



The Similar Eye: Proxy Life and Public Space in the MMORPG

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Abstract

Despite offering themselves as universes vastly alternative to our own, the majority of 3D Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games work to a strict profile of reward systems which serve to group players and places around sets of action types. In contradiction to the promised inexhaustibility of a “VR,” today’s MMORPGs are designed and held together by amplified constructions of passage rights, role archetypes, resource management and the threat of death. Yet MMORPGs are by far the preferred “virtual” experience today. Statistics are revealing ongoing and consistent growth in MMORPG gaming. We are seeing MMORPGs succeed as busy cultural landscapes within a network infrastructure originally designed to support transfer of scientific papers, a framework often criticized for being too pointillistic in nature to support the complex needs of human interaction (let alone “public space”). Generations of scholars and artists have dedicated plenty of thought to what constitutes public space, so just what makes us believe that some game developers can even come close to manifesting it in a virtual setting? This paper illustrates how and why we must begin to think of the MMORPG as a public space. More importantly it provides tools for thinking how this rich platform for human interaction is actually produced.

Keywords

Public place, multi-user network, class, experience point, disposition, crowd, flaneur, wild, virtual, role-play, death, city, character type, framework, tactic

So far all MMORPGs work on a model of character progression centered around the acquisition of points. Typically, progression is either 'Point Based' or 'Class Based'. In both point and class systems, the character progresses by collecting points by finding objects, killing creatures, exercising skills, and fulfilling missions that they choose in the game. In a class system however, like *EverQuest*, the skills one can apply points to are limited to your chosen profession and so are more conducive to a world of character 'types'. Regardless, both means of progression, whether point or class are centered around becoming stronger.

Often not discussed is the fact that MMORPGs are a very unusual kind of game, even within the context of its 'pen and paper' predecessor, *Dungeons & Dragons* in that they don't have a universal fixed objective as such. Instead 'life' persists up until the point that its creators choose to take the whole system down. While some MMORPGs integrate a mission or quest system within the game they really only serve as a means to gather more skills, valuable items or points.

From the perspective of game-play, this 'becoming stronger', is a condition of existence in the MMORPG. Access to the world itself is very limited at lower levels, so that only by becoming stronger can a player experience the wider environment. Higher level characters have access to a cumulatively greater field of activities and experiences. This system is unique to the role-play format of game and has everything to do with ensuring that the persistence of participation is linked with the persistence of the world. Within the role-play of the MMORPG, character development is better termed 'capacity development'; the player is willfully locked into a system of performance centered around growth. By problematising participation with the threat of reduced experience, the MMORPG gamer experiences the world as the limits of his or her character's evolution and existence. Obstructions to experiencing the world typically include beasts, lack of money, insufficient skills and health. This growing into the world simultaneously justifies and propels the subject into an exchange of work for development. Game-play in an MMORPG is in this way constantly affirming, historicizing and complexifying inter-animations of the agent in a place, whose whole momentum is to be capable enough for the world. It's for this reason, dating right back to pen and paper role-playing (like *D&D*), that these points are called 'Experience Points.'

Here, the threat of death plays an important role in the MMORPG. Excepting a few MMORPGs like *Middle Earth* and the anticipated *Dawn*, 'death' however is not permanent; where it is the end of game-play for one's chosen character. In *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *Asheron's Call* and *Anarchy Online* (in fact most MMORPGs) the event of death is a total yet temporary reduction of action, sometimes resulting in the permanent loss of points and items. Regardless of whether it is permanent or not it is enough of a significant interruption to game-play to ensure that all players want to

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prevent it happening ever again. The event of death is something provided by the world, as it is the world that kills [3]. For Michael Heim, reality itself is grounded in the final obstruction of death [4], and similarly in the MMORPG it is foundational to the very logic of the cosmology itself. As in the real these very mortal conventions are the basis of the formation of communities in the MMORPG game itself; under the context of a pre-eminent danger, users choose to form organized collectives like teams or clans. In this way each member of the team or clan benefits both from increased safety while exercising role-based skills. The exercising of these skills in turn affirms individual's value within the context of the group.

Naturally this sounds like perfect conditions for initiating conquest and slavery, yet in MMORPGs the forced subjugation of peoples is not practiced; groups can only survive against the world itself, they cannot contain it (or each other). In this way the MMORPG game-scape is the final antagonist and so the players of an MMORPG are united in interest by way of similar predicament. This 'world opposition' in turn gives benevolence a utility; gamers in an MMORPG soon find themselves helping other gamers as a means of ensuring prolonged and successful game-play. Examples of this might be giving a team member a magical item, healing them in combat or giving them money. So, while the world-player relation may be generalized as oppositional, it ultimately produces circumstances that help people to group and collaborate.

As Pierre Bourdieu suggests, it is the homogenization of the conditions of existence that in turn homogenize practices in that habitus [5]. In other words, people do as a result of conditions relative to where they are; similarly the 'action landscape' of a MMORPG synchronizes the intentions of its inhabitants. Gamers find themselves grouped together out of a commonly identified construction of action.

But action, or the practices of people, has never been enough to produce a public space. It is after all something that is conventionally associated with a place.

But even if it were possible to produce 'place' in 'cyberspace', popular criticism suggests it cannot produce a 'public' precisely because it doesn't support the range of human expressions, we are so often warned (like in this case by Richmond) that "by diminishing the use of our bodies and objects to communicate in the physical environment, we (are) reducing the quality of interaction between people" [6]. And if that isn't enough to discourage the quest for healthy cyber-communities, we are apparently doomed to making universes that are only abstractions of the real because the virtual is already innately devoid of public-space. Like Cynthia Davidson writes:

Given the absence of community, of a public, cyberspace makes an appeal for (and to) new sensations of perception and movement whose significance is no longer fixed by chains of material cause or the once concrete terrains of the social. [7]

Similarly for Gibson, cyberspace is about total immersion in the media itself, ultimately in order to take the agent away from all encounters with daily life:

“a consensual hallucination ... the point at which media (flows) together and surrounds as ... the ultimate extension of the exclusion of daily life. With cyberspace ... you can literally wrap yourself in media and not have to see what is really going on around you” [19]. Yet it seems that MMORPGs are very much about producing both public and place, and as such are described by the people that play them as communities, as public spaces.

In a *Star Wars Galaxies* developers forum, Ralph Koster, Creative Director for the upcoming MMORPG discusses these concerns with his designers:

I asked the team ... what their preferred metaphor was for a town in the game – player-run or not, really, though we focused mostly on player-run. Many different answers came up – what sort of organization or community do you see that feature of the game as being most like? OK, so one of the most frequent answers we got was “guild,” meaning people saw it as an alternate form of player association. We also got “staging area” a lot, meaning people saw it as a launch-pad to the “real game.” Some saw the metaphor as being “shopping mall” or “apartment complex.” My answer was kind of long and poetic, and people kind of looked at me strangely as I rambled. It went something like, “A 1950s small town with a local hardware store on the corner where the shop owner knows what sort of paint you really need for your fence and an ice cream parlor where you can go to get root beer floats and sarsaparilla and a bar where everyone knows your name and where the people you see at the local grocery store are mostly people you know by sight if not by name and there’s a gazebo in the town square where sometimes they play live music...” [20]

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But how do you get 50,000 MMORPG players to hang-out in town squares in the first place? Answer: You make other places scary...

LAYER ONE | LEVEL 2 | Second Natures

Within the dominant configuration of productive opposition in MMORPG game worlds we find an interior zoned with other ‘dispositions’ of landscape. These can largely be broken down to the zones of city (settlement), quest, and wilderness. Each zone is designed around a particular configuration of action, and the cycle of play moves through these environments in rhythms of loss and exploit.

- Cities or settlements are where game-play begins, resources are most concentrated (equipment, health, people, information) and gamers intersect with other people.
- Wild is the realm of the game world nature / super-nature. Typically sites of supernatural events, dangerous beasts and arcane treasures. While these areas comprise the greater game-scape, they are not representative where most game-play occurs. Wild areas serve as hunting grounds, transit routes to other settlements and as a context for quests.
- Quests are areas dedicated to objective driven game-play. Less a defined site, they can occur in either the Settlement or the Wild.

MMORPGs configure these zones in such a way as to ensure the player always returns to the city or settlement. Movements into the oppositional zones of wild or quest fan out from the safety net of the city. When the character dies or resources run out they are forced to return to the city or settlement to gather items and recoup lost health. While the MMORPG may at first appear to be a limitless field of operation, these frames of action are grouped around moving from the known into the foreign, from the safe into the dangerous as a kind of gamble of confidence that measures the user's capacity to manage their player character. The whole time the landscape serves as a chart for the mortal extensions of the character; the edge of the world, and total experience configured as the limit of mortal capacity. *Anarchy Online* is a good example of this. The wild areas of Rubi-Ka (*Anarchy Online*'s game-scape) are nicknamed 'hunting grounds'. Players can go to these areas to fight creatures for experience points. Hunting grounds that comprise the greater body of the game-scape are speckled with strategically scarce cities and settlements ensuring that the player cover massive unsafe ground before coming into the safety of the city. Sometimes players can walk through the hunting grounds for several real-world hours before coming across a settlement. Players seeking experience points venture out into the wilderness to hunt, often in teams while others simply travel to destinations in search of action or other players.

These hunting grounds represent the native state of the game world and so are the realm of the supernatural, like magic, beasts, arcane events and myths of world origin. The wild of the world is unstable, unsafe, populated by storms, surprises and death. While adventuring or hunting there is the persistent danger of being killed and losing life-growing 'experience points', at which point the user is thrown back to the last established spawn point, all efforts of journey lost. Cities and settlements therefore become safety zones, where players recoup equipment, find team members, and re-address failed efforts.

In this way the MMORPG game-scape brings all flows of human action back to the settlement, ensuring that the public is based around a functional dependence on other people. At some point, co-habitation, regardless of moral alignment becomes an inevitable function of game-play; the city or settlement must be the first and final fold. This is how MMORPGs have, at their very core, a mechanism that produces and supports the formation of public-space.

In her thesis, "Inhabiting the Virtual City," Judith Donath asserts,

There are parallels both between real-world cities and virtual environments as well as between real-world architect and virtual system designers. Both real-world and virtual cities are (or should be) vibrant gathering places of people, centers of commerce and entertainment. [8]

What then of the wild in an MMORPG – vast tracts of land speckled with gamers locked in battle with beasts, or on a lone treasure-hunt for some arcane treasure? How does this serve our promises of Virtual Realities as

a bustling field of human interaction? Closer inspection of game-play itself we see how wild areas in a MMORPG further assists this effect; by producing a valuable difference between public and wild places, with the city or settlement as a zone of comfort and protection. Only with the wild in place can we return to the settlement – moving from dangerous isolation to concentrated social possibility.

That a user can experience both isolation and companionship within a single interactive experience, is itself an incredible achievement.

Secondly the wild is the ‘unknowable’, it is the way in which MMORPGs ensure the world is always larger than the player experience. Because the wild of an MMORPG is so unknowable and so vast that people become lost. In this way, MMORPGs harness the forces of not knowing into the formation of community; one is often lost (a condition decisively designed out of all other information delivery systems and interfaces). The only way to find your way is to meet someone who knows. (Don’t worry, MMORPGs are full of lost people.)

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LAYER TWO | LEVEL ONE | Improvisations

Michel de Certeau argues that there are two ways of understanding public space, in terms of strategies applied to its actual creation and operation (design of ‘space’), and in terms of tactics which are used by people to individualize trajectories (actions in time) [9]. Tactics, for de Certeau, are procedures that become valid in relation to how they manifest in time, “to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation, (and) to the rapidity of the movements that change the organization of space.” Strategies, de Certeau argues, are put in place to establish autonomous places, ensuring that they are distinguishable from their ‘environment.’ Strategy therefore masters ‘space’ through control of sight. In this power relationship, tactics remain out of the reach of strategic power; it is in the temporal that one exercises individuality.

Clearly by the time the game is played, the strategic work is already done, in the design of cities, squares, wild and roads. We must consider also, however, within the strategic design of a game, what one can and can’t do in a game – its rules. It is in action, and against these frameworks, that gamers improvise and express themselves.

If, in this way, public space can be defined as an amalgam of places and behaviours strategically reserved for interrogations and improvisations on the practice of identity, then the MMORPG is full of them. In the case of improvisations, examples may include ridiculous adornment, ‘shouting’ (public chat announcements), dancing, names based on in-jokes or finding a ‘game glitch’ and exploiting it (cheating). Within the framework of identity already provided by the game, we see the spontaneous formation of groups, like ‘Guilds of Thieves’ and ‘Clans of Nanotechnologists’. In this way, different types in a MMORPG diversify the pool of in-game public expression, thereby conditioning shifts of group identity as a political movement. Archetypes and

frameworks for game-play serve to create possibilities for individuation not achievable in an environment of total freedom of identity formation. Here we can understand how models of VR allowing for total plasticity in identity formation could only serve to alienate agents from each other. Popular ideas of fluid identity-switching, gender-swapping, and the like, are themselves operating from a rhetoric of self-invention based on the assumption that we are capable of being voluntarist agents, absolutely in control of our own potential. This is born from, as Michelle Kendrick says, “the myth of a coherent identity that exists outside and prior to the technologies which create cyberspace” [10]. In support of this, Robert Markley points out that Virtual Reality inevitably borrows from the real; no matter how ideal our cultural abstractions, we are first of all subjects of the world [11].

However, this is not a thesis against the formulation of models alternative to the framework of the ‘archetype’, or ‘behaviour’, especially in interrogation of destructive types. What is important here is that identity has a room for resistance and improvisation, and that an operable framework is in place for this. Only when the social field can be read, can it become ‘public’. Because the game designs have already defined a recognizable framework for identity and action, the work of producing and maintaining iterations of identity within this framework becomes the work of the gamers. As in the real-world, a condition of public space is that the actual regulation of expressive improvisations must be considered to be the domain of the public; a public holds the domain of itself. Here, the right to name oneself and form groups, gives gamers opportunity to author within the world, while the spontaneous formation of societies produces a layer of private space from which to play against the strategically imposed public spaces.

LAYER TWO | LEVEL TWO | The Crowd

It’s hard to imagine any public space without the crowd. In literature and cinema it is used as the extremity of what is considered ‘public’ – a maximum density of people found in the everyday of “Trade and Traffic” [12], or bristling with “the potential of its own power,” in the words of Elias Canetti [13]. In the MMORPG the crowd is a major achievement, both as a technological milestone, and as unanimous proof that the world is inhabited. From the perspective of role-playing games however, crowds are used as a dynamic social space in which individuation practices are further performed and tested.

Crowds also are dense with the possibility of acquiring knowledge, trading, and finding team mates. For both these reasons MMORPG designers plan townships, markets and squares in such a way as to be suitable for visible co-location, or crowding. In *Anarchy Online* ‘mission terminals’ (where players select a mission) gather large numbers of people coming from a variety of ‘alignments’ (Neutral, ‘Clan’ (anarchic), ‘Omnitek’ (capitalistic)) and occupations. Public facilities and resources like mission terminals, shops, and health restoration units are the nexus of a crowd in MMORPGs.

Not dissimilar to real world streets and marketplaces, they are full of show-offs. In *Anarchy Online*, it's not uncommon to find gamers parading their avatars, striking poses or wandering amongst the crowds for long stretches. Attempts at conversation are fruitless with these players, they parade purely for the benefit of mystery. We can only guess at the adventures and histories that have given them their exotic ornaments, weapons and clothing and as a result we desperately want to meet them.

Identification based on avatars has long been criticized for producing landscapes of disinterested strangers – the contemporary MMORPG has cleverly solved this boring debate by introducing High Fashion:

In such a broad milieu of strangers, style was a dramatic necessity. One was repeatedly made aware of self as other, of one's commodity status within a vast social marketplace, and style provided its user with a powerful medium of encounter and exchange.... Style allowed one to put up a front, to protect one's inner self.... True moderns, they were learning to internalize the dictum of Bishop Berkeley, that "to be is to be perceived". [14]

Characters out on parade are, of course, reminiscent of the flaneur. Every MMORPG gamer finds themselves doing it, especially at later levels when your character is loaded with colourful exotic items, powers and 'pets' (creatures you made or found that look after you). MMORPG designers have recognized the integral function the flaneur plays in the formation of crowds, and are investing more and more effort in the graphic field of avatars and items. In other words, as long as the character individuation can be expressed as a rich visual field, gamers will want to find out more about other characters.

Walter Benjamin, writes of the Flaneur:

... on one side, the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man. Presumably, this is the dialectic that is developed in (Edgar Allen Poe's) "The Man of the Crowd." [12]

In the crowd we are simultaneously looking and being looked at – we are in the world through a 'feedback of seeing'. In this way the crowd is its own network: the character is distributed across the experience of other gamers, an internal network of recognition operating organically and outside of the immediate client-server telemetry of the game distribution platform.

LAYER THREE | LEVEL ONE | Bandwidths

Strangely the crowds in all MMORPGs are mute – the spoken word is instead replaced with text based consoles whose range of 'listenability' maybe be set to both wide and small ranges of distribution, akin to a kind of configurable radio-network within the game-scape. Typical configurations are 'team chat', 'whisper' and general chat or 'shout'. These networks are invaluable for keeping track of friends and team members, while ensuring the option of

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privacy in dense public situations. In game it's not uncommon to be standing with a group of people for long periods of 'silence', not knowing what they are whispering to each other. Gamers can choose who they wish to talk to at any given time by shifting these communication channels. The very nature of these configurations is that they politicize communication across the public, and such are highly conducive to the formation of 'secret and discriminate societies' such as guilds and clans. Here the public gains an interior, an 'underground' that politicizes the currency of inter-character relations while potentializing the intentional landscape of the crowd (and reasons for being a part of it). This is all purely by virtue of there being in place an option to configure communication channels.

These text based channels are integral to the functioning of an MMORPG (in its current state), both in that they serve the basic functions of chat, trade and organizational necessities, they also provide the means for the MMORPG to grow as a cultural site, inside the game.

LAYER THREE | LEVEL TWO | Loopback

In game there are places where stories are told. These are the cities, townships, town squares and bars. Land and the experiences that come with it are folded back into the group culture. Here the world has a life as a cultural practice inside the game – humans qualify and transport the world to the experiences of other players. It's here that the real animations of a MMORPG may be found. In a single player environment this is not the case, it is the technology itself that qualifies the world through its use. Only by moving through the landscape can you prove that it exists. With in-game chat and the practice of telling stories, we hear of the existence of other places with other people. That someone might be somewhere else doing something else, gives the world an extensiveness that can be felt from any occupied position. In this way the world develops its prominence, it persists regardless of the player, even regardless of that player's active participation.

Contrary to the passive medias like literature and film, the MMORPG provides a platform for the generation of transient multiple streams of 'stories'; each player reads the game relativistically, through both what their character can and can't do, and the unique temporal and geographical position they occupy at any time.

Secondly, while a particular book or a film may be understood as a cultural node or quasi-object [15], it is comparatively 'pre-rendered' in that the means of actual transmission are fixed. In a game, because outcomes are generated interactively, people do not talk about what happened, as much as about what they did. Experience is not owned by the medium, it belongs to the gamer. [18]

In this way, while the world exists as it is apparently perceived, it is also described back to itself in human language. In this manner the world lives through the group, and remains within the culture of people, not as an object contained by its own mode of delivery. Through other people we learn about

the world, and as in the real-world, it is the cities and settlements that are the cultural centres.

LAYER FOUR | LEVEL THREE | PROXY LIVES

Despite the culture of dramatic mystery that an avatar inevitably procures, role-play is not the general preoccupation of the MMORPG gamer. There is no recourse for bad acting in a MMORPG, and the framework for character design has barely enough information on which to base even a mediocre role for television. While the range of expressive interfaces is increasing, like gesture commands (waving, pointing, dancing), communication is primarily through the in-game chat interface. It will be some time before we have interactive access to the nuances of facial expressions in an MMORPG. First person shooter games like Sierra's *Counter-Strike* have integrated the possibility for players to stream their voices into the game using a microphone, but this has proved to be unpopular and bandwidth dependant.

'Role-play' in the MMORPG is better understood as an obligation to construct a loose framework for action, no more than what you'd expect to find in the real-world workplace. Role is more of a guideline outlining where players should invest in skill sets, of strengths and weaknesses that are used to manage responsibilities in team situations, not personalities. In other words, role is better understood as a configuration of ability. However, precisely because of the loose relationship to playing a role in MMORPGs, gamers have no obligation to performative consistencies, and so human motivations are very present in play. After all, a true landscape of strangers would be one, where everyone was acting.

MMORPGs are in this way less about performing as a character who lives in another world, than about people living in other worlds using the context-extension or 'vehicle' of character. 'Character' in an MMORPG is better understood as an effect produced by interanimations between the intent of the gamer and the universal logic of the game-world [18]. This does not constitute either 'pure subject' or case of 'remote control'. Real people live in MMORPGs through their characters, their characters' worldly needs and the stories that inevitably follow – these are concerns and conversations as real as any other.

This said, we have to ask just how much do real people want to present their real lives in-game anyways. It's not uncommon to have spend five hours in a landscape with 10 000 other people without finding out how old any of them are, where they live, or their favourite album. Why do we expect 'virtual worlds' to be an alternative interface to 'real content'?

LAYER FIVE | LEVEL ONE | The World-Skin

While the MMORPG is a Persistent World, in that it continues regardless of whether a 'client' (player) is logged-in or not, it is not singular, in the sense

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of a place or destination. Technically speaking, MMORPGs aren't shaped like a conventional model of a 'world' – a unified landscape with consolidated perimeters. An analysis of how an MMORPG is distributed over a network and actually played reveals it is not even 'shaped' like a centralized universe of 'visiting' agents.

In order to play an MMORPG, a player must install two major components of the game onto their computer, the software renderer (game engine) and 'world data' like textures, object models, and sounds. The player's position, in fact anything that moves or happens in the world, is managed by the server. When a gamer is moving around a MMORPG landscape, they are largely moving around in a world that is locally stored on their hard-disk – the movement itself is managed by the remote game-server over the world-wide-web. When a player moves from one position to another in the world, the game engine or 'software renderer' sends their 'view data' (information provided by their position and view angle), movement speed and other minor data to the server for calculation. The resulting data is then sent back to the client's computer and the game-engine presents (renders) what that player can 'see' in their current position or state. Sometimes player position is managed by several servers, so that when a player is moving across a landscape they are literally jumping across hard disks. In MMORPGs, this is happening at around 20 times a second across thousands of players.

Here we have world as process; simply through interacting, gamers of a MMORPG awaken a pre-existing data-set while the effect of shared habitation is provided by an elaborate tracking system organising movements and actions as relative yet contiguous experiences. A MMORPG is produced through both an exchange between data across a network, and the consensual recognition of the occurrence of the events by the perceptions of human beings. In this way a persistent world needs other people.

If there is one thing that draws attention to this 'world as process', its 'lag'. Lag is a strange in-game 'time-weather' where delays caused by network congestion create differences in time between the server and the client. These produce funny or disastrous discontinuities between the time dimensions of players. Lag is an example of how the system that holds up the world contributes into experience as a part of being in that world (the real-world equivalent might be an earthquake for instance). Other examples of interruptions to the game-play include 'patches' (updates to old or problematic data in the game) and server maintenance downtime.

Regardless of how much this client-server world mechanic works in the background of the gaming experience, these events intermittently and simultaneously effect huge numbers of people, and just like the weather, they are food for conversation. These conversations, alongside others relating to the games wider future and functions are discussed in a kind of 'afterlife' of game-play.

This brings us to the next layer of public.

LAYER FIVE | LEVEL TWO | Afterlives

Forums are text-based web interfaces for discussing opinions and questions relating to game-play with other gamers or game-masters (GMs or administrators). Forums are essentially lists of messages posted in one after another appearing on a web-page. Generally they are large and extremely lively discussion communities run either by the game-publishers themselves, or by groups of dedicated players. Some clans take their work so seriously that they develop whole sites and forums specifically focused on clan culture and in-game politics. It's at this layer of public that the MMORPG really comes into its own as a cultural object; talked about in the absence of game-play itself, the MMORPG starts to break the skin of its own technology and merges with the real-world.

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LAYER SIX | Permeations

The most significant example of MMORPGs permeation 'into' the real is the recent phenomenon of players selling items from the game-world for real-world cash. A search on ebay.com for *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, or *Anarchy Online* (to name a few) lists hundreds of advertisements for the sale of particular manuals, the services of a guide, weapons, specialist footwear, characters and money. Such huge amounts of revenue are being generated from these transactions that economists are starting to take note, and as such have placed real economic value to economies in game. In an recent interview for the BBC, Edward Castronova, a California State University professor, revealed some controversial statistics:

Norrath, the setting for the online game *EverQuest*, has been found to be the 77th richest country in the world, sandwiched between Russia and Bulgaria... Research carried out in the United States shows that virtual internal markets, combined with illegal online trading on auction websites, mean that Norrath has a gross national product per capita of \$2,266, bigger than China and India. He said that people are putting hundreds of hours a year into these characters and you can tell how valuable that is in terms of money by looking at how much these characters sell on open markets such as auction sites like ebay where they can fetch hundreds of US Dollars.

"In terms of the monetary input and the hours input the things that people are creating are very valuable," he said. [16]

This permeation of the game-world into the real only testifies to the power of the world effect produced by an MMORPG, and exposes innate tendencies to isolate electronic universes as somehow 'outside of the real'. MMORPGs collapse a platonic separation that we have wrought upon the 'virtual-world'; that it must authenticate against the real, in doing so remain committed to the realm of the symbolic. – MMORPGs offer new publics and new places,

and as such should be considered within the context of their functional social practices.

And so we have reached the final and most outward layer of public space in the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game – that of our own.

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Julian
Holland
Oliver: The
Similar Eye:
Proxy Life
and Public
Space in the
MMORPG