

**ELECTRIC PHANTOM, DIGITAL BRAIN:
ESSAYS ON ONLINE GAMING VIRTUAL WORLDS**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critical reflection on the rather recent phenomenon of online gaming and the virtual game worlds that sustain it. Contrary to popular culture where opinions on gaming in general have not substantially changed over the past decade—where it most assumes a position of unimportance and immaturity—gaming itself, whether as a pastime or a profession—along with the gamer—have since taken a number of irrevocable steps in becoming more confident in what they represent, who they are.

By providing an outline of the game and the gamer first—what is an online game, how does it operate, who are the gamers, etc.?—this thesis participates, in synthesis with previous related discourses, in contemporary discussions on the topic of online gaming. By addressing issues such as the reliance of online gaming on information technologies, the increasingly blurry boundaries between work and play, the shrinking offline and surging online sociality of younger generations, and the monarchical ownership structure of online entertainment industry, this thesis offers critical perspectives that are often overlooked by both nonacademic and scholarly discourses.

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JARGONS TO WATCH OUT FOR

ARPANET – Advanced Research Project Agency Network

EULA – End User License Agreement

FPS – First Person Shooter

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online (often used interchangeably with MMORPG)

MMORPG – Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Play Game

MUD – Multi-User Dungeon/Domain

PvE – Player versus Environment

PvP – Player versus Player

SL – Second Life

UI – User Interface

WoW – World of Warcraft

CHAPTER ONE

PRESENTING THE VIRTUAL LANDSCAPE: AN INTRODUCTION

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone ... We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before.

— A Declaration of the Independence of the Cyberspace, John Barlow

After yet another exhaustive battle, a group of infamously dauntless pirates who hunted the vital triangle shipping routes between solar systems 04EI-U, NG-M8K, and K-RMI5 was finally repelled out of the Cache sector they had been operating in the past year. The small party of eight who counterattacked the pirates, however, suffered heavy damage, and if another horde of pirates decided to take over the ones they just fought off, their flagships would not be repaired in time for confrontation. Scrolling down an inexhaustible menu to modify his two other lesser equipped warships, Kurtis chose an almost identical set of updates without much hesitation. After all, for an experienced trade-escort mercenary like him, this task is but a daily routine.¹ After twenty minutes of repetitive clicking and scrolling, the modification was finally complete. With no clear of sign of further trouble, Kurtis stretched out his contracted body, and decided to call it a day.

¹ See figure 1.1.



Figure 1.1. Eve Online. MMORPG developed and distributed by CCP Games. The game takes place in distant-future, interstellar space where players, embodying individual spaceships, engage each other in combat, trade, exploration, etc. As of five years ago, the game consists of almost eight thousand simulated star systems, each with a unique and inexhaustibly detailed distribution of natural resources, intelligent civilizations, and so on.

Less than a pace away from Kurtis in his brand-new gaming chair was Anna, his girlfriend, who apparently did not have any intention of signing off to join her companion in a magicless reality. For the time being she was preparing for tomorrow's raid (a gameplay in WoW where players collaborate in a team of 10 to 40 people to defeat difficult monsters that are beyond a singular avatar's reach) and had been fishing necessary raiding materials in the same spot for the last fifteen minutes, chatting with friends between clicks.² Still savoring the leftover excitement from the battle a moment ago, Kurtis stepped outside for a quick cigarette, then sat down at his computer once more to escape the rest of the quiet night. This time, instead of an interstellar mercenary, he became a night elf hunter with a crossbow strapped to his shoulder, and a loyal pet leopard that followed around. A few minutes of flying brought him to Anna's side by the virtual pond. Equipping the fishing rod, he sat down by her side, and started to think of applicable strategies for tomorrow's raid encounter.

² See figure 1.2.



Figure 1.2. Fishing in WoW. The player casts the rod by clicking a button, and if for the next 30 seconds a fish is baited, the float would wobble and a sound of splashing water would be generated so the player, upon clicking on the float, would receive a fish native to the location, or random items from weeds to coins.

Millions of people now regularly log on to any of the hundreds of digital universes available on a consistent basis, gaming by themselves or socializing with virtual best friends. The scene of Kurtis depicted in the above account is not at all unusual for a seasoned player these days. Often a player is enlisted in a varieties of MMOs, switching between the multitude of roles with insouciant ease. Yet such vast online virtual worlds have been in existence—in the present sense—for only slightly more than twenty years.³ How can such a recent creation become so thoroughly absorbed into the main streams of culture? And how can the players, who for the

³ A more comprehensive account on what was before those graphic wonders is provided in the next chapter.

most part sit immobile in front of a screen, seem so natural with embodying, sometimes vicariously, different and sometime highly contrasting characters?

The present inquiry grew out of my own nearly a lifetime's coexistence with such fantastic digital avatars and with that, the existence within wonderous virtual terrains as those avatars. It is intended as an attempt not to answer those—or any—questions that may be raised on the topic, but through providing relevant information by describing, imagining, and theorizing, to piece together a previously displaced segments of a picture back into a whole, and to look at it with renewed insights.

Chapter Two provides a brief and condensed account of the history of present online virtual worlds, which can arguably be traced all the way back to the first human attempts to instantiate human imagination. In constantly seeking symbiosis with technological interfaces, the present method of expressing and communicating imagination via vast digital architectures of virtual universes is anything but familiar. Chapter Three probes deeper into the inhabitants of MMOs and presents a very ordinary side of the players – one often does not hear in mainstream accounts, namely, the virtual sociality that is circulated among individual players. Simulation or not, at root, in-game avatars are but projections of persons who direct their every action, dictate every decision to be made. Chapter Four steps away from the brighter side of the story recounted in Chapter Three, and turns to the underworld of online gaming – the political economy of MMOs. After all, massive congregates of virtual avatars do not exist in a state of perpetual anarchy despite the conspicuous absence of any governing structure, nor do their hours invested in the game vaporize into thin air in the present stage of neoliberal capitalism. Finally, Chapter Five offers some theoretical speculations on the basis of information thus far presented,

revisiting and expanding, in the present context, the concepts of cyborg and posthuman in relation to the inhabitants of online gaming virtual worlds.

CHAPTER TWO

PEERING BACKWARD: A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIRTUALITY

Being human totally sucks most of the time. Videogames are the only thing that make life bearable.

— Ready Player One, Ernest Cline.

All too often, most of what one hears about virtual worlds are either hypes or woes, as if only polar extremes of human tragedy or comedy are taking place in such fantastic universes. In popular literature or film, the idea of a cyberspace – a concept first popularized by William Gibson’s 1984 fiction *Neuromancer* – inhabited by grotesque though titillating humanoids called cyborgs, seem to have become the entirety of public imagination when the virtual is evoked.⁴ Above all else, the virtual seems new. From lifelike androids to digitalized planets, more and more mesmerizing tricks are compiled onto this newness, presenting virtuality as intimations of inevitable dystopia, inexhaustible potentialities of human goodness – anything that is outside the imagination of a strictly regular person. And yet the fact is, for decades, millions of people have regularly entered virtual worlds without much trouble to adapt to its requirements, switched between online and offline lives with the ease which one opens a door and steps into another room.⁵ One has to wonder, knowing this, how much of the newness is really new, and with that, how much of the virtual is truly unreal.

⁴ VR, or virtual reality, thanks to tireless Hollywood entertainers, has almost assumed the sole significance of whatever the virtual is. From *Tron* (1982) to *Ready Player One* (2018), the virtual in public imagination is consistently tantamount to VR, and all it promises is endless hype or unimaginable sorrow.

⁵ I should point out here that virtual world as a category does not, technically speaking, exclude virtual places other than MMOs, such as social media, streaming platforms, or simply, the Internet itself. However, for present purposes,

The regularity with which virtuality as a theme appears in popular culture today is stunning to the point that tracing its history seems a task that cannot be accomplished because the sheer amount of trivialized information. Still, undeniably, online virtual worlds did not, in the very beginning, “spring, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus, full-blown from the mid of William Gibson ... [inherent in the virtual is] a complex history of technological innovations, conceptual developments, and metaphorical linkages” (Hayles 1994, p.11). Throughout history, the symbiotic relationship between technology and human sociality – from the first piece of half-desiccated bone used as a weapon to the latest model of spacecraft – have irreducibly defined the limitations of who we are and what we can be. Technology, in this sense, is interconnected with all other components of human society such as language and culture, to the extent that it is unnegotiable bound to the physical and temporal location within which it first emerged. To understand virtual worlds as but one of countless technological mediations that are constantly changing human sociality, we have to first inquiry into the concept of the virtual.

I.

Among the most important mediation to explore the virtual is writing. Through infusing empty symbols with meaning, the flow of thoughts—so intimate and idiosyncratic to highly particular time and space, become externalized and immortalized, to the point where history becomes visible, persisting across great distances from the point of inception. To the likes of Rheingold (1991) or Heim (1995), the first on-screen renditions of virtual space points toward a direct lineage that leads all the way back to prehistoric cave paintings. Virtuality, in this sense, is “the hallucination of heaven, the peyote vision, the dionysiac stupor. It is ... any system devised for

I will only talk about virtual world in association with the ones that are engineered specifically to accommodate online gaming.

losing ourselves in another world” (Schwartz, p.362). Religious rituals, dreams, literature and plays, all of which can be considered stages for the virtual to take place, space for other lives to be imagined. One of the most renowned example of virtuality in early Western philosophy is Plato’s allegory of the cave, which implies that what often is considered as reality is but an instantiation of phantoms of the unseen, which are equally real, self-sustaining and consequential.⁶

However, during the thousands of years that ensued since the allegory, attitude on the issue has nearly changed to the exact opposite – the virtual has not only been consigned to a position inferior to the real, but more importantly, it no longer possess the quality to be considered as an independent entity capable of standing on its own feet.⁷ The virtual world of this investigation, for most part, originated in the year 1969 when ARPANET—a U.S. federal government commissioned project which was developed by the Department of Defense, went online as the predecessor of the Internet, and with that, a new era of generations who grew up with networked or standalone video games. MUDs, or multi-user dungeons/domains, became increasingly popular during this time (more on MUDs, see next section).⁸

⁶ Needless to say that the allegory when scrutinized in entirety, has much more complicated implications which will not be delved into here. For present purposes, I will not inquiry further beyond the metaphorical value of an equilibrium between the virtual and the real.

⁷ The thousands of years in between is too vast and daunting a task for the present inquiry to cover in any depth at all, so I will circumvent it for the time being and hop into what is more manageable.

⁸ See figure 2.1.

```

Barracks, Floor 6 (100%)
...#.....#      #.....#
...#.....#      #.....#
...#.....#      #.....#
...#.....#      #.....#
...#.....#      #.....#
...#.....#      #.....#
-###.....#      #.....#
·# #.....#####-#####-#####
·# #.....-.....#      #.....#
·# #.....#####      #.....#
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##      #·#
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Kalgon          Lv 5      Blind
HP 41/52      MP 0/0      XP 1169/1500

You miss.
You miss.
Troll misses.
You hit the Troll for 10 damage.
Troll misses.
You hit the Troll for 6 damage.
You killed the Troll! (90 XP)
Robe*
Robe*
You pick up a Robe.
Bugbear misses.
You miss.
Bugbear misses.
You hit the Bugbear for 5 damage.
You hit the Bugbear for 6 damage.
You killed the Bugbear! (30 XP)
Bubbly Potion*
You pick up a Bubbly Potion.
You quaff the Potion of Blindness.
The world darkens!
Str 12 Dex 11 Int 6
For 14 Agi 15 Wil 9

```

Figure 2.1 An early MUD game. As we can easily observe, the game is for most part textually based, and the player’s gameplay hinges on their ability to communicate with the designer’s imagination via interpreting and enacting texts.

A crude synthesis between textual and visual entertainment, many popular MUDs capitalized on themes long lost in the conflict-infested time of postwar America. From dragon-slaying to magic-wielding, they captured the attention of generations of youth, supplementing the already stirred imagination of a time that fueled flying saucer craze and space race, with not only something to look forward to in the future, but also places to look backward at or simply, pure fantasy without much real-world implications. Such rudimentary capsules of time, in the ’70s, finally materialized into perhaps the first large-scale project in developing what Myron Krueger, the head of the project, termed artificial reality. Once, Krueger and a colleague who was working

in a different building were discussing Metaplay – a then equivalent of today’s CGI software – via telephone, displayed on both of their screen’s was an image of a waveform.

However, after a few minutes of frustrating discussion, we realized that we had a far more power means of communication available. Using the two-way video link described in Metaplay, we turned the [cameras onto ourselves] ... As we did this, we used our hands to point to various features on the composite display. It was exactly as if we were sitting together at a table with a piece of paper between us. After a while, I realized that I was seeing more than an illusion. As I moved my hand to point to the data my friend had just sent, the image of my hand briefly overlapped the image of his. He moved his hand ... I was struck with the thought that he was uncomfortable about the image of my hand touching the image of his ... The inescapable conclusion was that the same etiquette of personal space and avoidance of touching that exists in the real world was operating at that moment in this purely visual experience (Kruger 1983, p.125-27).

This utterly unexpected incident led to Videoplace, which is one of the first virtual space that can be described as a virtual world.⁹ The difference between Videoplace and telecommunication, both seem to provide virtually shareable locations, is that the intention of the likes of telephone or television is to connect two points, whereas in Videoplace, “two places creates a third place consisting of the information that is available to both communicating parties simultaneously” (Kruger 1991, p.37). In other words, Videoplace creates a virtual location within which temporally and physically synchronized communication is enabled, whether those who are in the space do that is irrelevant. Furthermore, Krueger envisioned such a virtual space will inevitably grow more massive in scale and rich in intricacy, i.e., into what would eventually be

⁹ See figure 2.2.

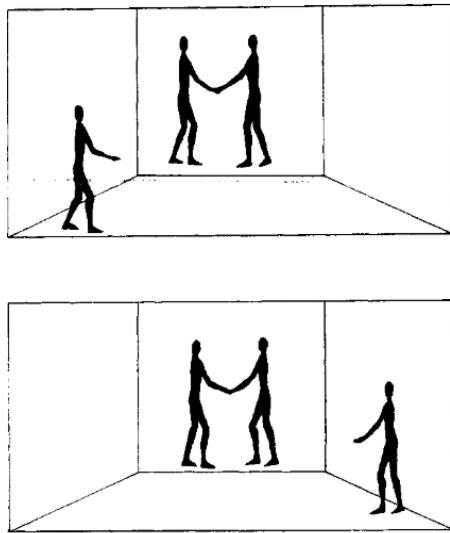


Figure 8—Videoplace



Figure 9—The video outline sensor

Figure 2.2 An illustration of Videoplace. The idea was to use the rudimentary CGI technology mentioned in the above account to create a space that is capable of resembling some realness so that participants, whose movements would be recorded by a video camera then transcribed onto a virtual embodiment in Videoplace, could interact with each other without physical presence.

termed “massively multiplayer”. He called this the megaenvironment, a place where

Each participant would enter a large and complex graphic world from a different physical location. Each would see only a small portion of that world, including her own image and those of other participants who are also in that part of the graphic world. The participant could interact with the others or could leave the current location and travel to a different part of the graphic world. Along the way, she would encounter other participants from other real locations. Such a megaenvironment could include hundreds of participants (ibid., p.62).

Such a creation of a virtual space capable of accommodating the simultaneous presence of multiple people, who occupy distinct actual locations, had thus become a central theme in

large-scale online worlds. On a technical level, virtual worlds exist regardless of the whereabouts of the occupants. “[virtual worlds] Persisted even as individuals entered and left it. This characteristic of persistence has been fundamental to virtual worlds ever since. A conference call ends when everyone hangs up, and a virtual world ... can go permanently offline, but while they exist as virtual worlds they persist beyond the logging off of any single resident. Persistence can be temporally circumscribed; it is not the same thing as eternal existence” (Boellstorff, p.47).¹⁰

II.

While the works of futuristic visionaries are indispensable in shaping what was to become large-scale virtual worlds, the story of MMO worlds, above all, owe their collective origin to video game.¹¹ William Higinbotham, a physicist who wished to enliven the otherwise static space of a science exhibition, invented “tennis for two” – the first video game to be displayed in front of the public, which included a television screen and a pixelated approximation for a ball bouncing between two edges of the screen, at 1958’s Brookhaven National Laboratory’s annual exhibition. However, the first video game to be released out of a laboratory was Spacewar!, a game that was developed by MIT students where players control spaceship-like figures to shoot at each other. The November of 1972 witnessed the first popular game—Pong, which was published by Atari. The game was a slight upgrade from “tennis for two”, and includes two-dimensional simulation of tennis court, and a ball to be bounced in between the edges of the screen. Space Invaders,

¹⁰ “external existence” is, with all fairness, an exaggeration, for virtual worlds, unlike its offline counterparts, is liable to be permanently shut down any moment its human managers wish so. However, the claim is technically sound. For more on the business side of virtual worlds, see Chapter Four.

¹¹ Despite its generic usage in public discourse, video game is a technically distinct category from computer game and the topic of this thesis—online computer gaming worlds. Without too much excursion, suffice it to say that video game essentially relies on the video screen as an interface to facilitate interaction between the player and the game, i.e., a one-way communication (the player adapts to the logical requirements of the game in an agreed place), whereas MMOs are, first and foremost, places regardless of players, as in the case of megaenvironment.

released in 1978, was the first game that incorporated computer-controlled unit in its gameplay, and it offers single-player or multi-player mode.¹²

Early video games mentioned above already possess, however primitive their graphics and gameplay design may appear to a contemporary observer, essential qualities of virtual worlds – namely, a constructed space that floats outside the realm of an offline reality, within which people communicate at a synchronized pace. Based on those games, later emerged game worlds that were capable of hosting increasing number of players, as well as providing more features through which a distinct in-game identity may be acquired. Super Mario Bros., first released in 1985, was one of the most iconic game in video game history. A pioneer in gameplay mechanic, where it not only offered the normal landmarks of two-dimensional gameworld (left, right, up, down), it also contained hidden passages (what became known as “Easter Eggs”) for players to explore, adding a richer sense of presence thus far absent in video game design. Doom, an FPS game that was widely acclaimed for its immersive graphic design, utilization of network technology (at its release the Internet was already, officially, commercialized and open to public), and personalized expansions content, was released in 1993. It was since then, first-person perspective became immensely popular in game design.

Most of these games were termed video game at the time, although retrospectively they may very well fit into the category of virtual world that bore faint semblance to later MMOs.¹³ Game such as Adventure the MUD is sometimes heralded as a legend in the brief history of virtual world development: “Adventure is a virtual world in a conceptual way: the game is played in an imaginary underground world of caves and chambers, and players proceed through

¹² See figure 2.3&4

¹³ Another characteristic in categorizing game vs. virtual world in the present inquiry is that game is often considered as competitive to a certain extent – having an opponent, keeping a score, etc., where virtual world is by definition more open-ended and sometimes lack the scoreboard altogether.

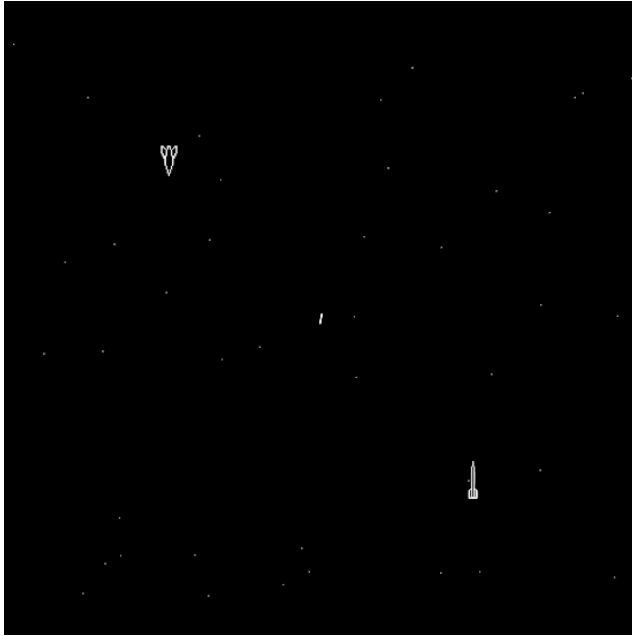


Figure 2.3 A recreation of Spacewar! on Java coding. Each player controls a spaceship and both are drawn toward a blackhole—represented by a dot in the middle. Whoever hits the other ship first scores.



Figure 2.4 Pong. The screen is a two-dimensional tennis court and two players are represented as two short bars on each end. The ball—represented by the thinner bar in between—is programmed to have only a limited angle when bouncing, similarly the player can only move along the vertical space within the unmarked portion of the line on each end.

that world ... typing commands such as ‘go north’ and ‘pick up sword’. The physical space is not displayed but described; the only visual scenes are in the player’s mind’s eye” (Rheingold 1991, p.23). Utopia, regarded by many as the first graphic virtual world, was released in 1982. A MUD as well, although unlike Adventure, it relied heavily on simulation for game mechanics and as a result, every decision made had direct consequence in the trajectory the game took; in this sense, it was more of a graphic rendition of an explicit simulation of a cybernetic system.¹⁴¹⁵

Until Utopia, simulation in game design was primarily deployed to render more realistic sensory experiences that often took shape of certain interfaces between offline human and machine (for instance, steering wheel and gears of a car, a motorcycle, etc.) and was much less focused on simulating features that would, by logic of casual design alone, impose upon the gameplay the same kind of irreversibility that characterizes much of the actual-world decision making – game designers might use certain graphic features to indicate a school of fish in a creek, but in all likelihood they would not go so far as to introduce an entire simulated ecosystem to substantiate fishing gameplay. Because of this, sim games occupy a particularly important place in the history of virtual world. Many of the early sim games such as SimCity (1989), SimEarth (1990), SimLife (1992), despite being capable of generating irrevocable casual chain of events, were nonetheless non-persistent in the sense a MMO does.¹⁶ They were “self-contained on whatever computer was being used at the time; when that computer was shut off, the simulation disappeared as well. For this reason, these worlds were also fundamentally single-player: persons could take turns operating the computer being used, but for the most part people

¹⁴ Just to give a short example, say, if rainfall in certain areas became scarce for a prolonged period of time, a drought was to be induced, and if the drought persisted for certain time, the population in that area was more likely to rebel than those who received enough rainfall, which may jeopardize the entire game. Sim games, from this perspective, was about managing a cybernetic system where it was to be sustained as long as possible.

¹⁵ See figure 2.5.

¹⁶ See figure 2.6&7

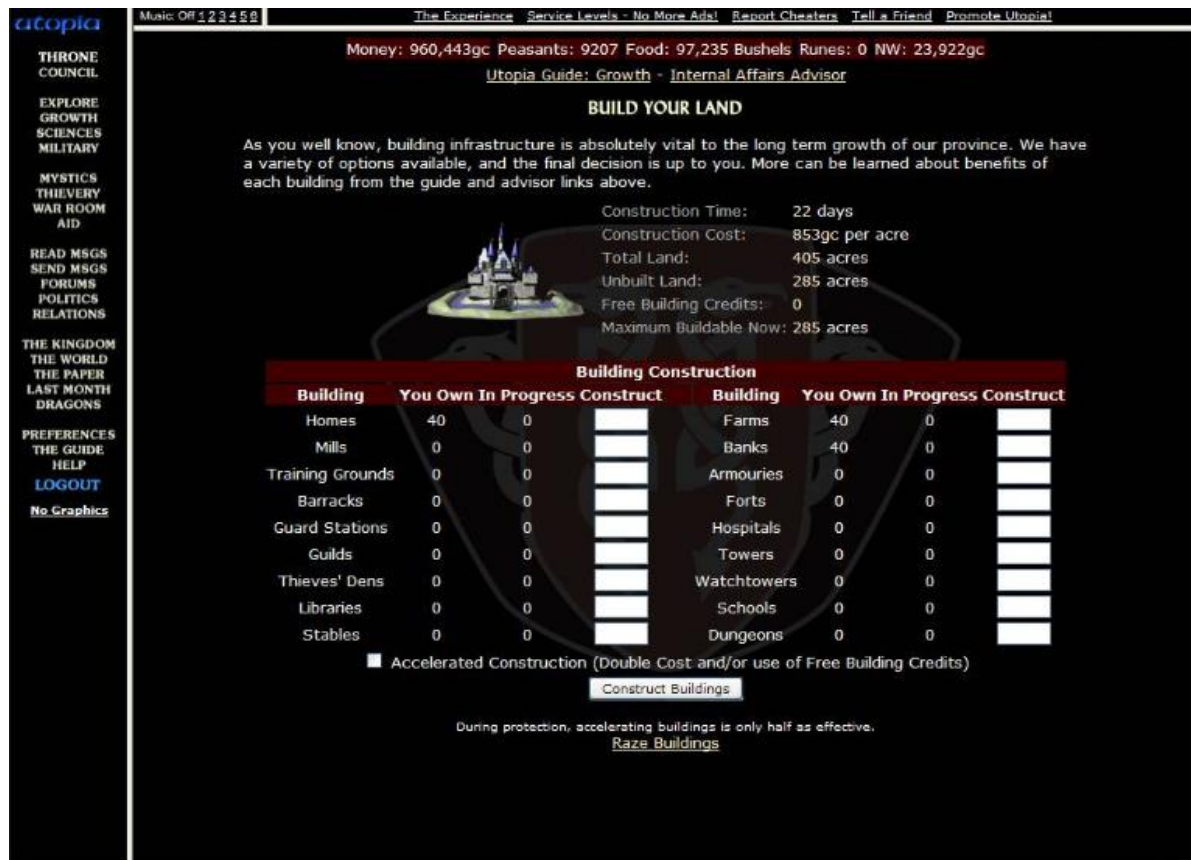


Figure 2.5 Utopia.

participated in these worlds one at a time” (Boellstorff, p.49). In the end, however specific gameplays were designed, MUDs and sims are textual adventures spiced by unrefined graphics; the rudimentary virtual worlds some of them are capable of accommodating, in other words, were essentially no different than that of a board game where action happens mostly in the mind rather than on-screen.

Still, the popularity of MUDs as small-scale virtual worlds during the early days of the Internet was undeniable. A 1993 study on online traffic revealed that slight over 10% of “the hits belonged to MUDs; in other words, before the advent of the World Wide Web (WWW) MUDs constituted some 10% of the internet” (Bartle, p.12). With such public enthusiasm, the idea of larger virtual worlds began to venture out from its previous niche—primarily shared by computer

scientists and ambitious game designer, into the general culture of video gaming. During the late 1990s, with advancement in network and visual technology, graphic-centered MUDs were created and released. Commonly termed MMORPGs, or massively multiplayer online role-play game, this generation of graphic worlds are distinctive in that they were the first “persistent (twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week) worlds, and the first instance of individualized mediated experiences within a mass audience (each player’s experience is unique despite the large number of simultaneous participants)” (Wolf and Perron, p.11). Habitat, released in 1985 as a 2D simulation of Tokyo, was generally acknowledged as the first virtual world with network features within which users interacted with each other via individual avatars; AlphaWorld, later renamed Active Worlds, was among the first large-scale 3D virtual worlds.

With the proliferation of such graphic virtual worlds, early defining characteristics of video games started to be incorporated more fully into the design of virtual worlds. Features that encourage inter-player interaction such as combat became a favorite among gamers. The first large-scale virtual world that attracted a considerable number of users was arguably Ultima Online. Released in 1997, it provided a dazzling amount of gameplay options, many among which, due to being first implemented on such a large scale, attracted noticeable notoriety.¹⁷

Unambiguously setting the tone for MMOs to come, Ultima Online was followed by the likes of EverQuest, RuneScape, Star Wars Galaxies and most notably, World of Warcraft, all of which made their names by a combination of open-world adventurism and immersive combat gameplay.¹⁸ However, as in the case of MUDs, games that abstained from the combat

¹⁷ It was, being the first popular MMO, the first game to handle player protests over game related issues in an authoritarian way (more on the significance of in-game governance, see Chapter 5). It was also the first game to introduce offline currency into the gameworld, which, over the years, has become an expected practice by game developers.

¹⁸ See figure 2.8&9.

bandwagon also received considerable popularity. The Sims Online, a networked and expanded version of SimLife, was released in 2002; Second Life, a similar game in many regards, was released a year later, both were simulations of a variety of offline life events experienced through the virtual body of individual avatars.¹⁹



Figure 2.6 SimEarth.

¹⁹ See figure 2.10.



Figure 2.7 SimCity.



Figure 2.8 Ultima Online, the first MMO to achieve wide acclaim. The story took place in a medieval land where magic was practiced and wars waged endlessly. Main features of the game included PvP, PvE, exploration, and commerce.



Figure 2.9 World of Warcraft. The game takes place in the fictional world Azeroth, a place inhabited by mythical creatures from gnomes and elves to demons with horns and cleaved hoofs and archaic fire elements. The creature shown in the screenshot is called a Murloc—a bipedal, amphibious fish-like creature. Initially the game borrowed most of its gameplay options from EverQuest (which was itself a graphics, engine, and content upgrade from Ultima Online), and later on added many features that came to define the contemporary MMO design. At its height, the game was reported to have 12 million unique monthly subscribers worldwide.



Figure 2.10 Second Life. Among the current MMO landscape, where most popular games provide a combination of combat and non-combat gameplay options, SL is the only notable game that has survived for more than a decade solely on providing a simulation of actual world as main attraction. Instead of slaying mythical monsters or fight intergalactic invaders, players meet new people, party, deal real estate (SL allows players to buy and trade land, which creates an entirely new aspect of the game that is absent in most other MMOs—real estate and finance. The virtual land thus assumes an intrinsic value not only inside but beyond the game world, whereas the virtual economy is linked directly to actual world economy, its virtual currency translatable to offline currencies), attend concerts and public lectures, build houses, design clothes, have virtual sex, marry virtual marriages ... the list goes on. Most SL residents assume human-looking avatars, the game nonetheless offers a variety of options, often one sees cartoon characters inhabit the same space alongside their “human” counterparts.

III.

A long path has been traversed since the first toughing of fingertips in a virtual place. Ironically, the same sentiments seem to linger still, untouched by the normally expected decay wrought by time. In my own experience during the past decade and a half, more than often when I carelessly moved my avatar too near or onto a friend's,²⁰ they would step away, creating a nominal space between us without even realizing doing it. Embedded in this innocuous act is a rich history of not only the players' own lives, but also the history of virtuality itself. As recounted in brevity above, from the allegory of the cave to the World of Warcraft, we see that such histories as unmistakably signs and intimations of how humans in different times had interacted with parallel virtual worlds in fantasy, and how such imaginations, interfaced by technology, were communicated between people.

Etymologically, both *technology* and *technique* can be traced back to the Greek root τέχνη (techne), which refers to “art or craft, to human action that engages with the world and thereby results in a different world” (Boellstorff, p.55). Consequently, techne carries with it a meaning that is distinct from an equally importantly Greek concept—episteme, which refers to knowledge about the world; in techne it is the “intentional action that *constitutes a gap* between the world as it was before the action, and the new world it calls into being” (ibid., p.55. Emphasis original). The purpose of techne is therefore, to bring something hitherto absent into being, to create “what nature found impossible to accomplish” (Guattari, p.33). Technology, from this perspective, is thus “any intentional extension of a natural process ... Respiration is a

²⁰ Some games are programed to allow avatars to stack on top of each other, which introduces a fascinating angle for the purpose of this inquiry, while other do not. The games I use as primary references in this thesis, World of Warcraft and Second Life, allow it. In combat-oriented games such as WoW, avatars stack together for most part to fulfill certain requirements set by PvE, or player versus environment encounters, where the opponents are algorithmic programs. It is outside those encounters when friends hang around each other simply talking, when the unconscious awareness of interpersonal distance becomes prominent.

wholly natural life function, for example, and is therefore not a technology; the human ability to breathe under water, by contrast, implies some technological extension” (Beniger, p.9).²¹ In Greek mythology, humans were brought to life from clay figures created by Prometheus, animals from figures by Epimetheus, who was then tasked to give positive traits to the creatures – wings to fly, claws to fight, night visions to hunt, gills to breathe under water, etc. When it came to humans, Epimetheus realized that he had none left, thus humans were created, comparing with other animals, powerless and defenseless. Prometheus, concerned about the sorry state of being for his own creations, “stole from Hephaestus and Athena the gift of skill in the arts, together with fire ... and bestowed it on man” (Stiegler, p.187). The “skill in the arts”, in all likelihood, is the mythological foundation for the idea of *techne*.

Unlike the biblical story of the Garden of Eden, where all human knowledge and morality comes from a bite off an apple—a symbol of Nature itself, in Greek mythology the uniqueness of human comes from, one can almost say, the direct opposite: instead of gaining knowledge on the world by taking what is already natural, humans are enlightened by the skill to make fire, i.e., to create something out of seemingly nowhere, to instantiate pure magic. It is, therefore, not knowledge about the world itself – *episteme*, but the ability to craft and to create on top of that knowledge – *techne*, that defines the human being (Boellstorff, 2008).²² The intricate affinity between *techne* and *episteme* is brought up in *The Question Concerning Technology*: “from earliest times until Plato the word *techne* is linked with the word *episteme* ... [techne] reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us ... Whoever builds a

²¹ Needless to say, those are rather narrow attitudes toward *Nature*, and are easily subjectable to critiques against the dualistic tradition of real vs. virtual in above sections. But for illustrative purposes in present inquiry, the metaphorical value is sufficient and the matter will be not pursued.

²² Once again, I am using this comparison purely for metaphorical value for it is quite problematic. After all in Abrahamic creation myth Nature is created by God and therefore knowledge, strictly speaking, comes from a divine power itself, which is a belief originated in Greek mythology. Without further excursion and risk turning this into a theology debate, I will use the comparison as metaphors only and not pursue further.

house or a ship or forges a sacrificial chalice reveals what is to be brought forth” (Heidegger, p.13). *Techne*, from this perspective, is the second nature Loytard (1991) seeks in fitting humans “to share in communal life, adult consciousness and reason” (p.3), and because of that, technology as a concept ceases to be an impartial tool that is invented solely by human ingenuity and instead, humans—as we have come to conceive them—are created by the technology they are bound to.

The MMO worlds investigated in this inquiry are, following this line of reasoning, but techniques in creating digital fires unique to the circumstances of present day and age, technologies in simultaneously creating and attempting to bridge gaps between the multitudes of humans. However, as interfaces, they constitute a categorical distinction in that “where most tools produce effects on a wilder world of which they are only a part, the computer [and by extension MMOs] contains its own worlds in miniature” (Edwards, p.109). The characteristics of today’s virtual worlds that distinguish them from countless renditions of virtuality in history, is that “*techne can take place inside them*, rather than solely in the actual world to produce them” (Boellstorff, p.58. *Emphasis original*). In other words, MMO worlds, while indisputably existing in continuity with offline reality, nonetheless is capable of – in terms specific to their own existence – generating new entities novel to both realms. This is what Boellstorff (2008) terms the “Age of *Techne*”: “a cultural moment when *techne* becomes recursive, an end as well as a means, a moment for which virtual worlds are the condition of possibility” (p.58). In the end, “it is this new salience for *techne* as the intentional crafting of world, self, and society” (*ibid.*, p.59) that reenchants to the world and reveals the magic long rendered invisible in the pursuit of a singular reality.

In the following chapter I turn to look at the populace of this realm and investigate how, on both a practical and theoretical level, such taken-for-grantedness of techne impacts their sense of self in relation to the general virtuality they inhabit, as well as their collective sociality in MMO worlds.

CHAPTER THREE

VIRTUALLY ACQUAINTED, REALLY ATTACHED: AN ESSAY ON VIRTUAL SOCIALITY IN MMO

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.

— How to Build a Universe that Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later, Philip K. Dick.

Shortly before Sony's former president Phil Harrison resigned from his post in 2008, he talked about how social gaming, a then recent and unexpected phenomenon, impacted the trajectory of game developers and distributors. At 2008's GDC (Game Developers Conference), Harrison acknowledged that Sony's earlier decision to focus on a traditional line of PlayStation series, one that more or less fits neatly into the popular stereotype that gamers were loners who lived in their parents' basement,²³ was a serious mistake. "It's a very interesting and frustrating thing for me to experience because I have been banging the drum about social gaming for a long time," Harrison said. "And our Japanese colleagues said that there is no such thing as social gaming in Japan: 'People do not play games on the same sofa together in each other's homes. It will never happen'".²⁴

What happened next surprised almost everyone. As it turned out, just about exactly the opposite occurred. Nintendo's Wii forfeited what Microsoft's Xbox and Sony's PlayStation were battling about – more powerful engines, higher quality graphics, increasingly sophisticated gameplays – instead, it banked on the interactive aspect of console gaming.²⁵ It achieved entirely

²³ Meaning, focusing almost exclusively on immersive single-player, instead of social features.

²⁴ New York Times, "As Gaming Turns Social, Industry Shifts Strategies", Seth Schiesel, February 28, 2008. The article can be accessed here, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/28/arts/television/28game.html>.

²⁵ Backed, of course, by exhaustive marketing campaigns. See figure 3.1&2.

unexpected success and with that, forced competitors in the console gaming industry to face what was then an unremarkable niche among gaming culture in general – social gaming.

I.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, when first emerged, the first generations of video game were intentionally designed to be not of a social matter – as far as interaction goes, it was supposed to foster interaction between nothing else but the gamer and their digital interface. And yet, through the condensed waves of newer generations of information technology – which gave rise to social media, smart phone, and online streaming – the way in which people gamed was changed forever again around the turn of the millennium, before it could crystalize into a solid



Figure 3.1 Wii gameplay.

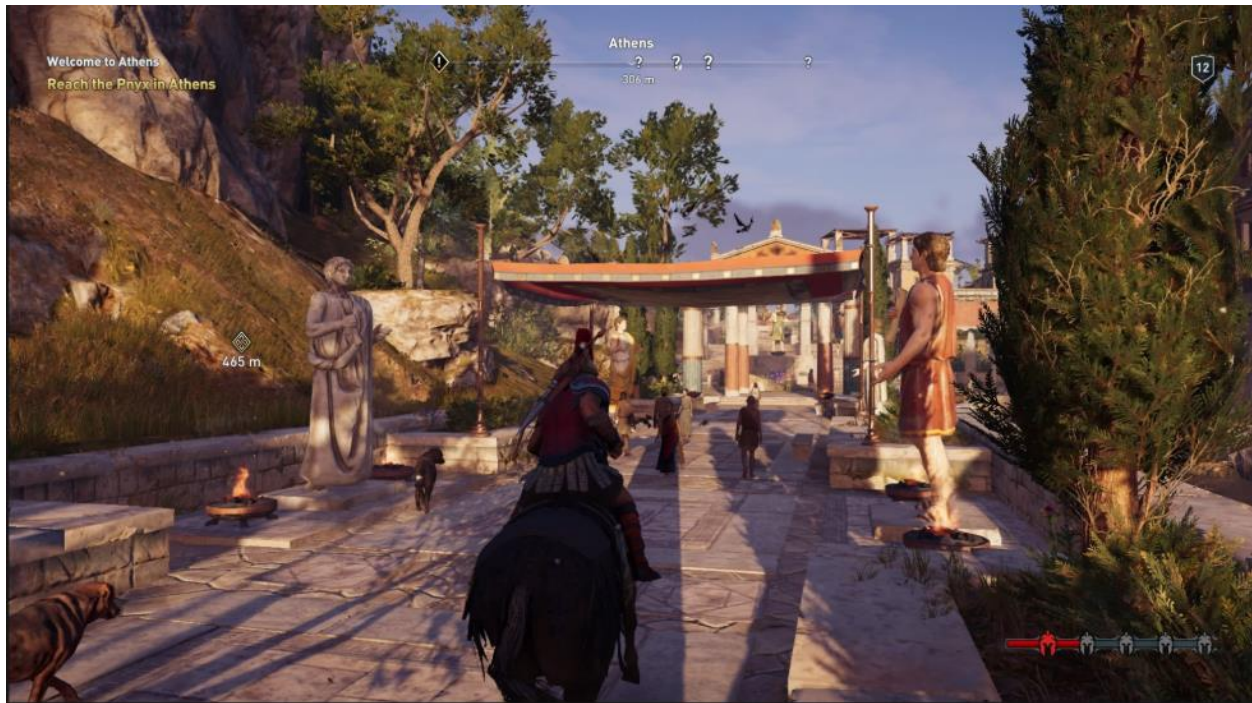


Figure 3.2 PlayStation gameplay. As we can see, in general Wii's in-game graphics appear amateurish, as if doodled cartoon figures by a child; in comparison PS games render a more realistic sensation – or as many call it, finetuned for a more mature audience. The difference is a result primarily of Wii's focus on accommodating inter-player interactive features, and Sony's emphasis on scaling up the dosage of a single player's immersion in the game.

shape.²⁶

In principle, MMO worlds are but codes rendered one or two dimensions fuller, and avatars pulsing amalgamation of lifeless pixels that are designed and created with clear intention to captivate attention. Executed in actuality, such worlds are pieces of algorithms which feed into an ongoing service – i.e., cybernetic platforms for products to be consumed. With caution one may compare virtual landscapes with shopping malls – both rely on an endless circulation of customers as well as products, while the lifespan of such venues depend heavily on a number of almost gratuitous factors, top among which are physical and temporal location, management, and marketing strategies. However, the difference being, one may spend half a day strolling in the mall and return regularly after random intervals of time, but in such cases one never attach oneself to the place, let alone identifying oneself as an inhabitant of the mall one frequents; MMO worlds, on the other hand, cultivate precisely that kind of attachments. Often one hears of player refer to themselves not only as gamers but residents—as in the case of sim games such as *Second Life*, or inhabitant, citizens, or simply the populace of particular gaming universes.

At the root of sentiments like this, according to Boellstorff (2008), is the capability inherent in the place to nurture intimacy. In other words, human sociality is “predicated on language’s ability to mediate selfhood” (p.151), and without such a shared linguistic infrastructure, as in the case of a shopping mall, a selfhood is indisputably absent – despite operating on similar business models, in the end one shopper is no different from another simply because the mall as a location does not extend enough space for an identity specific to its confines to be constructed, whereas online virtual worlds are created in such a way that on the

²⁶ The three factors mentioned here, which have become among the most defining trademarks of the information technology section since then, interacted with video gaming culture extensively and in turn, exerted enormous influence on each other. This is a topic that merits entire books in its own right, which will not be delved into here. cf. Taylor 2006; Watkins, 2009; Turkle 1995 & 2011.

outset, allocates a copious amount of space to enable and encourage the growth of a singular or a multitude of virtual selfhood(s) via graphic renditions of computational language. Part of this selfhood is built up via the game structure, where MMOs being what they are, offer a literally inexhaustible array of things to do, places to go, people to meet, to the point that a single player, under normal circumstances, never reaches an actual endgame situation, unless the game itself is discontinued.²⁷ Among those tasks, many, especially in combat-oriented games, are designed to be cooperative – thereby social, to the extent that they encourage interaction between players by rewarding those who cooperate more often more than those who do less.²⁸

This prompts Watkins (2009) to identify World the Warcraft, one of the most popular MMORPG, as the “quintessential participatory platform” (p.115), one that is inspired by “a model of the interactive media franchise that is poised to thrive among a generation of young men and women who prefer using Web-based tools and applications to create their own content and build their own worlds” (ibid., p.115). And that is indeed the sentiment shared by many MMO players, for to a large extent it is the newer generation of codes, combined with the recursive though fairly recent development in designing for multi-player content that enabled open-ended gaming experience via the individualized first-person perspectives. This kind of free-

²⁷ To be more specific, players who *play* the game in leisure times instead of relying on the game for livelihood. Since the early 2010s, when online streaming became a stable profession, things have changed much, perhaps to the chagrin of game designers. Streamers are employed full-time to stream their gameplay, and it is not uncommon for a streamer to stay in-game for more than 8 hours a day, more than five days a week. Such an approach makes it inevitable that at some point, boredom takes over any excitement or pleasure the game may otherwise provide, so that most professional gaming streamers (there are people who just stream IRL—or in real life—events), to the extent to which their respective gaming worlds can be explored, achieved that in due time. Although, as I have mentioned, such is decidedly not the intention of game designer.

²⁸ For instance, PvE (player versus environment, meaning against AIs) contents often require highly coordinated teamwork between from 10 to 40 people, depending on the specific occasion. In those boss fights, as they are commonly referred to as, each player has to coordinate their avatar in a way that best furthers the team’s interests, and sometimes the collaborative requirements can be so high that the vast majority of players would not even be able to achieve them. Without sidetracking too much, suffice it to say that this certainly is quite reminiscent of sport games, where a combination of individual skill and teamwork is indispensable if one wishes to achieve more. This calls for a whole discussion on the impact of eSports, or electronic sports, have had on MMOs, both its design and player mentality, which will not delved into here.

form game design, continues Watkins, makes play style extremely flexible, which, in comparison to earlier MMOs, allows substantially more space for the player to construct a variety of distinct experiences through as many avatars as they wish.

The creation of an avatar then becomes much more enriched in meaning to the players. No longer is it a routinized task they must perform in order to enter the game world, such as scrolling down and clicking the “I agree” button on EULAs, instead the act assumes, proportional to the virtual universe that hosts its existence, almost the significance of a re-birth, where a whole new persona awaits to be embodied, a self to be re-imagined.²⁹

II.

Wendy roleplays a child in SL. The sim game provides such features where a family unit can be constructed, consisting a number of children (although curiously, often no more than two or three, as in the case a middle-class family) and two adult members as parents.³⁰ For most part the family goes through certain sets of daily rituals, such as family meal, family walk, family shopping, family night – the list goes on. Practically, most actual things that can be simulated are enacted in one form or another.

Wendy, on this side of the screen, is a woman in her mid-twenties with a full-time job. Many weekday nights and weekends she logs on in the shape of a virtual child, waking up in bed

²⁹ Once again, professional gamers constitute a distinct category in this issue. It is common practice among casual players to invest a good deal of time and energy designing features of their new avatars and picking names (one name can be only used by one player at a time on a server, imagine if that were the case offline as well!), professional gamers treat their avatars the way tennis players treat their rackets, that is, as purely passive instruments for the achievement of certain purposes. As a result it is frequent to see professional players to randomize their avatar features and name them after themselves. For instance, if Josh is a professional WoW player, and he creates a new Mage class avatar, he would simply name the character Joshmage, and so on. See figure 3.3.

³⁰ See figure 3.4.



Figure 3.3 World of Warcraft character creation screen. On the upper left corner are certain features, from skin color to fair style, the player can modify. Once a category is selected, a window on the right side displays a number of options to choose from. In the center-bottom is the name section. One name is only usable by one player per server. If the player does not care too much for those auxiliary features, there is the randomize option. In the early days of the game when character features and names cannot be changed after finishing the initial customization, most of the players I knew customized and named their avatars with care. Later on, however, Blizzard Entertainment monetized both feature-altering and name-changing for \$15 and \$10 per service, respectively.



Figure 3.4 A screenshot of a family in Second Life. Family members, in most instances, are played by different players (although there are automated children – programs written to behavior in certain ways that are supposed to resemble children, from seemingly endless random bursts of crying fits to sudden, ill-tempered “I’m hungry!”s. Conspicuously one almost never hear about automated parents), sitting in front of their screens in various actual-world locations. The unit can be dissolved at any time, and it is not uncommon at first for players to roleplay for a while then quit the unit without notice. As a result many family units consist either offline friends—who are more likely to stick together, or long-term virtual friends. It is not a feature that is frequented by solo-players.

in a room that is brightly decorated by her virtual parents. She walks downstairs, greets her parents and siblings – if they are there, then begins another day in her second life. When talking about how those seeming innocuous and unremarkable daily rituals impact her sense of embodying a child online, she points out that they consistently enhances her identification with her in-game role not so much because of the mechanical proceedings of controlling an avatar to perform certain tasks, but the sentiments those acts induce when shared with others. “One of the big ones is being tucked into bed forth night”, she says, “Mommy will come up to my room, we’ll talk a little about our day, give hugs, I’ll hop up into bed, she’ll usually sing me a song or otherwise comfort me, I’ll say my goodnights, and right then log off”. One can almost say, in this case, that the offline world is but a dream of Wendy as virtual child’s.³¹ A second life, it seems, is a drastic understatement in describing what Wendy’s experience in SL, it is, to her, a life no less real than the one she carries on in actuality.

This may sound, to those who are not accustomed to virtual worlds as *sui generis* places, or those who have invested a lifetime in the faith of a singular reality, ridiculous, even outrageously absurd. In can be argued that virtuality, however much realness it is capable of generating on screen, cannot surpass that which is truly real so that on a fundamental level, it lacks “physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities” (Turkle, p.239), all of which are, according to this line of reasoning, indispensable in shaping and sustaining human sociality. In MMORPGs, Turkle continues, “you have virtuosity and fantasy – and something more: your performance put you at the center of a new community with virtual

³¹ It is worth pointing out here that, most interactions between players in SL happen on a textual and visual level, the rest – in terms of sentiment and ultimately, meaning, is subjected to the player’s arbitrary interpretation. For example, when Wendy says “I’ll hop up into bed, she’ll usually sing me a song”, what happens is by clicking a button, her character animates the act of hopping onto bed – a chain of animations that are programed to be executed in exact ways across all characters in SL unless otherwise specified, and her virtual mother’s human operator would, by typing a line of command, prompts a line of text to be displayed in the chat window on each player’s UI that reads approximately, *XXX sings XXX a song*.

best friends and a sense of belonging” (ibid., p.212), which in turn cultivates, just like the simulation of objects on screen, a simulated sense of attachment, a pixelated hologram to be in. Especially in worlds like Second Life, where the programming of the game “leads people to emphasize big emotional markers. There is love, marriage , divorce – a lot of emotional culminating points are compressed into an hour ... this is sweet spot of simulation: the exhilaration of creativity without its pressures, the excitement of exploration without its risks” (ibid., p. 212-224). Attachments cultivated in a cybernetic virtual space, she concludes, can certainly be felt as deeply as offline ones, but they are inherently incomplete in the sense that one only have to hide behind an impenetrable veneer of a digital rendition of the self to interact with other digital representatives of other selves – it is, in other words, the sociality of avatars, not humans.

Yet talking to those players, one finds a hard time to simply wave aside their sincere and unrelenting belief in the genuine realness of whichever virtual world they inhabit, and crown them as plainly ignorant. The distinction so central to Turkle’s line of argument – that the virtual is lesser than the real due to its engineered otherness, so that ramifications of whatever happens within its confines can be dismissed once the border is trespassed – seems to lose ground. One wonders how much lesser the virtual is against the real in actuality, and to those players, when they were immersed in embodying another self online, which realm is more real to them.

Indeed the conventional dichotomy of real against virtual is, to a considerable extent, an artifice of human imagination in the first place. Deleuze (2004) cautions that “the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual ... the virtual must be defined as strictly a part of the real object” (p.260). Fornäs et al. (2002) agrees, saying that “virtuality ... has followed human culture from its very beginning. Symbols open up

imaginary worlds that tend to be virtual worlds by including traits that imitate real social worlds” (p.30). Etymologically, virtual originates from Latin *virtus*, a word that is associated with longstanding contradictions within a Western binary worldview of mind versus body, good versus evil, object versus subject, etc. Such a dualistic tradition tends to “distinguish Culture itself, as intrinsically artificial, from Nature, the source of all that was natural. Cultures, in this view, were artificial creations natural to the human condition” (Strathern, p.48). The principal reason for those who maintain that the virtual is hierarchically subordinate to the real, it appears, has little to do with either the properties of entities within each category or the categories themselves, rather, it is often the established worldview that automatically casts anything initially incomprehensible to a culturally entrenched mind as immanently invalid, inadequate – or vice versa.

III.

One day during his fieldwork in Second Life, Boellstorff (2008) received an instant message from an in-game acquaintance – Samuel, who was complaining about a newly opened store in the neighborhood (recall that SL allows players to purchase and trade land). Curious at Samuel’s fuming rage, Boellstorff went and took a look. What turned out to be the problem was the neighborhood Samuel shared with a number of other people – which according to the player, was “one of the most romantic venues in all of Second Life” (p.89), was “infringed upon” by a new store which under Boellstorff’s description, resembled a disco of the 1980s, with the exception that the extravagant flashing lights were not contained within the store. As a result, the place was considered by the neighborhood residents to be a “glowing monstrosity” that was “rude and uncalled for”, “hard on the eyes”, and “ruins the whole look of this area” (pp.89-90). The

neighbors' unanimous discontent eventually incentivized them to purchase the land right next to it and filled the parcel with large billboards that read "IF YOU SUPPORT JOANIE'S (a small neighborhood club that had already been there for some time) DO NOT BUY FROM THIS STORE!!!".

The encounter ended in a heated tirade Samuel threw at Zazzy, who owned the new store, during which he said to the proprietor of the "glowing monstrosity": "you have no idea how much effort people have put into making this area nice. Your store here comes as a horrible shock ... they need to have neighbors who are considerate. You just barged in here with this flashing monster, ruining the view ... this is a neighborhood. Try to understand: this club (the local one) is this woman's (Joanie's) LIFE. It's her SECOND LIFE. She has spent MONTHS working on it, 24/7, getting in customers. It's the highlight of this whole sim and the area". Perhaps to Samuel's chagrin, such a heartfelt and self-righteous delivery only prompted Zazzy to respond with a feeble line of "this store is my life too", at which point Samuel, unwilling to relent, said "yeah but she was here first dude, Joanie moved here when the sim was new and now it's like threatened for her ... we care about this neighborhood Zazzy. We live here" (pp.89-91, captions original).

Just as to someone who lives in a nice neighborhood, who spends hours after hours mowing the lawn, cutting out overgrown plants, cleaning the driveway, etc. – all of which seems, in the eyes of another person who has lived in an urban area apartment their whole life, perfectly redundant and pointless – the virtual sky and soil in a MMO world equally constitute a space with real implications, within which interpersonal moods are to be shared and connectedness to be constructed. Such a location is immanently adequate for digitalized virtual selves to expand

any mood sharable into sustainable relationships, however emerged at first³². As a result, “given such attunement [toward a fully virtual existence], banter and laughter flow naturally across strangers and unite them into a community” (Dreyfus, p.110).

In the end, one has to concede that virtual worlds are bound by a completely different rule when it comes to what constitutes place and consequently, interpersonal proximity and attachment. For instance, irreducible and intricate elements such as emotions and feelings are often shared in virtual space in ways that is specific to its limitations though bear tangible consequences to those who are involved nonetheless (recall Wendy’s bed ritual) – which in turn, just like its actual counterpart, induces certain moods to make the moments more memorable, and the selves in those moments more real. It is therefore, reasonable to presume that “the shared mood that is constitutive [of virtual sentiments] ... it is what binds the participants ... and makes the occasion into a self-contained world” (Dreyfus, p.109).³³

Only the highly permeable border that defines—or fails to define, a virtual world as an unambiguously self-contained place is not as easily identifiable as neatly fenced neighborhood parcels in actuality. Sentiments circulated in virtuality, in other words, need not to be extinguished the moment one logs off the game and shuts off the computer, instead, they already exist in a place that is not entirely real nor unreal, perpetually bouncing in between and

³² For instance, in combat-oriented games such as WoW, boss fights are an integral part of the gaming experience, and it is often here one finds the intense elation of communal effervescence after defeating a difficult foe through dedicated teamwork, which, for those who are not familiar, suffice it to say it resembles a sporting event. But most often the connectedness forged through shared encounters does not stop there, and the relationship thus established sometimes extend over the virtual border with undiminished realness.

³³ It needs to be pointed out here that unlike in actuality where moods are for most of the time, expressed in spontaneous and direct ways, in virtual worlds not only moods but anything remoted related to feelings are instead, purposefully impressed via the limited outlets the game allows. That being said, it is often the specific circumstance that creates certain shareable moods, rather than individually engineered. It is in this regard – where context exists before individualization – that the argument holds, in other words, it is the event that is self-containing, not the impact of the event, as we will see in the following pages. In situations where a clearly contextual background is missing, effective communication between players are likely to be missing as well, not unlike in the offline world. Thus events, in the broad sense of the word, is of crucial importance in MMO sociality.

challenging taken-for-granted boundaries of the actual and virtual. Such a gap, curiously, reverberates into the identities of virtual world inhabitants not infrequently. Sometime, the distance is insurmountable, as one SL resident puts it: “the SL me and the RL (real life) me are two totally different people. I may appear strong in my online presence, but in RL I’m so weak it’s not even funny”; “Second Life is a chance to be someone else beside yourself, which you can’t really do it in RL unless you want to lead a double life”. However, many players agree that regardless of the technically endless possibilities for role-playing another being, in the end what the self is always becomes, instead of diminished, only more prominent. One players comments that “my appearance may change, but you’re stilling talking to ME, my personality ... I would imagination that the majority of the people who play here put in more of their personality than they’d like to admit” (Boellstorff, pp.118-121. Captions original).³⁴

Such a permeable boundary between the online and offline, in many instances, complements a sense of selfhood that is grounded in actuality. Via embodying a fictional character, many would be less restrained to explore possibilities that might have been denied to them on this side of the screen due to particularities of their personal conditions, as one often hears in the cases of players with physical disabilities. The structural condition that enabled such permeability, consequently, constitutes what Turner (2017) identifies as a liminal situation, one that “eludes or slips through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (p.95), and those who are caught in liminality “are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom,

³⁴ A common misconception is that in comparison, sim games (such as SL) in general allow greater space for players to experience with different personalities and identities, due to their game design. This line of argument is largely unsubstantiated. Combat-oriented MMOs, despite lacking in this feature on the outset, actually offers as much potential for embodying different personalities as non-combat oriented ones, for the simple reason that the avatar as a mediation between the player and the game world already encodes in it the necessity for role-playing.

conventional, and ceremonial” (ibid., p.95). To a large extent, the persistence, or lack of it, of a coherent selfhood one commonly witnesses among MMO world inhabitants can be attributed to this. The “network of classifications” that are defied by liminality are, after all, cultural boundaries which invariably orient toward a singular conception of reality; and following a cultivated receptiveness to online lives, virtual world residents have, in all likelihood, already been exposed to, if not thoroughly enculturated into, a distinct set of cultural norms that emerged and evolved to befit an equally vivid virtual space. Thus, being orthodoxically real or not is hardly relevant for a space that is in the first place, already located in the virtual thereby is itself, between places.

In this sense, the ineluctable liminality deeply rooted in the foundations of virtual worlds carries with it a contemporary variation of techne that is constantly generating a sense of shareable presence. Viewed from the first-person perspective of the avatar, this presence of the self—thus awareness of the digital self—creates a unique environment within which not only a self-contained personal identity could be extended or constructed anew, but beyond the limits of the self lies rich soil for interpersonal connectedness, i.e., cybersociality, to emerge and expand.

IV.

The virtual sociality in gaming worlds recounted in this chapter has, over the past two decades, become a trademark feature of MMOs and beyond, mostly by offering inhabitants what their generations have been denied in actuality, namely, the kind of grounded friendship and friendliness toward each other that is now mostly resigned to generic screenplays of film studio productions. The transformation from single to social gaming, also illustrates a much broader

cultural shift, chief among which are social media, live streaming, and personal portable digital devices. Whether simulation of offline reality or bold instantiations of dark fantasy, online virtual worlds consistently attract millions by combining features of traditional video gaming with a more contemporary concept of networked connected, inconspicuously shaping the way in which digitalized lives interact with each other. No longer do players sense strangeness emanating from the luminescent screen, only dull familiarity awaits, promising perhaps, instead of the initial excitement and adventure, an unremarkable though oddly fulfilling chance to live as someone else—or simply as themselves in somewhere else.

And yet, the matrix is created, after all, by someone somewhere, and not unlike in actuality, the logic entailed in its creation exerts almost dictatorial power over the place and its inhabitants – who are, similar to their offline counterparts, too obliviously preoccupied to notice the streams of flowing power. In the next chapter, I turn to the political economy of online gaming virtual worlds to discuss the theoretical implications inherent in the digital construct, as well as on the populace of these fantasy lands.

CHAPTER FOUR

BEYOND THE SCREEN: MMO IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL ECONOMY

Blizzard shall have the right to monitor and/or record your communications when you use the Platform, and you acknowledge and agree that when you use the Platform, you have no expectation that your communications will be private.

— Blizzard End User License Agreement, Section One, A, viii.

Many features associated with online virtual worlds, from lack of general market regulation to the nature of manufacturing codes, render them extremely vulnerable to monopolistic pressures, as we have witnessed across the information technology section, from software to computer to ISP (internet service provider) during the past thirty years; but above all, it is the ability to externalize a networked location that is shared by large and diverse groups of people that makes virtual world a particular interest in the present inquiry. For accompanying the domination by a single or a handful providers—a practice that nonetheless demarcates the market in monopolistic arrangements—among the tech industry is the reliance on the ubiquitous and complacent obliviousness from the customers. It is fair to say that until very recently, that is, when the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke out, most people would not even be bothered to comment on the predatory practices that infests the tech industry, treating most Internet features with the same indifference one reacts to the fate of a shopping mall.

Although to be fair, not unlike a shopping mall, virtual worlds are also subjected to the whims of their architects – the programmers. What is decidedly incomparable is that, however

skilled an offline architect is, their design have to conform to the laws of physics – something none of us have the ability to bend except in fantasy; whereas the architect of virtual worlds are the makers of laws in their worlds, gods in their creations. The codes of a virtual world are effectively its law, and such laws are not drafted by a congregate of representatives of inhabitants of the world, it is designed in entirety by those possess mastery over the basic language of the place, and those who are powerful enough to employee the virtual priests.

On Governance – I

The common practice among the online gaming industry is for a company to develop a game for three to five years, then either finds an external publisher or publish the game itself, at which time the game is released for the first time to public in open beta form for half to a full year. During beta time the game is expected to be under continuous playtesting from a mostly volunteering public and an employed group of play-testers. Eventually, if the game shows sufficient signs of acceptance or even enthusiasm from the public and critics alike, it is finally released with varying degrees of official pomposity – an intense period of promotion in advertisement, usually – then maintained, not unlike during open beta, as long as the game lasts. The final product sometimes is no different, at least to the eyes of a non-professional player, from the first version.

Not unlike shopping malls from the outset.

That being said, one pivotal distinction between an offline place and an online one, notwithstanding their striking similarities, is that the latter in most cases are owned wholesome by a third party.³⁵ Despite most virtual worlds these days are open-sourced (the codes are

³⁵ Going back to the shopping mall comparison. A shopping mall is like all other physical venues where the place is owned, often to the extent to which it can be owned – that is to say, the artificial value placed upon the place by its



Figure 4.1 World of Warcraft Public Test Realm server. The server is essentially no different from all other servers except that contents before official released will be run through here first for testing purposes. Notice the “Bug Reporter” icon on the lower left corner. Players volunteer to play-test new content are expected – without remuneration – to report whatever features they find improvable or dysfunctional.

human operators. An online venue such as a gaming world, on the other hand, is subjected to a set of fundamental laws of its virtual universe, and effectively, that universe is the game world itself. Those who own online venues own not only the value that can be generated from the place but most importantly, metaphorically speaking, the atomic, the molecular laws that give the place its forms and shapes in the first place. The owners of online places are, in this sense, truly gods of gods.

accessible to the general public) and have many participatory features aside from those inherent in the gameplay,³⁶ every single building block of the such worlds are legal assets of someone somewhere. The equivalent, on this side of the screen, is if every molecule were owned by a business entity and in order to live, one needs to pay fees to purchase license not only to interact with inanimate things, but upon waking up each morning, to embody oneself in the first place.

To put it this way would render the whole notion preposterous and perhaps even outrageous, but such reasonable sentiments, oddly enough, do not seem to permeate across into beyond a flat digital screen. For most part, inhabitants of vast online worlds do not bother with the underlying economy of their collective habitats, and only occasionally does one hear a half-hearted squeak on the undercurrents of politics that, however vigorously ignored most of the time, are invariably embedded within every human congregation, virtual or otherwise.³⁷ The fact that virtual worlds are first and foremost, “a body of binary digital information: ones and zeros rendered on a computer screen” (Boellstorff, p.91), makes the fusion between politics and economy all the more intricate online. The virtual molecules that are patented as permanently assets to a business entity are, instead of being impartial instruments of grand virtual architectures, more accurately speaking, harbinger of the contemporary mode of governance themselves.

³⁶ See figure 4.1. PTR, or play-test realm, is one such example. Unlike open beta, before a new in-game patch is officially implemented, most online games test the upcoming features in a PTR server that is open to all. The server itself is indistinguishable from the normal server except it is devoted entirely for the purpose of testing. Anyone who wishes to participate and provide feedbacks can do so. However, inconsistent with the participatory spirit commonly referred to such practice, the issue of remuneration is forever absent as far as PTR goes. Game publishers receive critical feedbacks from voluntary playtesters not infrequently, though in all cases without consideration to pay voluntary playtesters as they pay professional ones. The issue is discussed more thoroughly in the next section.

³⁷ It is worth pointing out that, even in the rare instances where politics of online worlds cannot be averted from mentioning anymore, the result tends to be a most curious one. Instead of calling for democratic participation by inhabitants, whenever a serious issue arises, one almost always hear the unmistakable call for the necessity of a benign virtual sovereign – a gentle and considerate dictator. For an example, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/27/opinion/gaming-new-zealand-shooter.html>.



Figure 4.2 World of Warcraft customer support window. On the left side the options “Report Player”, “Submit Bug”, and “Submit Suggestion” are highlighted. Like most other companies that run large online gaming worlds, Blizzard relies considerably on player feedback for game maintenance. This system places no requirement on players to report others, meaning that they can do it at will for whatever reasons they see fit. Upon accumulating enough reports against a particular player, GMs (game masters, or in-game customer service representatives) would investigate the reported player and determine, according to game regulations (which are outlined arbitrarily by Blizzard Entertainment) whether to exercise punishment or to what degree the punishment should. The reported player receives no notice during this process, and is only notified upon the implementation of the punishment. The reported may appeal.

As a result, publishing companies more or less act as sole custodians of vast digital universes under their management, arranging and rearranging the worlds and the inhabitants as though caretaking gods who nonetheless, hold absolute power over both the place and the people, whose arbitrations are anything but swift and final.³⁸ When commenting on Second Life's player report system, Boellstorff (2008) cautions that "since SL was owned by Linden Lab, its authority was absolute ... such total control over virtual worlds is one of the most consequential aspects of emerging models of governance for them, raising the prospect of virtual dictatorships" (Boellstorff, p.222). Ideally, however, one would think a world's population as diverse and vast as an online virtual world harbor enough potential, that is, spaces, for genuine forms of grassroot governance, and perhaps out of it, even legitimate sovereignty, to emerge if not spontaneously, at least eventually. Burke (2004) reasons that the three most likely places such legitimate governance may emerge in MMOs are developers, player associations, and the gameplay mechanics itself.³⁹ Yet after a lengthy investigation, he concludes that not only an ideal – but legitimate governance in any shape or form, is not to be found in any of the three places, or anywhere else in a majority of MMORPGs. The result, not without a sense of irony, is that a nearly mythical kind of authority reigns supreme in virtual gaming worlds, one that faintly resembles a fundamentally disinterested God who requires neither its people's understanding nor their constant, abject reverence.

³⁸ See figure 4.2. For instance, in World of Warcraft, as in most other games today, a report system functions as a bridge between CS representatives and gamers. Most game-related issues, from technical problems, other players' unethical behaviors, to bug reports, are all handled by Blizzard according to a set of rules that only they have power to alter.

³⁹ Gameplay mechanics, as I have been emphasizing so far, plays an enormous role in online gaming worlds. A game that places combat experience as the main feature, such as early *Sar Wars: Old Republic* – a game for the first few years was heavily criticized for offering a vexingly little amount of content besides PvP (player-versus-player) induces a certain mentality in its player population that is diametrically different from, for instance, games like *Second Life*, where a rather peaceful (meaning mostly non-combat oriented) simulation of real life is the main feature.

In other words, the final authority in MMO worlds, as far as reason extends, is the subtle though without doubt, tyrannical power emanated from the foundation of such virtual universes – the codes, and upon that, modified expectations extracted by human managers, who are always ready to exercise the usually reserved dictatorial power. To the players, however, who for most part are oblivious to the power of underlying structures of their online habitats, the seemingly plausible basis for compliance, if not altogether submission to authority, comes from the EULA (End User Licensing Agreement) or CoC (Code of Conduct) which every player, before assuming an in-game avatar, has to legally lend consent to. Lamentably such basis is perhaps, only too true to its virtual form, for the simple reason that nobody bothers to familiar themselves to the agreements they enter by clicking that button. Unfailing they just click “I agree” then move on, assuming everything is order – that is, until something turns out otherwise.

The fascinating thing about those documents, aside from it being a wide acknowledgment that no one reads them in actuality and yet they consistently receive scrupulous editions—removing clauses, adding requirements, etc.—as if a readership is present, is the drastically inconsistent manner from the way in which game publishers normally approach the public. Contrarily to the cunning solicitousness that coats all of their interactions with players in virtually every other instances, in EULA or CoC the tone reminds one more of a commandment than an agreement.⁴⁰ Furthermore, for a player who has established a routine, made friends in a

⁴⁰ See figure 4.4 at the end of chapter. The reason I am not comparing such documents to business contracts, which might seem the most obvious connection, is that business contract, essentially, is for binding purposes, and the force that binds is theoretically external to all parties concerned. In other words, a business contract is an agreement—which necessitates room for negotiation before signing—entered for a particularly impartial occasion, which includes by extension its participants, who are otherwise liable to be unaccountable, to function without being interfered by anything but a specific kind of logic through introducing a third party who, for the occasion, holds absolute power over all those who sign. A EULA, on the other hand, is decidedly unilateral in power flow, and equally dictatorial in effect. In lieu of subjecting all parties concerned to a third external power, the so-called agreement itself assumes the authority position and demands the other party to obey in most absolute terms in the confines specified in the document. As a result a EULA resembles neither the impartiality nor the act of lending consent in a contract, instead, it dictates, and expects obedience, indifferent to the source of the submission.

game, a EULA is not that different from a virtual dictatorship, for the technical possibility for the player not to agree and thereby forfeiting their access to the virtual world is altogether nonexistent. One tends not to abruptly walk away from a life one has built over time, if disagreement happens, those who are not in a position to change the situation most often compromises.

On Governance – II

If it is in EULA we glimpse the true nature of what the game world and its custodians represent, or perhaps more precisely, who they represent, the in-game situation tends to be, ironically, much less complicated and therefore, much more puzzling.

For most part, scholars who agree that the theoretical mode of governance in MMO worlds can be most accurately described as de facto dictatorship (Burke 2004; Castronova 2005; Taylor 2006; Boellstorff 2008), are close to being clueless to what is happening in-game as myself when I first became aware of the issue. After an extensive discussion of the logical aspect of how governance in virtual worlds ought to operate, Castronova (2005) relates to his experience with Star Wars Galaxies and World of Warcraft, not without a sense of helpless frustration, that “one looks long and hard to see any governance in synthetic worlds at all ... actual governing moments happen rarely ... from my perspective, not despotism but anarchy seems to be the de facto form of government” (pp.208-9), shortly afterwards, he concludes that “the nature of synthetic worlds governance—anarchy spiced with occasion profit-oriented tyranny ... [all in all,] the titular government is the coding authority and its officers are customer service representatives” (ibid., pp.210-13). In a similar vein, upon reflecting his experience in Second Life, Boellstorff (2008) points out that despite the fact that “SL was owned by Linden

Lab, its authority was absolute ... such [theoretically implementable] total control over virtual worlds is one of the most consequential aspects of emerging models of governance for them, raising the prospect of virtual dictatorships” (p.222), the inhabitants of the game world went about their daily chores with as routinized orderliness as though they are living, not a second, but simply a life in a collectively shared space, hardly heeding the presence of any overseeing, overpowered ethereal entities who are supposed to be governing their collective fate.

In part, the absence of absolute control is because the profit-driven nature of such worlds dictates it as unfeasible to implement dictatorial control over the entirety of the virtual landscape – a feat that, due to the nature of their technological construct, is always lurking in the realm of possibility. This, in turn, necessitates individual inhabitants of virtual worlds to exercise control over themselves on behalf of the managing authorities in order to avoid a complete anarchical scenario, which neither the players nor the publishers want. The question of governance within such cyber territories, then, for most part, stops concerning those who hold nominal governing power and instead, becomes the obligation of those who do not. The task of governance in MMO worlds, therefore, relies heavily on the government of oneself (Foucault 1991), or “the transformation of governmental techniques of management and control into internalized forms of techne” (Boellstorff, p.244).

From this perspective, the entire cultural apparatus we have discussed in the previous chapter – which is the central force that infuses meaning into a majority of players’ online second or third lives, falters irreparably, due to the immanence and by extension, sheer plausibility of an entirely new genre of engineered control over culture formation. The digital infrastructure of virtual worlds, upon completion, already encodes the general outline of the possible cultural trajectories within such worlds, propelling inhabitants/players as though

through an invisible current toward certain directions instead of others, as I have briefly mentioned in the importance of gameplay mechanics. “The technology does not wholly determine the nature of the society, though it may determine the parameters within which that society may develop” (Reid, p.109). As one SL player reacts, upon hearing that the U.S. government and military have numerous installments in the game: “my first thought was that the U.S. government was now trying an experiment [in the game world], looking for people with skills” (Boellstorff, p.225). Technically, concerns like this are not unwarranted, for fundamentally online games are programs, a concept that “first appears in the seventeenth century for public notices but which in the past 150 years has spread through other organizational and informational technologies .. [the program] has come to mean any prearranged information that guides subsequent behavior” (Beniger, p.39).

In this sense, online virtual worlds are first and foremost, economic programs that are designed for generating profit through appealing to highly generic populations, who mostly are indifferent to the intricacies embedded within the programs – i.e., its indispensable dependence on effective governance and therefore, governmentality. “The art of government”, remarks Foucault (1991),

is essentially concerned with answering the question of how to introduce economy – that is to say, the correct manner of managing individuals, goods, and wealth within the family ... and of making the family fortunes prosper – how to introduce this meticulous attention of the father towards his family into the management of the state ... this, I believe, is the essential issue in the establishment of the art of government: introduction of economy into political practice ... to govern a state will therefore mean to apply economy, to set up an economy at the level of the entire state, which means exercising

towards its inhabitants, and the wealth and behavior of each and all, *a form of surveillance and control* as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and his goods (p.92, emphasis mine).

In cases where the political is on the outset absent,⁴¹ or perhaps concealed, it is then not unnatural for the economic models to become the principal creeds by which the territory is governed. It is worth noting that, of the two forms of governing principles Foucault highlights: a modern form of governmentality which emphasizes the role of the state instead of the prince thereby untethering despotic sovereignty and territoriality from the legitimacy of governance; and an older, Machiavellian concept of government – one whose “sovereignty is not exercised on things, but above all on a territory and consequently on the subjects who inhabit it” (ibid., p.93), therefore, territoriality; the mode of governance and governmentality in MMO worlds resemble conspicuously the pre-Enlightenment one. Irrevocably bound by cyber territorialities of their respective virtual worlds, gaming companies hold absolute power over the inhabitants as kings and princes once did over their subjects, settling dispute, issues decrees, exercising absolute sovereignty.⁴² Indeed, “we can say that territory is the fundamental element [to a Machiavellian government] ... all these elements [inhabitants, natural resources, etc.] are mere variables by comparison with territory itself, which is the very foundation of principality and sovereignty” (ibid., p.93).

This is where an otherwise outdated mode of governance become in online virtual worlds, through fusing Machiavellian fundamentality on territoriality and a post-Enlightenment approach to government as oriented primarily toward economic management of things, a virtual

⁴¹ Depending on one’s viewpoints, the surface constructs of MMO worlds can be as political as offline rallies and mass protests or as apolitical as searching a blend restaurant for lunch in a shopping mall, which merits another discussion and will not be delved into here. Cf. Castronova 2005, Taylor 2006, Watkins 2009.

⁴² See figure 4.3.

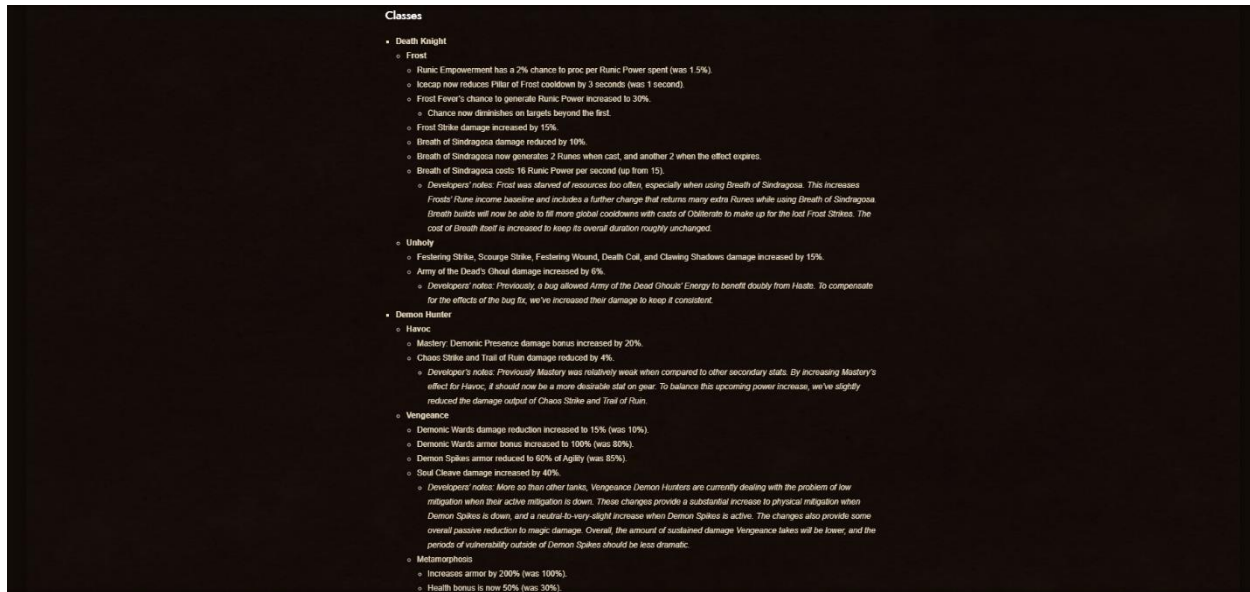


Figure 4.3 World of Warcraft patch notes. It is a common practice among MMOs and other video games alike to introduce new patches—which include reworked and new game features—every couple of months. Patches generally indicate the overall direction the game is taking. Game developers hire play-testers to test-play before releasing the updates. Many games have PTR servers (as discussed earlier), where everyone – if they wish – can participate in playtesting preliminary new patches and offer feedbacks. However, the majority of player do not participate. For most players, to experience new contents is to either play the updated game, or read the notes – such as shown in the screenshot above – from the game’s official website, which, ironically, cannot help but reminds one of a crowd of tittering subjects reading at the front entrance of the governor’s building, the newly issued decrees from the king.

governmentality – a highly specific tactic and instrument that aid the territorial sovereignty, in this case the authoritarianism inherent in the codes and those who manage the virtual world on behalf of its power, to achieve effective governance. In gaming worlds, this manifests as “obedience to the laws [in the present case, company regulations, user guidelines, and essentially, the possibilities and impossibilities determined by the codes of the world] was the law itself; law and sovereignty were absolutely inseparable” (ibid., p.95).⁴³ Foucault continues by saying that “with [post-Machiavellian] government it is a question not of imposing law on men, but of disposing things: that is to say, of employing tactics rather than laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics – to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved” (ibid., p.95). Here we see the clear fusion between the old and the new. On one hand, the sovereign authority exercised by publishers on behalf of codes over players are not only absolute but most critically, legitimate in the implicit, and “the ends of sovereignty is internal to itself and possesses its own intrinsic instruments in the shape of its laws” (ibid., p.95); on the other hand, the purpose of imposing such indisputable a sovereignty upon the subjects of virtual space is not only to maintain its legitimacy, but also

⁴³ Here it is useful to bring up the category of players who are often identified as “cheaters”. It is curious because for a cheater to exist, there has to be something to be cheated in the first place, and by the conventional though nonetheless moral connotations commonly associated with cheating, one has to assume that in comparison, the object or subject being cheated occupy a more or less higher moral standard than the cheater. However, in virtual worlds that are defined in the first place by a toneless, bloodless textual language determined to execute precision, any presence of morality is strict unnecessary for there is, structurally speaking, no room for the moral to exist. Yet consistently online cheaters are despised as much as their offline counterparts, due to similar sentiments. The point is, unlike in the actual world where the fundamental laws are, at least presently, unalterable—thereby rendering cheats insignificant to varying degrees, in virtual worlds such laws are extremely malleable, and one only has to alter a couple lines of source code to achieve wonders within seconds that would take other years. In this light, cheating in virtual worlds assumes a much graver consequence than in offline occasion. And this partially explains why in most EULAs, cheating behaviors are punishable by permanent suspension of the account. Such equivalence on this side of the screen, if one has a taste for irony, is the permanent suspension of life. Perhaps even more ironic is the fact that often it is other players who report in-game behaviors that resemble cheating (for instance, the use of bot—software that is programed to operate avatars in its human proprietor’s place). Such a cultivated vigilance suggests either mindless spite or more likely, implicit recognition of the legitimacy of the absolute power publishers hold in the eyes of the vast majority of players. After all, one does not report suspicious activities to the police if one thinks the police themselves are equally suspicious.

“resides in the things it manages and in the pursuit of the perfection and intensification of the processes which it directs; and the instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics” (ibid., p.95). In the end, “population comes to appear above all else as the ultimate end of [post-Machiavellian] government ... it is the population itself on which government will act either directly through large-scale campaigns, or indirectly through techniques that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people ... the directing of the flow of population into certain regions or activities, etc.” (ibid., p.100).⁴⁴

When sampling player attitude toward the role of gaming publishers in maintaining, or at the very least, upholding order in MMO worlds, one SL player told Boellstorff (2008) that “we don’t need big government [in game]—we just need tribal, or village government”, while another agrees, adding: “we have to police ourselves. Linden Lab’s job is to maintain grid stability, not to intervene with squabbles between users” (p.224).

Such stark discrepancy between players’ perception of game world governance and the actual influence the managers exert on behalf of its virtual absolutism is, after all, not unreasonable. For on one hand, most players log on day after day, wishing only to receive their expected doses of entertainment undisturbed; on the other hand, as Foucault (1995) points out, the modern rendition of governmentality, i.e., the tactics that are employed to manage the social collective of individual things, relies precisely on this level of obliviousness and the complacency resulted from it. Authorities of any kind only need to “arrange things that the

⁴⁴ It is critical to point out that, despite the seeming contradiction between a feudal population and a cyber one – namely, the former for most part possesses no mobility whereas the latter decidedly does, it does not come into mutually exclusively terms with being governed as simultaneously things and subjects, for the simple reason that those worlds are in the first place, on the Internet, which means that for the duration one is manifested as a graphic avatar in-game, one is irrevocably bound within the territory of the game as long as one assumes the character of the avatar. And it is ultimately the avatar who consistently returns to the game world – not the *person* behind the screen, that gaming companies manage as profitable things, because without the avatars, the individual would never enter the territory within which the companies acts as the sole sovereignty.

surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary ... in short, that the inmates (in the present context, the players) should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (p.201). Ultimately, the authority the vast matrix of codes and its publishers hold over players are skillfully rendered “invisible and unverifiable” by structural arrangements of virtual worlds in combination with the mode of governance, so that players are cultivated into a mentality to exercise self-discipline according to absolute powers that are to be “identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus” (ibid., p.215). Consequently, inside the confines of MMO worlds, the ways in which players conduct their activities cannot be decoupled from a cultivated lifestyle that on a fundamental level turns them against their own selves, stamps them simultaneously as subjects and things – for the disciplinary forces they lend consent to, either obliviously or insouciantly, in order to assume a second life online, above all else is “a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology” (ibid., p.215).

On Ludic Labor

A closer look at the neoliberal-friendly, ideologically charged popular discourse would reveal easily that such discussions tend not only to exaggerate the democratizing capability of anything online, moreover, they often remain conspicuously oblivious to the production process of online content, gaming or otherwise, during which genuine social relations are frequently exploited in the name of leisure. As a result, the enormous capacity for virtual gaming worlds to generate profits, to a large extent, hinges upon the manipulative design of an interactive playbour (a term

coined by Kücklich, which literally means play + labor). Commenting on the modalities of neoliberalism that has found a rich and receptive soil in MMO worlds, Kücklich (2005) points out that, digitalized playbour is exploitative by design, for it capitalizes on the inherent mobility of the Internet in conjuncture with the consequent dissolution of the artificial membrane that used to demarcate work sphere from play sphere.

By traditional Fordist logic, work sphere requires the repression of laborers' natural tendency to seek fulfillment of their species being whereas in play sphere, i.e., leisure, the laborer is allowed a respite from such repression. Yet, the underlying structure of the current mode of online social relation – one that is constantly under direction from capital's compulsion to self-replication, increasingly finds the distinction unnecessary. After all, work is as much an ephemeral concept that one acquires through lifelong enculturation as leisure, and if one cannot escape the most fundamental network that defines our time – the Internet, then the titular privacy so generously allowed by previous modes of production becomes effectively outdated. Thus, work begins to assume a pretense of leisure, i.e., it is expected to be pleasurable, creative, fulfilling, or simply fun and captivating, whereas leisure activities start to become more routinized, formalized and predictable in both form and content, all the while the border that marks work from play is liquidated physically as well as conceptually primarily by capital's colonization of virtual spaces. In short, work is supposed to become deceptively leisurely and leisure incrementally laborious.

To Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), the assimilation of leisure into work is necessarily accompanied by a determined investment in promoting participatory management, i.e., management of surplus-producing labor by the laborer themselves – which is ostensibly absent of overtly coercive mechanism and by extension, the self-sustained enactment, or the

internalization, of disciplinary technics, which we have come across in previous sections. The outcome is a predictable one: despite the dissolution of the border between work and leisure, work has not become substantially more leisurely, instead, it has grown decidedly more stressful while the ownership structure and property relations underscoring leisure in general have not undergone any substantive change.⁴⁵

Marx realizes this inherent contradiction within capitalist mode of production, remarking that the

working day does have a maximum limit. It cannot be prolonged beyond a certain point ... the length of the working day therefore fluctuates within the boundaries both physical and social. But these limiting conditions are of a very elastic nature, and allow a tremendous amount of latitude (Marx 1990, p.341).

Online gaming marketed as leisure thus exploits the player's misguided assumption of private entertainment in order to produce marketable value, then translates this mode of sustainably motivated play into churning out an equally sustainable mode profiteering. This constitutes a renewed attempt by capital to intensify alienation of labor under network capitalism, which indirectly perpetuates existing core systemic problems on one hand, and extends the labor time to produce absolute surplus-value under the veneer of leisure on the other. Eventually,

⁴⁵ For instance, today's largest gaming corporations (EA, Sony, Steam, Nintendo, Activision, etc.), modeled after tech giants such as Amazon, Facebook and Google, rely heavily on UGC (user-generated content). Publicly self-identified as service providers, i.e., platform managers, multibillion dollar corporations alike remain property of a handful while those who most regularly create contents for the games – the players, remain conspicuously absent in the ownership and remuneration structure. In one instance concerning the game Second Life, it is reported that players created more than 95% of in-game content while until a couple years ago, it charged a monthly fee for access and even when the fee was removed, profits generated by the game are not shared among players (Boellstorff, 2008).

the prolongation of the working day beyond the point at which the worker would have produced an exact equivalent for the value of his labor-power, and the appropriation of that surplus labor by capital—this is the process which constitutes the production of absolute surplus-value. It forms the general foundation of the capitalist system, and the starting point for the production of relative surplus-value. The latter presupposes that the working day is already divided into two parts, necessary labor and surplus labor. In order to prolong the surplus labor, the necessary labor is shortened by methods for producing the equivalent of the way of labor in a shorter time. The production of absolute surplus-value turns exclusively on the length of the working day, whereas the production of relative surplus-value completely revolutionizes the technical processes of labor and the groupings into which society is divided (ibid., p.645).

In other words, leisure activities within the online play sphere – which in rhetoric is there only for the genuine entertainment of users and by extension, not to replicate the exact labor-commodity relations under neoliberalism that infest the entire expanse of the work sphere, do precisely that. Value created as such then is appropriated by a handful of corporations for the reproduction of capital under the same ownership structure and property relations, whereas the players are treated, or I should say, managed, in principle, no different than slightly more intelligent and sensual cattle that are to be milked efficiently and eventually, dispensed with.

For the present context, it is useful to clarify the analytical distinction between value, price, and labor, for they are commonly conflated in mainstream discourse such as seen in Hesmondhalgh (2010). He echoes many others' opinion by claiming that to conceive online leisure activities as labor is completely unreasonable because on one hand, players are not actively engaging themselves for the purpose of monetary compensation and on the other hand,

the majority of cultural and creative works are historically unpaid. Here a conflation of value and price is obvious. The decisive feature that differentiates the two, points out Marx (1993), is that “every commodity (product or instrument of production) is the objectification of a given amount of labor time” (p.140).

He then elaborates:

how then is the magnitude of this value [of the commodity] to be measured? By means of the quantity of the “value-forming substance”, the labor, contained in the article. This quantity is measured by its duration, and the labor-time is itself measured on the particular scale of hours, days etc. (Marx 1990, p.129) ... the greater the labor-time necessary to produce an article ... the greater its value. The value of a commodity, therefore, varies directly as the quantity, and inversely as the productivity, of the labor which finds its realization within the commodity (ibid. p.131).

Price, on the other hand, is the “money-name of the labor objectified in a commodity” (ibid, pp.195-196). Comment such as Hesmondhalgh’s circumvents the dynamics of the constant interplay between value, price, and labor, therefore fails to address the issue accurately. Value, in this case, is objectively established by the amount of laboring time – minutes, hours, days, etc. – necessary to produce a commodity, whereas price is the arbitrary evaluation of the market value of certain commodity, which consequently is determined not only by the amount of labor power but mostly by those who own the means of production, therefore is exploitative by nature within capitalist system. Monetary compensation in the form of wage labor, then, does not accurately reflect the value produced by the laboring process, instead, it manages on behalf of capital to keep surpluses in profitable circulation. Hence, the conflation of value and price sidesteps the issue – namely, digitalized playbour is at root, a contemporary attempt to intensify laboring

process, extend work beyond paid workhour, reduce, if not negate wage costs altogether, and ultimately, to naturalize and universalize the abolition of leisure altogether and replace in its place, an inescapable web of capital flow in which all who are not collectors are to be printed into cash.

Such is the subsumption of labor under capital, a process according to Marx (1990), engenders unequal relations of production – for in this way labor is transformed into wage-labor, which then promotes the production of absolute surplus-value through maximizing the extension of workhour in disguise of ubiquitous portals to leisure.

It is certainly no coincidence that inexhaustibly vast MMO worlds came into being only after the infrastructure of neoliberalism had considerably matured. The consequence of such timely entry, remarks Taylor (2006), has a particularly defining effect on future trajectories of online virtual worlds, because “they set precedents for the networked future in which spaces and experience come to be mediated primarily through commercialized systems of authorship and exchange” (p.126). This, in turn, constitutes what Boellstorff (2008) calls “creationist capitalism”, by which he means “a mode of capitalism in which labor is understood in terms of creativity, so that production is understood as creation” (p.206). The emergence and subsequent popularization of such a peculiar form of capitalism, according to Barbrook and Cameron (2001), can be traced back to a Silicon Valley version of “Californian Ideology”, one that unduly rewards competitive hyper-individualism. Considering that most of the famed MMO developers and publishers in the entirety of the history of MMOs either started in California, it does not surprise too much to see this particular ideology multiply and prosper in the virtual worlds they design or maintain.⁴⁶ Such virtual Californian Ideology, Barbrook and Cameron venture to

⁴⁶ Here I should mention that, unlike Hollywood blockbusters, not all of the most populated MMO worlds are creations of Californian companies. For instance, virtual worlds that are popular in Asia tend to present drastically

reason, is the result of “a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the high-tech industries of Silicon Valley ... the Californian ideology promiscuously combines the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies. This amalgamation of opposites has been achieved through a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies” (p.364).⁴⁷

Through conflating labor and creation in this way and further relocating the whole process into a networked space designed to accommodate a multitude of human sociality, the act of production thus becomes, to those who produce, simultaneously a value-creating activity and a spectacle to be observed like most other events on screen. As a result, players tend to be cunningly nudged to produce content for free, or at most with nominal though perfunctory rewards, in exchange for “advertise materials for a product they have already purchased” (Boellstorff, p.210).⁴⁸ In the end, creationist capitalism redefines labor as leisure through the market value it creates, so that creativity would be permanently detached from any previous association with leisure and be effectively remolded as a “form of labor in its own right” (ibid., p.213), which, however pursued, is nonetheless fundamentally incorporated into the legions of profit-driven obsessions that fuel endlessly into the contemporary mode of market dynamics.

different qualities, at least on the outset, than those from the West. Without being overly technical, suffice it to say that despite sharing the same structural limitation of computational language, i.e., generations of code, online worlds created in different parts of the world tend to assume different characteristics and by extension, nominally distinct set of ideologies to represent.

⁴⁷ For instance, once again, recall the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, which is heavily influence by a primarily Californian counterculture publication called *The Whole Earth Catalog*.

⁴⁸ Recall the World of Warcraft achievement system shown in the last chapter. Most of the achievement system in MMOs these days are like that and the rewards, with all fairness, are completely perfunctory, which means being rewarded or not have, as far as gameplay is concerned, no impact whatsoever. That being said, many of those achievements are designed to be more or less more challenging than causal gameplay, therefore possessing them, to a certain extent, showcases the player’s skill and in some cases, even devotion to the game, or as many players referred, prestige.

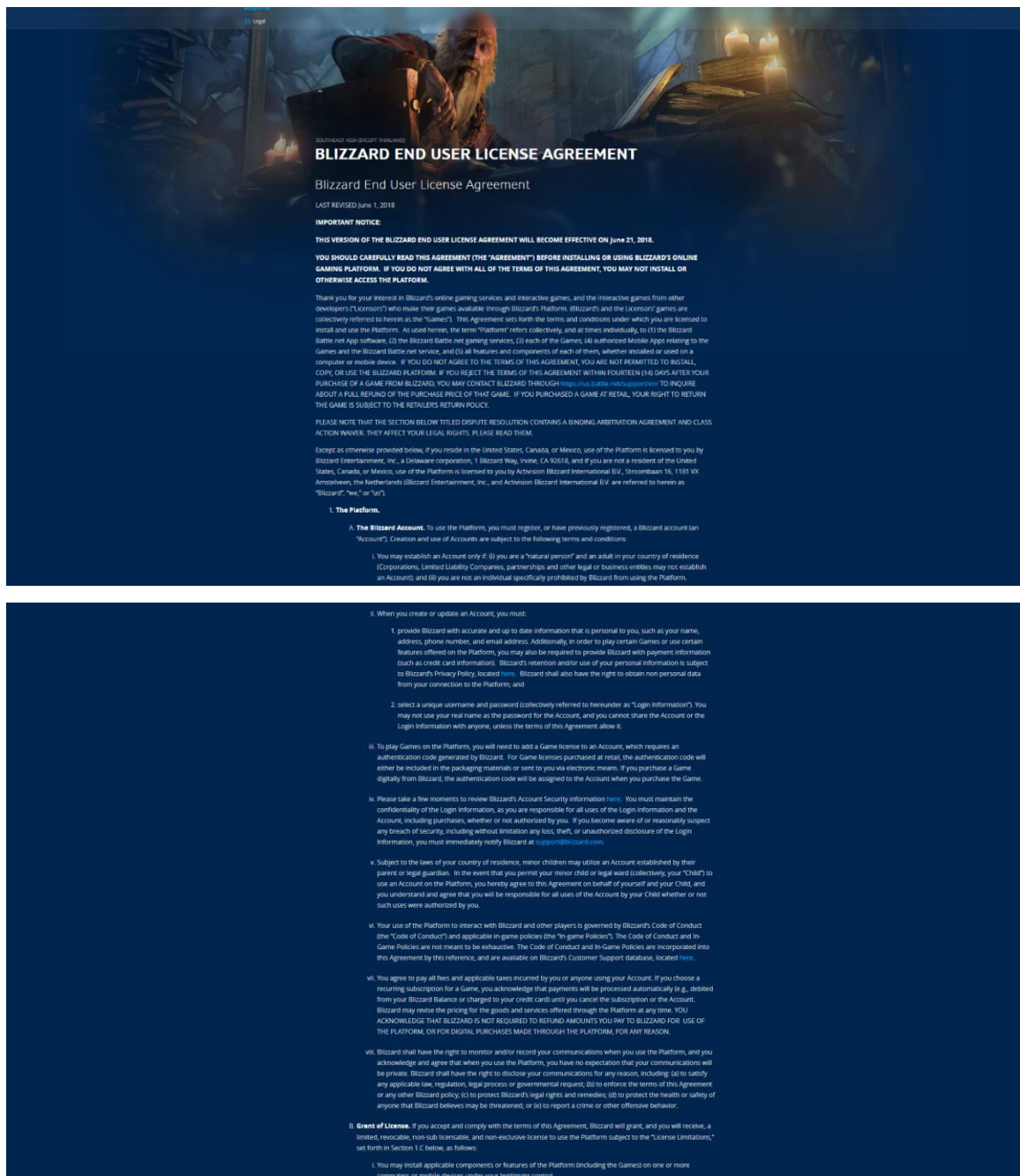


Figure 4.4 Blizzard Entertainment EULA. I only show the first two pieces of the document, which in its entirety takes 13 non-overlapping screenshots. The point is to illustrate that given its condensed length, no player in their right mind would bother to even go through the first clause, let alone the whole document. The so-called agreement then, is never intended to be an agreeable agreement but merely a pretense to enforce the governing authority of the game publisher, and to regurgitate its absolutist legitimacy.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE QUESTION OF FARMING: A CONCLUSION

Farm (verb, with object)—use (land) for growing crops and rearing animals; breed or grow (a type of livestock or crop) commercially.

— Oxford Dictionary

Farm (verb, in gaming)—to stay in one specific place in order to acquire more of a certain item or money. Example: “I need to go to the other zone to farm primals for my weapon”.

— Urban Dictionary

When World of Warcraft was at its zenith around 2009, one would often hear players talk about a spectral group of people – the Chinese gold farmers, with brimming contempt and occasionally, discreet jealousy.⁴⁹ The category was applied to organized groups of players, at the time of the inception mostly from East Asia, who farmed in-game gold with an efficiency that was absurd in the eyes of the vast majority of players, then sell them off in exchange for offline currencies. At first, ordinary players who logged online on a consistent basis, for most part, harbored nearly universal though nameless hatred toward gold farmers. Many said they were breaking the game in terms of designed balance, still many more said the game ought to be played instead of professionalized. At the very bottom, the titular Chinese congregates were broadly received with

⁴⁹ Why Chinese and not Korean or Japanese? The assumption implicit in the framing, one that concerns labor and race in online gaming worlds, is quite fascinating from the outset and troubling if one gets to know something about it. The issue, however, will not be delved into here. cf. Nakamura (2009).

hostility, even among Chinese gamers. Their in-game accounts faced frequent permanent suspension from game publishers, their avatars, if recognized by casuals, would be reported to authority, and subjectable to group griefing had they not logged off in time.⁵⁰

Yet their numbers grew, their profits sounder and sounder. The studios—as they are commonly referred to today, can be found in virtual any game now (whereas originally the Chinese gold farmers received their deciding notoriety in EverQuest and World of Warcraft—two of the largest MMOs in the early 2000s, despite the fact that such groups had existed as long as MMOs had existed, in various forms depending on the game). Rarely does one encounter anybody who would bother to comment on those mirthless professionals any longer, either positively or negatively, and rarer still is the level of severity with which they are punished by game publishers and ridiculed by players.

A personal friend of mine, for a period of a year and a half, operated a studio of this sort, with proud hopes and a less vigorous management, which eventually led to debts he is still unable to clear till this day. However, the start was a relatively promising one. In 2012 – which was rather late to the party, he rented a joyless suburban bungalow on the outskirts of a major southern Chinese city and turned it into a den for cyborgs where the flesh and the digital were often dissolved into shapeless figures in tall and squeaking gaming chairs. There, his employees – normally numbered six to ten young males – toiled 10 to 14 hours a day, and included not much else on their schedules except repetitive keyboard and mouse clicking, eating, showering, sleeping, and rolling off bed to start this over again. In winter times the cramped living room,

⁵⁰ Griefing most often happens in PvP games, where players can combat each other's avatars. Games as such also tend to have faction system, where one or multiple factions—from which the player may select from upon entry—are in perpetual warring relations with each other. As a result, griefing participated by large numbers of player often consist of camping from opposite factions —killing the opponents' avatars and stay at the scene of the crime so that when the killed respawn in the location where they died, they can be killed again, for however many times until reinforcements come or the abused players log off.

which they used as the “office”, smelled of leftover half-cooked meat (they hired housekeepers to cook and clean) while in summer, a teeming public swimming pool without chlorine. The youngsters did not talk much, so for most of the time there were only the pecking of keyboard and occasionally, faint hums of encaged music in headsets to be heard. My friend, who initially was determined to live with the boys and later only went for inspection once a week, repeatedly lamented to me about his dilemma about insufficient efficiency. *Wouldn't it be nice*, he said half seriously once, *if they can eat and sleep at their desks!*⁵¹ At which point I replied sarcastically: *wouldn't it be nicer if they could dispense with eating and sleep altogether and be uploaded wholesome into the game-world!* After all, the whole enterprise of gold farming is itself but a shadowy projection of the ethos of modern Information Technology – namely, to attempt to overcome the rift between a human order and a mechanical order – the former imperfect and imperfectable if left to their own devices, the latter promises of nothing but endlessly roads to ultimate perfection, to create a common ground on which not only language may be exchanged between the inorganic and the organic but enigmas such as thought and mind itself, and with it the whole being of the human would be permanently tethered to the mechanic and the digital, no longer suspended in a perpetual state of becoming and for once, be allowed a glimpse of the true scope of Nature's wonder.

But jokes aside, at the end of the day, the business was too competitive for those who could not be grafted onto their workstations 24/7, and for most part, my friend failed to recruit anyone of that sort, and his business dreams thus faded into nowhere. These days, farming is so

⁵¹ Here I should point out that it is indeed beyond doable to 1) eat by the desk—which is a common practice these days regardless of profession, and 2) sleep there as well. The gaming chairs are designed to be elastic to the extent that they can be extended into a not so uncomfortable leathery surface – much better than seats in flying non-first class, except they are on wheels. If one is not too picky on comfort, the gaming chair, as told me by some gamers who slept in it not infrequently, was “not bad” for a makeshift bed.

common an activity among gamers one farms not only in-game gold but virtual everything that can be farmed inside the vast digital construct of MMOs. The initial gold farmers, it seems, have proliferated beyond anyone's expectation. Their very inconspicuousness nowadays implies that not that they have gone extinct, but that others who resented them so have been assimilated to their order of existence. At this point, one has to wonder, who are, categorically speaking, the gold farmers?

I. Cyborg

The prefix *cyber*, in popular and academic discourses alike, is as ubiquitous as the term *virtual*. Frequently, whenever one encounters anything that is slightly linked to the Internet, one invokes the *cyber* or *virtual* interchangeably, heedless of the history behind the seemingly unimpressive arrangement of letters. However, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the virtual has coexisted with human imagination since the earliest of time, and the cyber, to a large extent, is but a contemporary adaptation of the idea expressed by virtuality – originally lurked only in the shapeless corners of the mind, via symbiosis with various technological mediation, it is, in the present moment, magically alive in front of our eyes and ears, instantiated beyond a doubt, among our actual presence.

The origin of cyborg, or, cybernetic organism, has to be traced back to cybernetics – after all, everyone knows what an organism is, or at least knows one when sees one. In Norbert Wiener's 1948 book *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, he created the term cybernetics by combining the prefix *cyber* – whose Greek root means to direct, to steer, and *net* as in network. The idea of cybernetics, thus, is largely attributable to the necessity prompted by increasing pace in upgrading technological installations

in both the military and civilian sectors during early to mid-twentieth century to exercise more efficient and precise command, control, and communication systems.⁵² The matter, in other words, is almost entirely one that concerns the hybridization of the natural sciences and engineering and perhaps, even the engineering of natural matters. Ideally speaking, a cybernetic system ought to rely on precise, centralized governance – which among mechanical systems is manifested as top-down control, to form a sustainable self-contained system which is capable of self-directing in performing and reperforming certain tasks. With the newly created enigma-solver—computers, individual cybernetic systems can thus be linked in a network centralized from the computer, where a common language for the machines are to be devised for C³ and with that, forming another larger, though no less efficient systems; then those larger systems are to be networked into other, higher level systems, and so on. Essentially, the concept is primarily utilized for 1) increasing efficiency and 2) increasing reliability through implementing C³ via the computer as nexus.

Predictably, this part of the history is largely forgotten by irreverent contemporary invokers of cyber. The prefix has been assumed as simply to indicate anything Internet-related, or occasionally VR-related. The term *cyborg*, coined in 1964, was initially designated to conceptualize an applied version of cybernetics in real world – the synthesis between organic organism and cybernetic system, and is only to be misused afterwards (Tomas, 1995).⁵³

Among academics, the concept of *cyborg* became popular after Donna Haraway's 1984 article, "A Cyborg Manifesto". Wild enthusiasm flooded her attempt to tackle such obscure a

⁵² C³ in short in Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, which will be used as such in portions of the chapter.

⁵³ I have to stress here that cyborg does not, as being widely mistook by the public and academics alike (we will see in a moment Haraway's definition of the cyborg, which commits the same error), simply imply the combination of human and machine. A cybernetic system based on a computerized digital grid is decidedly different from a generic machine, and a synthesis is not a crude combination.

topic, while skimming through the article with professional aquiline eyes, evidently many did not bother to pay much attention to the subtitle, which is “Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the late Twentieth Century”. What is implicit in the whole title, then, is obvious: this is not an attempt to discuss the concept of cyborg for the sake of the concept, but rather, the cyborg is to be utilized as an instrument, or at best an interface or an enabler, to articulate toward political ends Haraway is aiming at. As a matter of fact, she opens with precisely that warning by saying “This essay is an effort to build an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism” (Haraway, p.190). Nonetheless, when subsequently mentioned, *A Cyborg Manifesto* became for most part a partition on behalf of the mythical creatures called cyborgs, who seemed to suffer similar fate as women in general and who was said to represent great promises for a better future.⁵⁴

The general public, on the other side of the wall, received the idea about the same time, thanks to a group of popular sci-fi writers spearheaded by Philip K. Dick. Two years prior to the publishing of the Manifesto, a game-changing film—*Blade Runner*, was screened for the first time. The movie was based on PKD’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), set under a dayless sky and an even more dystopic California, where people from all walks of life appeared to exist in frictionless synthesis with technological interferences from minor mechanical implants, chemical mood inducers to life-like, full-size mechanical pets and androids – a world supposedly populated by cyborgs who were bored beyond boredom, hopeless beyond despair, forever encased in an amber of time where one could not see two paces ahead into the future because of unrelenting dust storms and smog. Two years later to the film’s release, William

⁵⁴ In the article Haraway makes generous comparison between women and cyborg, as if the former is a singular group and the latter comparable to the former. The topic of gender in the present mode of virtuality merits an entire project, which will not be delved into here.

Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) consolidated the cyborg's prominent position in public imagination, taking the concept to a higher level, for this time the synthesis did not stop at the body. A central character in the story, a certain "flatline", belonged to a hacker whose material presence was eliminated while operating in a digital grid—the cyberspace, thus remained there forever afterwards in consciousness only. Conceivably, this entity represents a signal from the fantastic futureworld, one where the mind becomes uploadable and assimilable to not only a mechanical order, but a digital one.

The creature who owes its birth to the varying degrees of synthesis between the organic and inorganic—one that is most commonly referred to as the cyborg, in other words, never materialized out of thin air even in fiction; they are, invariably, unfailingly, the product of a new terrain yet to be fully explored by feeble constructs of flesh and blood—in short, a new order of lifeforms that roam a world beyond recognition, natives to the groundless, skyless cyberspace.

Thusly, cyborg became known as our shadows from the future, and if only we played the cards correctly, we can and will become them. Defined as "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway, p.190), it is thereby the outcome of the dynamics between a particular form of technological intervention and the time and space such transformation is taking place. As for the present day humans who inhabit the space—who are lagging incalculable behind in the pace of change, they are to be assimilated. Thus lies the irony, that the master is about to be mastered, the hunter hunted. She laments further:

later-twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally-designed,

and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert (ibid., p.194).

And where else, one is tempted to ask, is a better habitable zone for such fantastic creatures than the current instantiation of cyberspace? The boundless expanse of MMOs, as we have seen so far, seem to provide all that are needed for the survival and flourishing of cyborgs of all kind, in transition or already metamorphosized. The cyborghood whose very survival is predicated on prosthetic continuity between the organic and inorganic, whose identity is reliant upon a “reconceptualization of the human body as a boundary figure belonging simultaneously to at least two previously incompatible systems of meaning—the organic/natural and the technological/cultural” (Balsamo, p.215), appear to be well provided-for by online virtual worlds.

And yet the migrants into virtual worlds we have discussed so far, when judged from a cyborg perspective, seem to be lacking beyond salvation, just like their offline counterparts. None of them seem to undergo constant disassemble and reassemble procedures in either selfhood or collective identification, none of them conceive of or are willing to believe themselves and their virtual habitats as reducible to the mere technicalities of coding, and most important of all, none is even slightly concerned that they might be living in a simulated Disneyland where consequences are even more beyond reach, where paths to perfection sprout out the ground as casually as mana is said to fall from heaven – all of which, according to Haraway, are deciding characteristics of cyborghood. At the end of the day, the variously customized virtual citizens seem to be painfully un-cyborgish though not entirely human either, i.e., creatures who are perennially bored, incorrigibly unthinking, and often than not, fairly certain of their utter cluelessness of what they are doing here and where to go next.

As it happened, the irony might have unexpectedly turned on its own prophesized self. Instead of propagating, like that of a television screen, “highly miniaturized ... forms of ‘private life’” where all traces of the public sphere is eradicated for good, instead of promoting a culture that is “heavily oriented to individual competition and extraterrestrial warfare” where everyone is militarized to the teeth in thought (Haraway, p.213), the virtual selfhood and by extension, virtual communities, that exist in sporadic locations in online worlds appear un-violently self-contained, content and complacent in the still cumbersome mechanical and the increasingly imperceptible digital prostheses in pursuing another life on the screen.⁵⁵ When prompted to think about the matter, they often would unhesitatingly acknowledge that spending time online is indeed reducing time they spend with families and friends in traditional offline communal settings, but nonetheless the virtual other selves seem to be an agreeable version of a draft of cyborghood – a moderate sign of progress to overcome many physical limitations – for them to take comfort in.

Then arises the questions: Why have not our machines, which are getting smarter and smarter by the day, come to join us in inseparable symbiosis? Where is the prophesized transition of becoming cyborg? Why on earth have we not gained one glimpse into what a truly emancipating cyborghood would look like, and why would attempts to achieve that state of being, even ones that were as mild as google glass—which was ridiculed out of the market so quickly one hardly even saw what it looked like—were rejected so utterly? What path are we on now? Finally, above all, if the inhabitants of MMOs are not cyborgs, who are the creatures that

⁵⁵ It is important to point out here that words such as violence is, like all other product of culture, bound to the specificities of its location of use. Often what appears to be stunningly violent actions to onlookers who know little about online gaming is not at all violent to the players who are directing their avatars to perform those act. To paraphrase what a World of Warcraft developer once said during a conference, their job is not to render the virtual world realistic but to modify it as fictional as possible. As such, despite players “kill” monsters and other players quite often, the implications of that cannot be taken out of context.

materialize and vanish with the speed of light on the thousands of digital universes on the Internet every day, and what are they?

II. Posthuman

The specter of the Chinese gold farmer still haunts us today, not only in MMOs but beyond the permeable membrane that nominally marks the edge of the virtual realm. The cyborg, after all, is still expected to retain some humanly characteristics, i.e., it ought to be identifiable that within a cyborg, which part constitutes the *cy*, and which the *org*. But the Chinese gold farmers heed no such pedantic scrupulousness. They are summoned to stay in one stationary container for half of the day and another for the rest, only to occasionally be allowed to venture away from their usual spots, though carrying, or being carried by, their smarter phones wherever they go. More sensitive observers would be alarmed – for those are not cyborg they are seeing, and this appears to be worse than the absence of any progress in becoming cyborg, for those, on the contrary, are legions of full-sized, life-like androids who probably cannot even remember their dreams.

To paraphrase Haraway – the irony is perhaps too alive and too well, and it is the promise that has become overfed to the point of inertia in the same spot. From what is commonly referred to as the cyberspace (MMOs) emerged not the expected native inhabitants in recognizable cyborg forms, but instead, outpours invading legions of gold farmers, each unique in physical features, each marching identity steps. The cyberspace, instead of a haven to be anointed by a bright future, is somewhere skewed off track, irreversibly heading toward a world where not even cyborgs are needed.

Boellstorff (2008) confirms that the current inhabitant of MMOs are indeed not cyborgs in the sense that many academics have meant since Haraway. A cyborg compromises on

continuity with its mechanical interface while not relinquishing its previous selfhood both in materiality and conceptual construct, whereas on the contrary, “virtual embodiment is predicated on a discontinuity, the gap between virtual and actual. A cyborg implant is physically connected to the body it modifies; but it was never assumed that one could have a virtual arm grafted onto a physical arm” (p.138). In other words, to be or to become a cyborg, one has to suffer some losses – be it the physical absence of actual creatures that prompted life-like mechanical pets in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, or Molly’s presumable insufficient physical abilities as a hacker that resulted in her enhancement implants in *Neuromancer*. Moreover, the losses need to occur in the same realm where the potential upgrades are available. For the digital representatives of actual selves, from this perspective, it is then a sheer impossibility for either them or their operators to become cyborg simply because first, the two realms do not communicate on the same language and second, neither party in either realm suffered any losses whatsoever – the avatars immanently complete by digital standards the moment they are created, and the humans in front of screens unalterably fully human the moment they enter the virtual worlds.

Evidently, what we have in front of us is not a compromise on synthesis, i.e., not a cyborghood, but slightly altered in subtle ways, a comprise on overcoming cyborghood by circumventing it altogether. It appears to point toward the becoming of posthumans.

In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles (2008) comments that “the cyborg-self is one that finds its thoughts scattered—distributed—into a variety of locations by the protocols and economies of the user-screen interface” (p.288), whereas the posthuman, instead of conforming to the mechanical disassemble-reassemble procedure, turns to rely on more elastic assumptions as basic principles:

First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals (ibid., pp.2-3).

In other words, in becoming posthuman the prosthetic synthesis so central to Haraway's cyborghood appears to be replaced by prosthetic extension, through "overcoming our inherent physical limitations ... [by] protecting these very same limitations" (Boulter, p.59). The entry into MMOs – all via the perspective, thus the embodiment of individualized avatar, thereby becomes convincingly un-cyborgish. The act of combining is still indisputably present in virtually embodying the avatar whereas a synthetic relationship is decidedly missing. No more does the player wish to be implanted with codes of MMOs they inhabit than the virtual universes wish to become fully animated in ways their human inhabitants would likely want: "when one activates the game console one is entering into the logic and general computational

economy of a machine whose promise is one of *extension* and of a certain kind of seamless commingling of *subjectivities*” (ibid., p.30, emphasis mine).

III. The End

The question has yet to be answered, who and what is the gold farmer, and what is their relation to the large scale online virtual worlds?

Inhabitants of online virtual worlds, we have speculated so far, cannot be easily tossed across the categorical border into cyborghood, because neither is the virtual avatar necessarily an object, nor the virtual worlds purely inorganic externalities. However, neither can we categorize them into as a teetering crowd of posthuman becomers, for “the posthuman position is ... only ever a promise, forever haunted by the structural necessity of a return to the world ... the player is ... *not posthuman but something else entirely, something entirely new and unaccountable to this [actual] world*” (Boulter, p.123, emphasis original). Is there any categories left to secure an identifiable identity for the players then?

Galloway (2012) suggests that we dispense with both due to the peculiar circumstances we are in. On one hand, the dualistic worldview that gives cyborghood its grounding – one that is invariably dependent on a object-subject synthesis, a positive-negative continuity, simply cannot be applied to the idiosyncratic complexities presented by the digital universes; on the other hand, “it is no longer the Hegel of history, where everything is “post-” this and “post-” that, but the Hegel of the negative, where everything is “un-” or “non”. What was once a logic of supercession is now a logic of cancelation” (p.138). As an alternative, he proposes to think of the millions of recurrent facsimiles of online gold farmers as the nonhuman – an order of creatures whose “act of life is always already an act of affective identity [imprinted by the logic of ludic

capitalism]” (p.136) while at the same time, whose self is perennially quarantined in a temporal vacuum of “*universality without collectivity*” (p.142, emphasis original).

For now, it appears that the gold farms are nobody but our very selves, whether we host second lives in virtual worlds or not. Each time we scroll down a Facebook page, skim through user reviews of a restaurant, or materialize in the digital wonderland of MMOs to issue endless chains of command, we are farming for something of value and simultaneously being farmed by performing those micro doses of unpaid labor.

We are the gold farmers, and we have yet to become anything that is capable of possessing a positive identity.

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