THIS IS…. WARCRAFT! Or: How to Stop Worrying and Abandon Abstruse Notions of 'Cyberspace'

Date : November 18, 2007

Efe Levant, MA Material and Visual Culture student, UCL
The Question of 'online identity' and/or 'cyberspace' is increasingly gaining importance with the ever-increasing popularity of online games like Second life and World of Warcraft (WoW). An increasing amount of concern and interest is focusing on the supposed addictive qualities of the software and the emergence of economic interactions involving the exchange of online goods with real money. A specialized industry is steadily developing to cater for the demands of MMO players (Massively Multiplayer Online). These industries are known amongst players as 'gold farms'; a great deal of which consists of workshops in China, where Chinese gold farmers perform repetitive tasks to gather/farm in-game currency (known as gold or simply g).

The increasing amount of time spent by players in 'virtual spaces' like World of Warcraft has not failed to reach the attention of a diverse range of interest groups. A fruitful analytical categorisation, in terms of illustrating the historical continuity of the controversy surrounding artificial spaces can

be extracted from the debate between Boyle and Hobbes regarding the air-pump. The problem is whether manufactured, synthetic spaces have experimental legitimacy to potentially alter human existence. In a paper called "Just like IRL: Play, Spatiality and sociality in Online Fantasy Games." I have identified the two positions in the controversy as Boylean and Hobbesian. The Boylean position is the suggestion that online spaces provide unique situations that allow possibilities for experimenting with various aspects of human existence such as: identity, literature and economy. Economist Edward Castronova argues that economies in synthetic worlds can be considered as a 'corporate Petri-dish' as they provide the opportunity to experiment not only with new forms of organisational technologies but also with the conventional ethical paradigms that condition the study of economics. However fieldwork results can ascertain that virtual economies function too much like the unpredictable 'real' economies (of which they essentially a part of) to be able to enjoy the degree of control a natural scientist might enjoy in a laboratory or a Petri dish. For instance the ultimate problem of inequality is often brought up in discussions between players. The most common source of agitation amongst the players is what is known as the nerf debate. When a specific class (mage, hunter, warrior etc…) gets nerfed (reduced in power) the players who play the class take action to lobby for the reversal of the nerf, which mostly consists of whining on the World Wide Web forums. Far from being a hygienic space suitable for controlling experimental variables, the economies of MMOs are just as susceptible to arbitrary factors unpredictable both to the players and the developers of games like World of Warcraft. This view draws a picture of online environments as a cyberian apartness that gives numerous experimental possibilities both to the users and a diverse spectrum of scholars ranging from economists to medical scientists. Although it is evident that online games may provide food for thought for a wide range of intellectual pursuits, approaching these spaces as mere illustrations to pre-existing models and paradigms will not do justice to the activities carried out inside them. Ethnographic study is in a unique position to reveal the significance of these quotidian activities and correct misconceptions that detach these spaces from the ordinary condition of human existence with labels like 'cyberspace' or 'virtual community'.

The Hobbesian view stands in opposition to the Boylean willingness to seek experimental opportunities in 'virtual' spaces. This position claims that online games are dangerous and addictive. Some view such recreational uses of the Internet as time consuming and unproductive others suggest that video games are killing simulators and encourage violent behaviour. This approach generally uses hypodermic metaphors to illustrate how video games induce a 'permanent state of arousal' and seduce the players into an illusion of control. The argument echoes Hobbes' objection to the laboratory space set up by Boyle, to be specific the Hobbesian attitude towards artificial spaces involves the denouncement of such environments as illegitimate. In Hobbes' case the laboratory is a challenge to the Leviathan/state, embodied in the person of the sovereign. The contemporary case against MMOs replaces Hobbes' monarchic symbolisms with liberal values like autonomy and entrepreneurship, hence it should be no surprise that an overwhelming majority of this literature comes from the field of clinical psychology, which as noted by Nikolas Rose has a significant tendency for disciplining difference in the name of stability. Hence the Hobbesian interpretation views spaces like World of Warcraft as deeply subversive to legitimate values and the structures of authority attached to them. The policy implications entailed by this approach expectably involves the 'treatment' of what is considered to be an 'epidemic' in order to subdue these spaces to the authority of the Leviathan. Though there is certainly policy to be made in this field these policies need to bear in mind that online communities have not suddenly descended from outer space but are deeply embedded in 'real' social relationships.

From October 2006 to June 2007 I conducted fieldwork on the popular MMO World of Warcraft to investigate the extent to which the spaces of online games are intertwined with 'real life' (RL). This fieldwork involved both the observation of the community within the game and individual players outside. Often players had one simple answer to respond to my questions concerning a variety of different aspects of the game. Whether I asked them about how players attain their reputation among their peers, how wealth is distributed within player associations known as guilds or what determines an appropriate moment for using the in game facility to take pictures (screenshots) the answer was unwavering: "Just Like IRL" (In Real Life). The testimonies of these players have also largely matched my observations. Aspects of ordinary life like inequality, fellowship and even gender roles reflect almost exactly on the surface of the MMO. Such participant observation is bound to make nonsense of fictitious scenarios like the dawn of the age of the originless 'cyborg' who are "not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust". As a matter of fact despite their obvious proximity to Harraway's cyborg theory due to the combination of technology and organism in these online communities, these spaces are far better understood by observing how unspoken rules are generated to ensure the replication of specific types of behaviour much like a habitus instead of introducing new historical paradigms.

The fundamental aim of the effort undertaken in this project is to dismiss obscure and unhelpful conceptions surrounding what are essentially fairly ordinary communities that happen to gather around spaces generated in MMOs. It is my belief that despite their values, existing theories concerning MMOs are largely inadequate due to their failure to realize certain essential truths about online games and persist instead to employ unsustainable concepts like 'cyberspace' or 'virtuality'. These abstruse notions may make impressive illustrations for re-occurring ideologies whose historical ancestry I have attempted to reveal, however they are useless if not harmful for understanding environments like World of Warcarft. As pressure slowly increases to formulate legislation concerning diverse aspects of MMOs, I that hope this project and others that might follow it will be allowed to inform these policies.