

Reinvention Through Amnesia

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Surveying the field of knowledge about digital games, we engage the articles in this symposium as reviewers, focusing particularly on issues of labor, bodies, space/time, economics, and the use of metaphor.

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We stand at a bold new dawn of meaning. Cybertarian technophiles attribute magical properties to virtual worlds that supposedly obliterate geography, sovereignty, and hierarchy—a combination of truth and beauty that has the potential to heal the wound of the division of labor and turn nation-states into memorabilia through a perfect global liberation of the mind. The on-line environment makes consumers into producers, frees the disabled from exclusion, encourages new subjectivities, rewards intellect and competitiveness, links people across cultures, and allows millions of flowers to bloom in a postpolitical cornucopia—or at least, that is what some analysts of virtual worlds fantasize.

The editors of this dossier have gathered some fascinating materials to help us think through virtual worlds. We will spare you the normal science of reiterating what they say. We each reviewed, independently of one another, three of these manuscripts for the journal. Each of us wanted to challenge the authors a wee bit. Some of our proposals were not incorporated in the published versions. Those of us who do this labor for associations and editors are used to that. We are less used, however, to sharing our criticisms with journal readers. But this time we can, thanks to a kind offer from the guest editor, so we will offer some thoughts about what is happening—and not happening—in game studies. Then we will engage the dossier. We elected to write this response jointly once we discovered from the editor that we were the two reviewers.

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While some scholars have questioned defining games as media (Aarseth, 2001), we believe that games' construction and circulation within the media industries makes it perilous for us not to draw such connections. Games *are* different from other forms of media, and different platforms can create different experiences and limitations. Yet online games are increasingly part of cross-media empires. Large-scale branded productions that create universes for individuals to live in through films, books, television shows, interactive Web sites, online games, and other forms of participation. To claim that games are categorically different, and that we cannot apply any prior knowledge from critical media studies or past studies of different media, is short-sighted.

One of the most important contributions critical media studies can make is through a continual reminder of the role of the *critical* in understanding games and virtual worlds. Too often, effects studies and political economy neglect how power and influence play out in, around, and through games. Game players are conceptualized as either passive imbibers of a game's ideology, or they are thought to actively but uncritically take up particular subject positions through gameplay. While being cognizant of the power and influence that the game industry can wield to shape our popular culture landscape, we also have to consider the individual players themselves, how they make sense of game spaces and how virtual worlds challenge as well as reconstitute dominant ideologies.

Just Gaming

A powerful binary dominates academic debates about virtual worlds and on-line gaming. At one antinomy, it is supposed that an omniscient, omnipotent group of technocrats is plotting to control the emotions and thoughts of young people around the world and turn them into malleable consumers, workers, and killers. At the other antinomy, it is assumed that all-powerful desiring machines called players have their wishes met by producers through the magic elixir of supply and demand (Tobin, 2004). In the latter antinomy, new-media *savants* are fond of invoking precapitalist philosophers, thereby dodging such questions as labor exploitation or ideology, heading instead for aesthetics and neoclassical economics: brokering high art and high technology through high neoliberalism. These *savants* refer to ludology (ignoring work done by experts in such groups as The Association for the Study of Play or the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport) and narratology (ignoring work from the International Association for Media and Communication Research, Console-ing Passions, or the Union for Democratic Communication). Drawing on the possessive individualism of neoclassical economics, these game analysts study virtual environments as ways of understanding "whole societies under controlled conditions" (Castronova, 2006), ignoring history, political economy, cultural studies, and ethnography in the process.

There is a material history to this closeness between neoclassical economics and games, and it is mediated through militarism. Gaming is crucial to war and vice versa. War games became systematic training practices in the late 19th century at the US

Naval War College Game, as simulations of Prussian and French field tactics. Such methods gained popularity after remarkable success in predicting the Japanese campaign in the Pacific from 1942 (Der Derian 2003, pp. 38–39). Game theory in 1960s and 1970s political science and warcraft sought to scientize the study and practice of crisis decision-making, reapplying a rational-actor model of maximizing utility to the conduct of states, soldiers, and diplomats in nuclear-war simulations. Then, with the conjunctural decline of Keynesianism, game theory's ideal-typical monadic subject came to dominate economics and political science more generally. Utility maximization even overtook parts of Marxism, which hitherto had tended to favor collective rather than individual models of choice. Games were in, everywhere you looked.

That notion of individuals out for themselves remains in vogue, restimulated through electronic games, which were invented for the US military by defense contractors—the Pentagon worked with Atari in the 1980s to develop *Battlezone*, an arcade game, for use as a flight simulator for fighter pilots, at the same time as it established a gaming center within the National Defense University (Power 2007, p. 276). In the early 1990s, the end of Cold War II wrought economic havoc on many corporations that were codependants of the Pentagon. They turned to the games industry as a natural supplement to militarism. Today's new geopolitical crisis sees these firms conducting half their games business with the private market and half with the state (Hall, 2006).

Scholarly advocates of corporate-governmental culture claim that games “serve the national interest by entertaining consumer-citizens and creating a consumer-based demand for military technology” (Power 2007, p. 277). This sanguine outlook has its own material history in the links of research schools, cybertarians, and the military. In the 1990s, the National Academy of Sciences held a workshop for academia, Hollywood, and the Pentagon on simulation and games, and the National Research Council announced a collaborative research agenda in popular culture and militarism. It convened meetings to streamline such cooperation, from special effects to training simulations, from immersive technologies to simulated networks (Lenoir 2003, p. 190; Macedonia, 2002). Since that time, untold numbers of academic journals and institutes on games have developed close ties with the Pentagon, testing and augmenting the recruitment and training potential of virtual worlds and games to ideologize, hire, and instruct the population.

For example, the Center for Computational Analysis of Social and Organizational Systems at Carnegie-Mellon University promulgates studies underwritten by the Office of Naval Research and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). DARPA uses its US\$2 billion annual budget to examine such topics as how social networking uncovers “top America's Army players' distinct behaviors, the optimum size of an America's Army team, the importance of fire volume toward opponent, the recommendable communication structure and content, and the contribution of the unity among team members” (Carley, Moon, Schneider, & Shigiltchoff, 2005). And it refers to Orlando as “Team Orlando” because the city houses Disney's research-and-development “imagineers”; the University of Central Florida's Institute for Simulation

and Training; Lockheed Martin, the nation's biggest military contractor; and the Pentagon's Institute for Simulation and Training. The University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) was set up to articulate scholars, film and television producers, and game designers. It was opened by the Secretary of the Army and the head of the Motion Picture Association of America, and underwritten by US\$45 million of the military's budget in 1998, a figure that was doubled in its 2004 renewal. ICT uses this money and Hollywood muscle to test out violent technologies and narrative scenarios under the aegis of faculty from film, engineering, and communications (Deck, 2004; Silver & Marwick 2006, p. 50; Turse 2008, p. 120). It produces such Pentagon recruitment tools as *Full Spectrum Warrior*, which doubles as a "training device . . . for military operations in urban terrain." The utility of these innovations continues in combat. Such games have become crucial tools because fewer and fewer nations now allow the US to play live war games on their terrain. In addition, the Pentagon is aware that off-duty soldiers play games. The idea is to invade their supposed leisure time, weaning them from skater games and towards what are essentially training manuals. It even boasts that *Full Spectrum Warrior* was the "game that captured Saddam," since the men who dug Hussein out had been trained with it (Andersen, 2007; Burston, 2003; Harmon, 2003; Kundnani, 2004; Stockwell & Muir, 2003; Turse 2008, pp. 122, 119). So virtual worlds and games prove the truth of market forces, in both their internal dynamics and their very success? We do not think so.

Dossier

In thinking through what ties the articles in this special issue together, besides an examination of practices found in virtual worlds, issues of space, bodies, and labor keep resurfacing. Such directions continue the work of deconstructing the myth of on-line activity as placeless and disembodied, while also bringing in new critiques, questioning Internet spaces as playgrounds for privileged individuals to experiment with identity and all too easily create new collectives and communities based on ties other than the geographic.

These articles make important claims about situated spaces and the kinds of interactions that we might never have foreseen. Virtual worlds work hard to simulate geographic land, which raises the question—can we relate to others, and to ourselves, without such key markers? Clearly, the worlds of Azeroth and *Second Life* are different in how they conceptualize their physical locales, yet both have clearly defined rules for environments, and physicality is a key ingredient in the mix. The gay bars that set up on islands in *Second Life*, for example, are literally claiming ground—staking their existence, in the code of a digital space. And researchers of virtual worlds often unreflectively mirror that language back at us—seeing "new worlds" and "new civilizations" forming on virtual ground. Using such language without consideration of its fraught history continues the project of forgetting the past—and denying the experiences of those not powerful enough to claim subjectivity in "our" conceptions of the virtual experience.

Just as space is important, we also see the continual return of laboring bodies. While Nakamura sets up an important rift between western players, who are constructed as “leisure players,” and Chinese players, who are “worker players,” labor plays an important role for all participants. Everyone must “grind” to achieve success in MMOs, be it wealth, high level, or social standing. Some players use their labor to build reputation, while others do so to build actual cash; either way, they must all work. Of course, some players get to choose how they labor and to what ends—others have fewer opportunities. And the rewards of the game are very different, with one set of laboring bodies being denied a sense of embodiment, of selfhood itself, in MMOs, because their avatars are tied to the companies for which they toil rather than them individually.

We’d like to have seen Nakamura engage more studies of Asians and the US labor market plus other aspects of the New International Division of Cultural Labor (cf., for example, *Social Semiotics* 15, no. 3 [2005] and 16, no. 1 [2006]). This type of analysis needs to explain where the players are, who owns the games, how the legal agreements operate, etc. Nakamura moves away from discourses *about* MMOs to focus on their problematic uses, particularly how racism reinserts itself into virtual spaces, which are supposedly free of bodies and assumptions about them. Perhaps it’s not a surprise that in a world built on racial conflict (consider Horde versus Alliance in *World of Warcraft*’s fictional world of Azeroth), the players should likewise resort to their own form of racial profiling or policing, to keep their ranks pure—only “legitimate” players need apply. Nakamura does an excellent job in exploring how the freedoms of machinima have allowed darker sides of fandom to be expressed, but there are a few points her piece raises but does not cover in depth that we would like to address here.

First, it is key to note that the practice of real-money trade (RMT) has tangible effects on both the gameplay of those that engage in its practice—either farming gold or buying gold earned from farming—as well as those who refuse to engage its practices. Camping of valuable monsters for the treasures they drop; monopolization of particular areas; price controls at auction houses or the collapse of certain markets—all impact players who engage as well as reject RMT. Those ramifications mean that player discontent is real, and it is vital for game developers to manage—otherwise there may be no populated game world to play in. Game researchers (as well as developers) need to understand that anger, and appreciate it, before ascribing it to one factor rather than another—here to racism. For while racism is definitely a piece of the puzzle, we also need to ask how and why that anger gets expressed as racism and racist practices, and what is overlooked or ignored in the process.

MMO players should remember that early discourse about RMT started out as talk about “gold farmers” but then turned into the much more problematic “Chinese gold farmers” at some point in time. And in its racialized turn, it moved from a potential critique of a loathsome industry into a racist rant against already-marginalized workers. We should seek to understand how (often justifiable) player anger has focused on the “migrants” engaged in labor in the game, rather than the corporations that seek to profit from them. Certainly, most players would not begrudge a Chinese

individual the equivalent of thirty cents an hour for “playing” *World of Warcraft* (Dibbell, 2007). Yet those same individuals may make racist comments in a game, harass other suspect players, or go so far as to create machinima pieces doing the same. Why are they not mocking or protesting IGE.com, allegedly the largest buyer and seller of virtual assets for MMORPGs worldwide?

In the experience of one of us (Mia) they have, at least in some games. The popular fan board Allakhazam.com, which took a strong anti-RMT stance, was sold to the parent company of IGE in 2005. Posters spent weeks protesting the sale when it was publicized later in 2006. But rather than devote their attention solely to racist attacks on “gil-buyers” and “gil-sellers” (the currency in *Final Fantasy XI Online*), they went after the creator of IGE, Brock Pierce, attempting to expose his sordid past, as well as promising to abandon the site due to the change. So not all players who oppose RMT may be racist, but we must still deal with that claim. Why is it so easy, in this case in *World of Warcraft*, for players to attack individuals rather than structures? Perhaps that is the answer—we still look to individuals and their actions in game spaces (as in daily life), rather than larger structures, or nameless and faceless organizations. IGE might be a large edifice with much more to gain or lose through the practices of RMT, but the “Chinese” dwarf in front of you is a much easier target, literally and figuratively.

Brookey and Cannon point to the importance of bodies in a slightly different sense in *Second Life*, but here too we see how individuals labor to create bodies that present in a particular fashion. They discuss those bodies in Foucault’s sense of docile bodies, which are not tamed, but actively produced, in ways that accord with dominant ideological ideas about feminine sexuality and heteronormativity in particular. This paper asks key questions about how sexuality is constructed and performed in *Second Life*, concluding that many of the images and enactments found there echo or reinforce traditional ideological norms. The promise of liberating sexuality in a space that can allow for (any)body and any practice gets reduced to pose balls that neatly indicate “male” and “female” positions or roles to assume. While individual users can transgress those directions, and some do, the continued use of those traditional markers and their implications suggest that the “second” sexual life in *Second Life* is not that far from our first.

Yet, while we know what options many users are creating and playing with, we do not know so much about how individuals are taking up, modifying, or negotiating such objects. Why would so many female users, for example, choose highly conventionalized versions of attractive female avatars? What is the reward they take from that use, and how might they modify their avatars over time? Contemporary social worlds demand high levels of individual perfection, control, and accomplishment, for both genders. While we may never “measure up” in the “real world,” where our bodies are truly unruly, we can perhaps make the grade in a virtual one, where each element of our digital *persona* can be crafted, adjusted, perfected, and stylized. What pleasures does that afford residents of *Second Life* and similar virtual worlds? We need to know why individuals take so much care in crafting conventional notions of attractive bodies in cyberspace. Foucault argued that power is not merely a

repressive tool, something negative. Power constitutes, and it can work to constitute a self. We need to know how users in *Second Life* feel they are being powerful through the choices they are making, through sexuality and appearance, and how the limits of heteronormativity embody that seeming contradiction. Likewise, why do gay and lesbian residents of *Second Life* feel drawn to re-create spatial formations—bars, clubs, zones, and islands? What is it about the notion of space and claiming space—seeing and being seen—that remains critical to individual and group formation and cohesiveness? Again, we need to consult with the users of such worlds, to see how they are making such decisions, and why space continues to be so important.

Another way to understand *Second Life* is through examining its own economic structure and larger user base. There is controversy over how many people regularly visit *Second Life*—it has been suggested that churn is monumental, although the data are not released by Linden Lab, its owner-operator. Linden admits that 60% of people sign up then barely revisit, but the figure may be as high as 85%. A decade of unfulfilled cybertarian promise about the immense/emergent popularity of virtual worlds continues (Shirky, 2006). More interestingly, the approximately 200-strong Second Life Liberation Army protests corporate greed, *bourgeois* individualism, and fascism within *Second Life*, attacking American Apparel, Reebok, the realtor Anshe Chung, and the xenophobic politician Jean Marie Le Pen, and demanding that Linden install democracy so people within the site can vote on major issues. They claim to be inheriting the same contradiction that fueled 17th and 18th-century revolutionaries—the disarticulation of freely-available property rights from participatory political rights (Klata, 2007; “Second Life, Same Mess,” 2007; Semuels, 2007). Hackers obtaining financial information (to do with material life, not the virtual) about participants have generated further critiques of *Second Life*’s proprietors (“Security,” 2006).

“The Economics of *Arden*” takes us inside the design specifications of game workers as they seek proof for neoclassical economics and its fetish of supply-and-demand and selfishness as the core of human agency and happiness. One of us (Toby) has frequently been involved in publishing pieces because of who wrote them rather than their scholarly thoroughness or tendentious power. Examples have included papers produced by sex workers, DJs, and physicists. In each case, the identities of these writers mattered more than what they had to say. The same may apply to this essay. Some of the authors created their own game. So regardless of the theoretical and ideological presuppositions that inform their work, and what those things hold them back from engaging, the paper matters because of its status as an historical record.

But given their desire to publish in one of the few avowedly progressive publications that comes from a professional US association of scholars, we expected more, especially after the review process. For theirs is not the only economics in the world. It may be the currently fashionable model in North American universities, but we would like to have seen the authors required to explain why they chose not to engage (either in the game or the paper) the work of the postautistic economics movement <paecon.net>, gender economics (*Feminist Economics*), queer economics (Jacobsen & Zeller, 2007), the political economy of communication (a crucial source for much work that this journal has published over the years), or postmodern economics (*Rethinking Marxism, Review*

of *Radical Political Economics*). Why? Because when players are involved in the preparation of instructions, counternarratives, new games, and virtual worlds—and frequently sign away their intellectual property as they do so—our forms of analysis need to focus on the contradictions of organizational structures, their articulations with everyday life and textuality, and their intrication with the polity and economy, addressing social structures and conjunctures. But those other contributions—and the questions of power and justice that they raise for laboring bodies—may as well never have existed to the makers and chroniclers of *Arden*. Now given that such scholarship didn't inform their game, they may not have felt the need to discuss it. But that seems odd if you want to publish in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*.

By contrast, the Gunkels point out how neoclassical economics and cybertarian mythology repeat older media discourses and reiterate the teleological White mythology of conventional US history. It is almost eerie to see the re-emergence of a discourse of a “new world” and a “new frontier” in thinking through virtual worlds, just as we saw in relation to cyberspace in the 1990s. This persistent forgetting, papering over, or unconscious invocation of unpleasant historical associations is curious, especially given that some of the scholars making those claims would associate themselves with a critical viewpoint. Yet again, we see the necessity for critical media studies to make those linkages explicit and challenge virtual-world researchers to interrogate the roots of their discourse. Just as virtual worlds are constructed electronically via bits and bytes that don't physically exist but have great power, so too discourse shapes and frames how we see, how we conceptualize, new spaces. Such a discourse also of course ties back to early utopian views of the Internet and virtual spaces (if not virtual reality) as places to try again, to start over afresh, to be more successful, better at a variety of things. So just as we must acknowledge the problematic history of the term, it's instructive to keep looking afresh for new chances, new opportunities to “get things right” this time around.

One concern the authors only mention briefly is how such a discourse might or might not resonate with Asian MMO developers and players—while they were some of the first popularizers of MMOs globally, we do not know if they too conceptualize of virtual spaces as “new lands” with opportunities to get things right, overcome past problems, or strive for new sorts of social relations or cultures. Without a past history so clearly tied to a “frontier myth,” do Asian MMOs or virtual worlds and their players construct discourses about unexplored lands and opportunities to populate or domesticate, free of “foreign” natives? Given the complex colonial (including both colonizing and colonized) histories of Korea, China and Japan in particular, these are critical questions. Lastly, we would like to see the authors' arguments taken further, to note that both utopic and dystopic discourses have accompanied the advent of each new media technology over many centuries, since the dawn of illuminated manuscripts. In addition, it would make sense for their argument to engage Native-American, Chican@, and other scholarship re frontier mythology in history-writing (Grande, 2004; Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Conclusion

Media utopias were conceptually instantiated in René Descartes' defiant 1637 apologia for choosing to write in French rather than Latin, in search of audiences that would "use only their natural reason in its purity," as opposed to "those who only trust old books" (1977, p. 56). This demotic faith in new media and genres was solidified by Johann Creiling's lecture at Tübingen in 1702, which claimed teaching would be transformed by the magic lantern (Winston, 2007). The utopia continues (with, of course, dystopic corollaries). In the 1920s, Germany and Australia saw union-owned stations pioneering choral response via two-way radio, a dream of worker-actor collaboration across the ether. And speaking of the ether, this mystical substance was given all kinds of bizarre properties by early practitioners, such as contact with the dead and cures for cancer (Miller, 1992). In 1930, Samuel Brody (1988) argued that the Soviet Union would deploy television to "build socialism and a better world for the laboring masses". In 1935, Rudolf Arnheim (1969) predicted it would offer viewers simultaneous global experiences, from railway disasters, professorial addresses, and town meetings to boxing bouts, dance bands, carnivals, and aerial views—a spectacular montage of Athens, Broadway, and Vesuvius. A common vision would surpass the limitations of linguistic competence and interpretation. TV might even bring global peace by showing spectators that "we are located as one among many". Similar claims are now made for the Internet and its social-networking qualities. The binding and unbinding of time and space, the visibility and audibility of signs from elsewhere, both promised and delivered a sophisticated series of dialogues throughout communities.

Popular ideas about globalization tend to see it as a neoliberal model for world markets and a way to understand the growing mobility of capital, markets, groups, laws, and policies. The Internet and virtual worlds are hailed as places where time and space collapse, where we can all "come together" in some brave new world (there is that discourse again). Yet as this dossier discloses, there is no erasure of time or space. While we might be able to "come together" in virtual worlds at the same time, we remain regulated by different time zones, which make material demands on our lived bodies. This is a real challenge to the notion of a global community—we cannot escape those constraints. And just as social structures and corporations regulate when we can congregate, they also mark us in ways that we cannot simply escape through the creation of an avatar. Again and again we attempt to recreate ourselves in virtual worlds, and if we are denied that opportunity, we lose a claim to being in those spaces. We continue to need a virtual body to labor, to embody our sexuality, to explore virtual lands. And those virtual bodies are implicated in our senses of ourselves, our social identities, and our claims to existence and authority.

We also continue to labor in particular ways within virtual worlds, often without a critical awareness of how we are reproducing the same old systems. Our discourses about new lands that provide spaces for all to create a better life end up masking the realities that such spaces are only available for a privileged few, if by "participation" we mean the opportunity to play or experiment with the self, to build communities

or knowledge. Others may be let in, but they enter anonymously, laboring at the tedious tasks that the privileged feel are not worthwhile. We also labor in creating idealized versions of ourselves, crafting and controlling our identities; yet in gaining that pleasure, we perhaps overlook other possibilities—other potential aspects of being or appearance that might be even more liberating. Finally, we labor in game economies that do not seem to offer us anything new—we have auction houses, scarcity, gold coins, wages. Where is the brave new world of economies? Is there no alternative to working all day, simply to come home, log in, and work all evening as well? We need more interrogation of the way things have developed in virtual worlds, as they are already becoming scarily commonplace and accepted as the “logical” forms for such worlds. As Vincent Mosco (2004, p. 19) reminds us, utopic technological “myths are important both for what they reveal (including a genuine desire for community and democracy) and for what they conceal (including the growing concentration of communication power in a handful of transnational media businesses)”. Let us not perpetuate myths when we should be interrogating them.

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