards opponents is disseminated on multiple media, including YouTube (on propaganda in *EVE*, see Combs, 2008).

Virtual social structures vs. real-world social structures

According to Castronova (2004), an important benefit of MMOs is that they allow players to engage in behaviour that would not be possible for them outside the game. This may be due to physical limits, but also due to the baggage of social structures and established practices that condition our everyday actions. Castronova's ideal virtual getaway is an MMO where real-world structures do not reach, and virtual behaviour is conditioned only by a new set of virtual structures and practices. In practice, though, this ideal is seldom reached: for example, secondary markets allow wealthy individuals to purchase powerful game characters. Castronova (2004) describes this as real-world structures seeping into the virtual.

An essential virtual world social structure is the MMORPG guild, which affects the behaviour of members (and others, e.g. those wishing to become members) in many ways (e.g. Williams et al, 2006). But while a typical guild is a group of players playing the same game together, guilds also exist independently of any particular game, moving from MMO to MMO or participating in several simultaneously. According to CCP Chief China Representative Horace Xiong (personal communication, 16 May 2007), Chinese "trans-game megaguilds" can have up to a hundred thousand members. Their feuds and alliances transcend any single game, turning individual MMOs into part of a larger metagame. This situation becomes difficult to describe using a simple real–virtual model.

MMOs also have lifecycles, which cause action observed inside an MMO to intensify at one point, calm down at another. Launches of new content, expansion packs, game balancing ("nerfs") and game journalism affect behaviour inside an MMO. I also hypothesise that such a mundane variable as whether the family computer is placed in the living room or the bedroom has a strong effect on the users' propensity to visit certain areas in *Second Life*.

Virtual economy vs. real economy

Virtual economies have been at the heart of the debate concerning the relationship between virtual worlds and the real world from the start. Real-money trade of virtual property (RMT) is said to open a door for real-world rationalism and economic inequalities to seep into the virtual world (Castronova, 2004). On the other hand, a common retort is that having no RMT markets unfairly advantages those players who have more real-world time on their hands. In any case, while RMT started as a clandestine rule-bending player-to-player activity, selling virtual commodities is increasingly becoming a revenue model for MMO operators (for a discussion of virtual asset sales and the magic circle, see Lin & Sun, 2007).

Even without RMT, virtual economies are not isolated from the real world. Nash and Schneyer (2004) describe a situation where the release of an MMO title to a new market creates an influx of new players, which translates to a sudden rise in the number of low-level avatars, which in turn has a significant impact on the game's internal economy. They also observe that the prices of certain goods fluctuate as a function of the time of

day, because Japanese players have different demand characteristics compared to North American players.

Another situation where the "real world" penetrates into virtual economies is when operators conduct game balancing or "nerfing", which can dramatically affect the in-game value of virtual commodities.

Virtual commodities vs. real commodities

The objects being traded on the marketplaces of virtual economies are variously known as virtual property, virtual assets, virtual items or virtual commodities. Such language tends to imply that the objects are somehow "virtual versions" or "simulations" of some actual, real, physical objects. However, there are plenty of virtual assets that do not have any "physical" counterpart. Even those that have an intuitive counterpart (e.g. clothes) can have uses and attributes that are completely different from the physical object. Thus it is more accurate to see virtual assets as a new independent category of assets; assets that are sometimes "inspired" by certain commonplace objects, but not "virtual versions" of them. This is regardless of what term we use to refer to them.

In many cases, the desirability of a virtual commodity stems from its role and meaning inside the service that hosts it. At the same time, some publishers attempt to make virtual assets attractive by importing and attaching meanings to them from the "outside", the surrounding popular culture. For example, *Cyworld* sells decorative items shaped after famous characters from popular anime series and online games, while many games and services feature seasonal decorations like Christmas trees and Halloween masks. *Second Life* has a large variety of branded objects.

Virtual law and politics vs. real-world law and politics

In the previous part of this paper, I summarised Lastowka's (2007) fairly convincing argument that virtual worlds should be treated exceptionally by courts, because they are play spaces. Joshua Fairfield shows that the exceptionalistic foundation in this argument is misguided:

> At first blush, the magic circle seems to apply. The action took place in a "virtual," and not a "real" world, and so legal liability should not follow. But upon careful examination, the distinction between "real" and "virtual" world fails. When a player enters a world in which player vs. player conflict is enabled, she *consents* to contact. (Fairfield, 2008: 18; my emphasis)

Fairfield's point is that implied consent and community standards are (or should be) taken into account *always* when courts apply law; not just in the case of sports and games like sumo and *WoW*, but in the case of every industry and pursuit. Thus while Fairfield agrees with Lastowka in that "rules of play" must be taken seriously by courts, he denies that there is anything out of the conventional or "virtual" about this.

As for virtual politics, the most eager souls point to predictions of "social order independent of, and in several ways transcending, real-world governments" as well as "the waning importance of real-world governments" (Bray & Konsynski, 2007: 20). But the perspective afforded by Fairfield (2008) shows that at least for now, virtual world politics are strictly subordinate to real-world politics: they create rules of play that are interpreted by real-world judiciaries.

4. A SOCIAL WORLD PERSPECTIVE

Summarising the above findings, we find that any study of a "virtual world" should take into account the following caveats:

- the space the virtual world occupies may not be clearly defined;
- its population is indeterminate;
- its visitors' identity is linked to the outside;
- for any social interaction it may only constitute part of the context;
- outside structures and practices condition behaviour within it;
- its economy is open to outside influences; and
- its commodities may derive their value from references to the outside.

Clearly, the notion of a virtual world begins to seem strained. A large number of caveats touches upon every aspect of the concept. Thus far, the typical strategy for authors (myself included) to deal with this has been to treat the caveats as "links" or "interaction" between the real world and the virtual world. This strategy attempts to address the issues while still clinging on to the dichotomous model. But as the review above shows, the exceptions are beginning to pile up to such an extent that they are becoming very difficult for a researcher to keep track of. It is time to seek a better way of conceptualising the situation.

The main shortcoming of the virtual world model is that it bundles together an MMO server and a set of social groups and practices, and assumes that their boundaries coincide and line up so perfectly that they can be subsumed into a single entity. As the above examples illustrate, these boundaries do not in fact always line up. Firstly, the user group and culture of an MMO often encompass the whole server, but also extend to other servers, media and platforms. Secondly, other groups including families, business circles and localities overlap with the MMO, and the MMO is crisscrossed by larger entities such as megaguilds, nationalities and movements in popular culture. From the perspective of the "one server, one people" virtual world model, any activity in these non-overlapping areas appears as an anomaly.

The first step towards a better model is therefore to uncouple the technological platform from the user groups and their culture. This means stepping back and re-evaluating the relevant boundaries of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Do the boundaries of a complete computer-mediated "society" really coincide with the limits of an *EverQuest* server, as Castronova (2006a) suggests? Or should we also look at guild servers and forum

discussions as parallel modes of the same social world? The point is not to give up on boundaries altogether and let the research turn into mist, but to avoid drawing artificial ones based on technical distinctions alone (unless it is the technology that one is researching).

The second step towards a better model is to re-embed the MMO in the rest of social reality. The dichotomous model suggests that virtual world and real world are like night and day, mind and body. But discussions above have placed MMOs in the same contexts as mundane social groups such as families, business circles and neighbourhoods. Indeed, scholars frequently refer to the user base of an MMO as "the community", recalling Rheingold's (2000) notion of a virtual community.[5] This is an ill-fitting term, however, considering that Rheingold's virtual community as well as the classical sociological notion of community are characterised by familiarity, unity and even intimacy that a group of million individuals who buy a box or create an account on a website will clearly not share.

To find a more fitting abstraction, I suggest looking at sociologist Anselm Strauss's (1978) *social world perspective*. Strauss was contributing to a research stream that had historically focused on either macro-level group encounters, e.g. those involving ethnic, racial and nationalistic groups, or the enormous proliferation of micro-level social groups which are not necessarily clearly boundaried or organised. His aim was to unify these approaches in a perspective that is holistic yet captures the fluidity of the social reality.

According to Strauss, social worlds are "universes of discourse" (Strauss, 1978: 121), the boundaries of which are set "neither by territory nor formal membership but by the limits of effective *communication*" (Strauss, 1978: 199). In the social world perspective, social reality as a whole is seen as consisting of numerous social worlds of varying size which overlap, intersect and segment into subworlds. A typical individual belongs into several: e.g. their family, workplace, profession, hobby, religious community, drinking buddies. Worlds can be international or local, emergent or established, public or hidden, hierarchical or anarchic. On the other hand, the degree of authenticity of one's membership and activities can be under constant debate and negotiation (Strauss, 1978: 123).

Though an MMO involves discourses and people, we cannot ignore concrete aspects like technology, space and action. Strauss emphasises these tangible, observable qualities in the concept of social worlds:

> In each social world, at least one primary *activity* (along with related clusters of activity) is strikingly evident; i.e., climbing mountains, researching, collecting.

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[5] E.g. Bray & Konsynski (2007: 23): "Second Life provided a unique example where a "revolution" helped influence Linden Lab to change its direction with regard to property rights and taxes, ultimately resulting in growth of the community from 15,000 to 7,200,000 participants by June 2007. Lawrence Lessig was the academic who encouraged Linden Lab to listen to the virtual community's requests."

There are *sites* where activities occur: hence space and a shaped landscape are relevant. *Technology* (inherited or innovative modes of carrying out the social world's activities) is always involved. […] In social worlds at their outset, there may be only temporary divisions of labor, but once under way, *organizations* inevitably evolve to further one aspect or another of the world's activities. (Strauss, 1978: 122; emphasis in original)

In MMOs like *EVE Online*, participating can be a very complex and involved activity, giving rise to sub-activities, organisations and even new technologies[6] arranged around the central activity. While the participants as a whole cannot share unity and intimacy, they form a sphere of "effective communication" that connects them together. Their communications are mediated not only by *EVE*'s servers and discussion forums, but by third-party sites, online radio broadcasts, video streams and a quarterly print magazine which covers events and persons on 84 glossy full-color pages, engaging *EVE* users in a "universe of discourses" centered around the play activity.

From this perspective, *EVE* can be seen as a complete and independent social world that moreover hosts constellations of subworlds. This may not sound like a very interesting claim, until we realise that it places *EVE* in the same category as London's world of finance, the Judo world, or the world of game studies. From an individual's point of view, *EVE's* role in their life would thus be comparable to their professional world, neighbourhood or even extended family. Some of these other social worlds can of course involve some of the same people, activities, sites and technologies as the MMO, representing instances where the MMO social world intersects with another social world.

On the other hand, it is obvious that not every MMO platform will necessarily spawn a distinct social world that encompasses its user base; many services do not aspire to do this as strongly as *EVE* does. For example, *Habbo Hotel* and *Second Life* are designed as open-ended platforms where participation does not center around a particular activity to the same extent. Instead, user groups are invited to use the service as a platform for their own activities. Some of these groups and activities are rooted in established social worlds (e.g. school friends in *Habbo*, academic meetings in *Second Life*), while others are newly created. This kind of an MMO may thus be more accurately analysed as an intersection site of multiple social worlds rather than as a cradle of a monolithic social world.[7]

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[6] E.g. not only individual but also organisational tools such as human resources and enterprise planning systems. "[M]ost of the tasks that are handled by FCs [Fleet Commanders] are handled using tools and processes that are external to the game client software." (Combs, 2008)

[7] A very similar view is that some virtual worlds act as "boundary objects". See http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2007/10/habbo-hotel-as-.html

5. IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Richard Bartle defines *virtual* as "that which isn't, having the form or effect of that which is" (Bartle, 2003: 1). By this definition, the proposition "Virtual worlds don't exist" is a truism, a pun. But I hope to have demonstrated that it is also true in the second sense: that there are no "virtual worlds" that achieve the form or effect of the real world.[8]

Substituting the dichotomous "one server, one people" virtual world perspective with a social world perspective where people are uncoupled from technology allows us to point out certain shortcomings in the current MMO research agendas. The most obvious point is that an MMO server does not enclose a "world" or "society" separate from the Earth. An MMO server may be at the center of a social world, a universe of activity and discourse so deep that it feels like a different reality. But to a greater or smaller extent, the same individuals are simultaneously part of numerous other social worlds, which shape their identity and condition their actions.

To point out one concrete target for my criticism, Castronova's conclusion that observing coordination effects in MMOs indicates that they take place "on a large-scale level in human societies" (Castronova, 2006a: 179) is not tenable. Accepting it would entail a radical re-understanding of "human society", and I am also not convinced that 10 000 people qualifies as "large-scale" when talking about societies. Furthermore, Castronova's assertion that "important factors have been controlled" in these settings (Castronova, 2006a: 164) seems bold given the circumstances. In principle, is it not possible that players e.g. voted for the meeting place on a discussion forum? What is the effect of players who have characters on multiple servers? The social world perspective underlines the fact that platforms do not equal people: MMO social worlds reach outside the technical boundaries of their servers, and in some cases, the heart of the world may even be found elsewhere. If a researcher wishes to scope their research to the MMO server only, there must be a special justification for it.

"Mirror image" studies that purport to teach us something about the Earth, economy or human society on a macro level are based on false premises, but this does not mean that all fruitful experimental or quasi-experimental studies in MMOs would impossible. If we are willing to accept a slightly more modest aim and focus on micro-level phenomena, there is a world of studies that could take advantage of MMOs to produce results generalisable to larger contexts. As in any experiment, whether computer-mediated or not, identifying all significant control variables and keeping them constant can be a challenge, but not an impossible one, especially if the researcher has conceptualised the situation accurately.

In the virtual world perspective, different MMOs are assumed to have something in common that makes it possible to make general statements about them as a category,

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[8] Bartle in fact seems to have anticipated a social world perspective: "a world […] doesn't have to mean an entire planet: it's used in the same sense as 'the Roman world' or 'the world of high finance.'" (Bartle, 2003: 1)

which is another type of generalisation that MMO studies frequently do. A distinction is often made between game worlds and open-ended worlds. For example, Bray and Konsynski distinguish between MMORPGs and worlds with "no expressly developed plot or storyline" (Bray & Konsynski, 2007: 19). In the latter group, they include *Second Life*, *Entropia Universe* (which in fact does have a storyline) and *Cyworld* (a Korean online service often labeled as a social networking site).

The social world perspective reminds us that universes of activity and discourse similar to those found over MMOs may also be found on other digital sites. In some aspects they may be less complex and interesting than MMO-worlds, but e.g. virtual economies are found in all kinds of services from social networking sites to instant messaging systems. Anyone who thinks that deep relationships, social structures and politics can only be mediated by simulated geometrical space and real-time three-dimensional interaction can refer to e.g. Howard Rheingold (2000). For many purposes, the closest comparison an MMO-world has may in fact not be another MMO-world, but some other type of social world. For example, for some purposes, *Second Life* is closer to *Facebook* than to *World of Warcraft*. When scholars purport to make statements about virtual worlds in general, in reality they often speak about a specific MMO.[9]

As a summary of the above discussion, I suggest that researchers ask themselves the following questions to ensure their work is relevant to their aims:

> 1) Out of all social world sites and technologies, why am I focusing on MMOs?
> 2) Out of all possible interaction modalities, am I justified in limiting my observations to the MMO server?
> 3) Do my results concern MMOs in general, a specific MMO, or some completely different category?

There are plenty of good answers to all three questions, but "MMOs are like virtual versions of the real world" is not among them.

Finally, the social world perspective highlights the fact that while notions such as commodities, social structures, norms, membership and politics can be identified over MMOs, they should not be considered "virtual versions" or "simulations" of "real-world" phenomena. Firstly, they are not doppelgängers but entities in their own right, *sui generis*. Secondly, analogous phenomena exist in many other social worlds, whether computer-mediated or not.

Hopefully, this realisation will allow scholars to begin retiring the "virtual" prefix from their terminology – again. T. L. Taylor observes that "In much the same way we now see the relationship between on- and offline life as not a bounded one, in many ways a game/not-game dichotomy does not hold" (Taylor, 2006: 19). Cyberspace isolationism is

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[9] For example, "a few real-world universities are even establishing islands in virtual worlds and offering classes" (Bray & Konsynski, 2007: 18) actually means "a few real-world universities are even establishing islands in *Second Life* and offering classes".

considered antiquated now; few people use the term "IRL" these days. Dichotomous either-or views have been replaced with more nuanced understandings of how Internet meshes into our lives (e.g. Mitra & Schwartz, 2001). Though Castronova explicitly denies connection with Barlow's ancient declaration (Castronova, 2004: 208), it is hard not to see kinship in their ideas. Both were undeniably pioneers.

The real world doesn't exist

This paper could well have been titled "The real world doesn't exist". If there are problems with the concept of the "virtual world", so are there problems in the way "real world" is implicitly conceptualised in many MMO studies: a uniform, monolithic reality, where people lead a rational "real life" with their unitary "real identity". Such a view is in stark contrast to the views prevalent in contemporary sociology, which emphasise the multiplicity, fluidity and even fragmentation of identities (e.g. Turkle, 1996; Slater, 1997) and the often arational, constructed and "aestheticized" character of everyday life (e.g. Featherstone, 1991; Giddens; 1991).

Moreover, structuralist and post-structuralist theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) identify rules and structures in all fields of life that are not unlike the written and unwritten rules of MMO-worlds. This game-like character of everyday life has not gone unnoticed in MMO studies: Castronova equates society with a large game, although he only sees one game instead of a multiplicity (Castronova, 2006a: 171). At the same time, in some instances MMO gameplay is increasingly resembling work: laborious, tedious and occasionally lucrative (Yee, 2006; Grimes, 2006: 982-985). For all these reasons, I believe it does not do injustice to MMOs to treat them on par with other fields of life, instead of placing them on a separate plane.

Despite the critical tone of this paper, I hope it will not be seen as a negative message to MMO-related studies. On the contrary, the perspective I am advocating radically *magnifies* the significance of MMO research: after all, it places MMOs potentially on the same line with entities like family, religion and workplace!

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