

The Geography of Virtual Worlds

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I'm editing a special issue of the journal *Space and Culture* on the "Geography of Virtual Worlds." Here's a draft of the introduction. It's still in process, but it might give some sense of what I think will be a very interesting issue.

This evening I am home in front of the fireplace, chatting with friends and looking out the window onto a wide expanse of ocean. Not far from my beach house, there are dance clubs, art spaces, snowy mountain peaks, and classrooms. I am only seconds from London, Berlin, New York, Dublin and Tokyo. And without much effort I can summon my friends from around the world to join me in my spa. You're probably wondering how, on a professor's salary, I can afford all this. The answer: log onto Second Life.

Second Life is a multi-user virtual environment (MUVE). But it's not a game. Unlike other virtual environments like World of Warcraft or even The Sims Online, there is no built-in objective to the Second Life world. And yet, millions of users have "moved in" and participated in creating it – from building homes like the one described above, to building natural landscapes, and even entire cities. At the time of this writing, the world is composed of nearly 900 square kilometers of virtual landscape (Linden, 2008) used for everything from simple chat to collaborative work, performance, education, commerce and of course, sex. Corporations such as Nike, Toyota, and IBM have created presences there. The Center for Disease Control and the Red Cross have set up services. Universities are teaching classes. Entrepreneurs are selling everything from virtual real estate to physical paintings. And pornography abounds.

So while Second Life is not a game, it does seem to have a dominant objective - commerce. Real money is traded in the form of "Linden Dollars" – an online token that exchanges at 270 per US dollar. And unlike other virtual environments with less formal economies, Second Life users don't need to rely on third party trading sites like eBay. All currency transfers take place on the company's website. Second Life has enjoyed rapid growth since its launch in 2003 largely because the motivation of market exchange is built into the business model. It is for this reason that some commentators have characterized it as a three dimensional extension of the Web (Kirkpatrick, 2006). But these views seem to ignore the rather important peculiarities of the three dimensional platform. While MUVEs like Second Life, There.com and Metaverse are direct descendants of text-based multi-user domains (MUDs) and their graphical counterparts (MOOs), the 3D immersive qualities of these contemporary spaces suggest a significant divergence from traditional chat rooms and message boards. MUVEs provide a level of engagement that is quite different from the 2D Web. It is for this reason that a number of commercial spaces in Second Life remain empty. Many of the companies and services that initially rushed to build virtual stores and offices have failed to bring people to their sites. For these companies, the strategy was simply to reproduce their web presence in three dimensions –building flat product panels dispersed in space and not considering the specificity of user experience in the virtual environment. What was ill considered in these ventures was the centrality of the spatially located avatar in all interactions. In other words, instead of searching for a product, clicking on it, reading reviews and then purchasing, my avatar has to first walk through a space and find the product. Or instead of a chat room, where communication is represented as words in a browser window, avatars in a MUVE have to organize themselves in a pattern conducive to conversation. They have to stand next to each other, sit on a park bench, or fly to a far-flung corner of the sky. In short, MUVEs re-introduce space into digitally mediated communication.

The way bodies are organized in space is determined by multiple factors, including gender, design (street, church, club, etc.), event (art installation, class, wedding, etc.), ownership, and many other vertices of spatial organization. Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell (2007) refer to this as infrastructure. While they write specifically about pervasive computing, or computing in physical environments, their thesis applies quite well to MUVEs. They argue that spatial

organization, including distance and presence, informs the meaning of individual spaces and, in turn, informs the nature of communication within those spaces. This general concept is well supported by research that has investigated the nature of communication in virtual environments. In a particularly interesting study about spatial infrastructure in MUVES, Yee et al. concluded that offline personal space norms applied to avatar interactions in Second Life (2007). By measuring avatar movement, they learned that female avatars tend to stand closer together than their male counterparts. In addition, they concluded that males tend to stand farther away from each other outside than they do inside. These conventions are parallel to real-world, physical behaviors. Beyond Second Life, extensive research has been conducted in various other MUVES. Martey and Stromer-Galley (2007), in their study of The Sims Online, conclude that the metaphor of the “house” is primary in shaping a player’s sense of “appropriate behavior.” And Taylor, in her study of Everquest, points to the centrality of the body metaphor: “Bodies,” she writes, “act not only as a conduit through which we participate in society but as a mechanism through which communities themselves are performed. They facilitate not only the production of identities, but social relationships and communication” (2006, 117). Bodies, and their relationship to objects and structures (including other virtual bodies), are generally proscriptive of user behavior and social interactions in MUVES. Dourish and Bell’s concept of infrastructure adds the organizing context of space into all of these studies.

Understanding the context of virtual space is no simple task. Considering that virtual space is infinitely malleable, how is it that it comes to affect communication? One would think that, because of the open-ended nature of the technology, virtual space would emerge in a manner unconnected to physical space. Unbounded by physics, space could assemble within any organizational principle – color, time, number, or emotional register. And yet, within most MUVES, there is an abundance of metaphors to physical space. Why do avatars need houses, beds, or even chairs? They don’t get cold, they don’t need to sleep, and their legs don’t ache from standing all day. Second Life, for instance, is filled with familiar habitations, from bedrooms, to lounges, clubs and swimming pools. Virtual houses have kitchens and showers, parks have benches, and beaches have towels to protect against virtual sand creeping into virtual bathing suits. While it is possible that in the early stages of adoption, MUVE users, like users of any new technology, gravitate towards the familiar (consider the Web’s heavy reliance on desktop and room metaphors), it is more likely that physical space, as a socially vetted context, will remain the most useful metaphor for the navigation of MUVES. While operating systems only suggest space (i.e. the desktop) as an organizing principle, MUVES are fundamentally built around that principle.

But the utility of these metaphors extend beyond spatial orientation. The abundance of city sims (simulations) in Second Life suggests that users are also drawn to familiar places. One could walk the streets of London, Tokyo, New York, Boston, Berlin, Dublin, and Zurich, just to name a few. “Debs Regent,” the owner of the London sim and UK ex-pat living in Portugal, explained that the project of building the Knightsbridge neighborhood in London was a labor of love. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have [London] in SL so I don’t get homesick. There are lots of ex-pats out there. Not just ex-pats in other countries, but in the UK too - people who miss their roots just like I did. So we recreated Knightsbridge in SL” (Gordon, 2007). Debs assembled an all-volunteer team to build the city, which currently includes everything from true-to-life detail on all the buildings, several double-decker buses and a working Underground that moves from Knightsbridge to the under-construction Chelsea neighborhood. The long-term goal of the project is to recreate the entire city of London. There is no completion date set – because completion is not really the point. The group of people that gather in the London sim are there because they enjoy the process. It’s a collaborative building project that has reconnected a number of people to the city. And my conversations with the people involved in Berlin and Dublin revealed very similar stories. These people are using Second Life not to escape the confines of physical space, but to work collaboratively to create a familiar environment. The familiarity of the represented space is central to the user experience. And the immersive qualities of the technology, facilitated by the spatial parameters of avatar-led navigation, offer a sense of presence not possible in traditional Web media. In this sense, place becomes yet another potential infrastructural component of virtual space.

Spatial practices within Second Life, and other similar MUVES, are much too varied to characterize in a singularly cohesive manner. From the touristic impulses of city sims, to collaborative workspaces employed by corporations, to elaborate fan communities, art spaces and classrooms, to real world design scenarios, the technological affordances of MUVES provide new frameworks for social interaction that are fundamentally organized around space.

This special issue of *Space and Culture* brings together scholarship across disciplines to better formulate questions that need to be asked as virtual worlds integrate with the 2D web. Rebecca and Charlie Nesson describe a class taught at Harvard University in the spring of 2007 where Second Life was combined with the physical classroom to organize local and global populations around a single curriculum. The articles by Eric Kabisch and Lily Chen are each concerned with deciphering the correlation between virtual and physical spaces. Kabisch describes his own project called Datascape that merges physical and virtual in what he calls a “hybrid environment.” And Chen argues for a greater emphasis on “social spaces” in virtual design as opposed to what she sees as the currently dominant one-to-one correspondence between the physical space and its reproduction. The article by Shaowen Bardzell and Will Odom explores the function of virtual space by looking at a particular Gorean fan community in Second Life. The article addresses how 3D space facilitates the creation of “emotional places,” and makes the argument that the design of MUVES should be influenced by these kinds of practices. And finally, Gene Koo and myself contribute an article about a program we started in Boston, Massachusetts that employs Second Life as a means of engaging people in the city’s neighborhoods in a collaborative design process. Ultimately, we argue that enabling groups to engage simultaneously in virtual and physical spaces opens up possibilities for group identification and communitarian action.

Each of the articles in this volume seeks to explore the complex geography of virtual worlds. But what’s apparent in all the work is the lack of emphasis on virtuality. More important is how the virtual interfaces with the physical. While MUVES are worlds unto themselves, they are both windows and mirrors of the embodied world of physical space. Untangling this relationship is the task at hand.

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The Place of Social Media

It explores the myriad ways in which online social networks interact with physical space. It investigates how location matters - even in wide open cyberspace
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