

Online Diasporas: Theoretical Considerations on the Study of Diasporic Behavior in MMORPGs

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ABSTRACT

The concept of ‘online diaspora’ refers to the complex, dispersive and migratory behavior that some online communities may exhibit when moving from one virtual environment to another. This paper examines leading theoretical approaches to the notion of ‘diaspora’, and contrasts them with a set of cases of both ‘real life’ and ‘online diasporas’ taken from the author’s ethnographic experiences in MMORPGs as well as from published literature on the subject. The objective is to reach an understanding of the particularities of this type of diaspora in terms of their conceptualization. This, in turn, paves the way towards the formulation of a theoretical framework for the study of diasporic behavior in MMORPGs.

Keywords

diaspora, identity, MMORPG, theoretical approaches,

INTRODUCTION

In my years of experience conducting longitudinal ethnographic studies of digitally mediated communities, I have repeatedly witnessed how groups of users, upon formation in a given virtual community, tend to simultaneously exist in other online aggregates. For example, a guild of players from a MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) would also hold a same Facebook group page, would play in a same team in an online shooter, and would also maintain a guild community forum. Although the existence of this multiplicity of spaces of interaction can be considered as a given in the age of digital media, all online groups do not necessarily remain confined to a same virtual context all throughout their lifespan. They might either get involuntarily *displaced from*, or *voluntarily quit* logging into, their original point of formation. Successively, they may migrate to another virtual community or disperse and scatter into a myriad of other settings.

Therein the first glimpses of the idea that this *complex, dispersive and migratory behavior* some online groups may exhibit could signify that they are, in essence, a new form of diaspora – namely *online diasporas*. In fact, Pearce (2009) and Salazar (2006, 2010) document cases of groups of players that, after forming within digitally mediated MMORPGs such as *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* (Cyan Inc. 2003) and *Star Wars Galaxies*

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(SWG) (Sony Online Entertainment, 2003), displaced themselves and re-formed inside other digital environments.

Nevertheless, the conceptual aspects of whether these groups can be considered ‘online diasporas’ or not, as well as the characteristics and properties of the theoretical construct in itself are all prone for theoretical examination and verification. This is due to the fact that the notion of ‘diaspora’ is a point of contention and a topic of long-standing scholarly debate amongst interested disciplines, such as *cultural anthropology*, *area studies*, *political science* and even within the multidisciplinary field that has them as its exclusive object of study, *diaspora studies* (Tölölyan, 2007).

In this paper, I intend to examine leading theoretical approaches to the notion of ‘diaspora’, and contrast them with a set of cases of both actual MMORPG ‘online diasporas’ as well as non-game related ‘real life diasporas’. Antagonistic and non-antagonistic views of the construct will be assessed in terms of identifying both common and non-common theoretical threads. Moreover, the analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of both MMORPG online diasporas and their real life counterparts will automatically poise the Digital Game Studies discipline right into forefront of the abovementioned disciplinary debate on the subject. The ultimate objective is to pave the way towards the formulation of a theoretical framework for the study of diasporic behavior in MMORPGs.

ONLINE DIASPORAS: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

On the notion of “Diaspora”

Etymologically speaking, Sideri posits that the term ‘diaspora’ implies a dialectic opposition of two Greek roots : “ *dia-* (a preposition which, when used in compound words, means division and dispersion) and *-spiro* [sic] (literally, to sow the seeds)... this suggests, on the one hand, the idea of dispersion and on the other, that of stasis and stability” (2008, 33-34). Its first use can be traced to biblical references (per their Greek translation) of the scattering of the Jewish people after their exile from the Kingdom of Judah and Judea. It was then transposed to refer to similarly violently displaced historical ethnic groups such as the Armenian and Greek diasporas, and from there to a wide range of scattered ethnic group that exist in the present (Brubaker, 2005).

Interestingly, the term retains its innate contradiction also on a conceptual level, as there are two main differentiated (and somewhat opposed) notions of “diaspora”: the *classical* notion and the *postmodern* one (Sideri, 2008; Fernández, 2008). Safran (1991) can be considered as one of the main representatives of the *classical notion*, which implies the forceful or involuntary dispersion of a given community from its original geographic and cultural center and a concomitant sense of loss, grief and dislocation. A key characterization of this conceptualization is the deep sense of nostalgia and connectedness with an idealized homeland, as well as the conflictive relationship the displaced group experiences towards its receptor society. It also assumes the existence of a defined ethnic identity that reproduces itself throughout generations of offspring of the originally displaced group, adapting to its new environment but at the same time maintaining its essential characteristics.

The *Uru Diaspora* case study, as described by Pearce (2009) vividly exemplifies how a ‘online diaspora’, on its classical notion, can occur within an MMORPG. The author makes a thorough ethnographic account of the trials and tribulations of ‘The Gathering of

Uru' (TGU), a group of players that formed within *Uru Prologue* (the online component of *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*). They were forcefully displaced from the game when, both the developer and publisher of the game (Cyan and Ubisoft, respectively), decided to shutdown the server due to their perceived lack of potential commercial success for the game. The author goes great lengths to describe in detail how these players, that once shared a common identification as fans of *Uru Prologue's* gameplay and mythology (which in turn were based on the widely acclaimed *Myst* series of games), formed tightly knit affiliation/friendship bonds based upon this commonality and withstood together their displacement by migrating and scattering, as a diaspora, to other online environments such as *There.com* (There, Inc; 2003) and *Second Life* (Linden Research Inc; 2003). From the author's description of this process, one can see how their social identity as a group, although undergoing 'assimilation' and 'transculturation' processes to the new environments, never ceased to be deeply marked by a sense of loss and idealization of their 'homeland'...

Yearning for the Homeland

My Homeland Uru
From my beautiful homeland [...]
A refrain is sung by a sister who lives far from her homeland
And the memories make her cry
The song that she sings springs from her pain and her own tears [...]
Your homeland strikes your soul when you are gone
Your homeland sighs when you are not there
The memories live and flow through my blood
I carry her inside me, yes its true [...]
Flows in my blood, ever stronger
On its way to my heart
I sing of my homeland, beautiful and loved
I suffer the pain that is in her soul
Although I am far away, I can feel her
And one day I'll return
I know it
-Raena

This poem, posted by TGU member Raena [...] expresses this sense of losing one's homeland, a sentiment that many TGUers shared. To an unknowing reader, it would be hard to recognize that its writer was talking about a fictional place. In reality, of course, she knows it is a virtual world, but her deep attachment to Uru as "homeland," and the implied ethnic identity that goes with that, is clearly expressed in this text. (Pearce, 2009 ; 92-93).

... and by an ambiguous (sometimes even antagonistic) relationship between TGUers and the operators of the new online spaces where they migrated as well as their "indigenous" players:

For a small and growing virtual society like *There.com*, the sudden onslaught of a large group of players en masse placed a significant burden on the system [...] The TGU community that had settled near Alice's Emerald City grew to about sixty people in a matter of four weeks, creating huge problems with lag [...] There were also festering resentments among the "indigenous" *Thereians* and Emerald City residents, a number of whom moved out. TGU then moved [several times] to an adjacent lot to create more space between the two communities [...] In each case, the move was brought on either by a battle for processing resources, or "griefing" (harassment) from other players.

The primary form of griefing entailed players running over avatars with dune buggies. [...] Another form of griefing was what one TGUer described as "sign wars." [...] Whenever the TGUers would create a new settlement, they would plant a sign identifying it as their area.

Griefers would then place another sign in front of theirs, such as a billboard advertising cybersex.

A significant faction of existing Thereians was suspicious and fearful of this sudden inrush of "outsiders." Many were afraid that, by sheer numbers, the Uruvians would take over There.com entirely, turning it into Uru. Some There.com denizens thought the "Uru people" a bit odd. [...] As a result, TGUers became very protective of one another, and the persecution from Thereians only served to further strengthen their bond.

There.com management had the opposite response to the new arrivals: they were conciliatory and accommodating. After all, the Uru immigrants represented an instant market. There, Inc. (the world's owner at the time) was more than happy to nurture this growing population and the subscription fees it brought. [...] The perception, not entirely unfounded, that the Uru people had undue influence with the powers that be only served to exacerbate the tensions between the new immigrants and native Thereians. (Pearce, 2009, 97-99).

Nevertheless, as much as this description of the *Uru Diaspora* exemplifies the *classical notion* in high fidelity, the multiplicity of possibilities and circumstances by which an online group may exhibit diasporic behavior leads to the statement of a few questions: Does there really need to be an idealized and lost "homeland" (and the grief associated with it) in order for an online diaspora to be considered a diaspora? Does the diasporic group necessarily need to exhibit a relatively homogeneous, well-differentiated and stable identity in order for it to be a diaspora? Does there necessarily need to exist conflict involved in the migration and subsequent re-establishment of the group unto new environments?

These questions delineate, precisely, the sort of criticisms that the *postmodern notion* poses to the traditional concept of diaspora. Clifford (1994), one of its mayor advocates, proposes a non-essentialist notion in terms of disconnecting the diasporic group with a center of origin, a feeling of loss and a wish for return. In this sense, the *postmodern notion* is linked with the advent of globalization and transnationalism and the concomitant blurring of boundaries between state/nations. Thus, this notion sees diasporas as a new form of consciousness, collectivity and solidarity on which deterritorialization, fragmentation and decentredness are praised as pivotal points from which to affirm the diasporic group's identity and political agency.

In order to illustrate this notion of diaspora, I will bring forth an ethnographic study conducted on the World of Warcraft (WoW) MMORPG (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), from June 2006 till December 2008, and referred on Salazar (2010) on which I studied a guild of players, namely "Target Guild D", from the Excalibur server¹. This group initially formed as a Player Association (PA) of the Star Wars Galaxies (SWG) MMORPG and then quit the game altogether just to disperse in equivalent groups on both the Guild Wars (ArenaNet, 2005) and WoW MMORPGs. My first contact with them was during yet another separate ethnographic study I conducted on SWG from January 2003 to December 2005, when I tangentially met them several times as an allied PA of the particular group I was studying at the time, and referred on Salazar (2006, 2009). The study I conducted on WoW then was fairly unrelated with my current interest in online diasporas, but looking back into the transcripts of an interview I had with one of their founders, he succinctly described the kind of "online diaspora" they came to be:

Researcher: So, as you may remember, I know all of you since... um...from your time in SWG. May I ask ... how would you describe SWG Target Guild D vs. WoW Target Guild D? How was that process of going from one game to another? Any ...um ... changes?

Dreed: Hmmm, funny you put it... you say it that way. Target Guild D in **SWG vs WOW** [emphasis added by Dreed] ... I'd say we're the same group of friends and it doesn't really have to do with the game we're playing in, it never has been actually ... uhm.. well maybe SWG did have a bit to do at the beginning cuz well, we all met there cuz we all loved the Star Wars movies and we had no idea how to play a massive multiplayer game of this sort you know...so we formed the XACT PA... but then came SOE with their CURB and NGE to screw SWG all over and we well like, well .. you know what SOE? We're leaving, and for good, you're not getting any more money from us. We were kinda pissed at SOE then ... but ... uhm... looking in hindsight I'd say we left cuz we were also bored to death of that game you know... And well, we came here and made a new home in WoW and all, and some others went onto Guild Wars and all... So, to answer your question: I'd say that we are this same group of friends that play together as a group on a game that we now happen love, and we try to thrive on. We had allied and enemy PAs in SWG and well, now we have just a new set of friends and foes on WoW and Guild Wars ... Of course the games are different ... we're not in the Star Wars Universe anymore, we are in Azeroth now and all that, but ... but we just play as each games makes us play, that changes, but what doesn't change is us as friends ... for example , although I don't play Guild Wars that much I still log every now and then there to meet old friends, and likewise some of them sometimes pay a few months of WoW just to keep in touch which us here ... even our newbs, if you will ...you know... you know that like ... 95% of the guild we have now in WoW played SWG .. the rest are just new member we picked up here in WoW... I don't even think they know or can tell if we played in SWG or not ... you are the one who just brought this up now, haven't even thought about us now as opposed to how we were in SWG until now that you're asking me you know ...

Researcher: Hmmm.. so.. uhm, if I understood you correctly the game is not the main thing that keeps you guys together, right? If not, then ... what would you say is that thing that keeps you guys together?

Dreed: Yeah, certainly not ... or I'd say, it is somewhat **NOT** [emphasis added by Dreed] the game, its more like us, our friendship what uhm... hold us together as you say. It's kinda like ... like... I'd say that it's the fact the we stayed true to each other and held to each other for all this time no matter what game we've been playing, that we've all decided together what game we're trying next and stuff. Funny that you bring all this up today cuz, actually ... yesterday night I was talking in teamspeak with our guys here in WoW and on Guild Wars about we all giving it a try to LotRO [Lord of the Rings Online; Turbine, 2007; reference added by author]... it was just released and it looks pretty neat. So we were talking about how all of us had read Tolkien's book and how awesome the Lord of the Rings movies were, and all ... it's also kinda like, like sometimes I feel that playing WoW and Guild Wars is getting kinda old, you know what I mean? And I'm not the only one who feels that way ... So, since there's no friggin way we're going back to SWG.., that's for sure ... now we're gonna go and try LotRO as a group, again, cuz damn sure not leaving without all this motley bunch ya know, would be kinda lonely if I went there all by myself ... don't think the game would stick on me if I went that way ya know...

Researcher: So, what would you say if ... and I'm being hypothetical here... Blizzard or Turbine from LotRO pulled a similar move as SOE did with the CURB and NGE? Would you leave also "en masse" as you just said?

Dreed: Oh we'd all leave again alright, for sure, no question about it ...I might even go ahead and say that such thing happening would just make us band together stronger as a group and all, cuz you see, the same way it happened back when we left SWG, it was like, it was like.. like leaving was our statement to them. ... our ... our way of giving the finger to SOE and making them understand that that we decided to speak with our wallets, if you will... and... and ... not that I think Blizzard would be that stupid to do it, but if they ever did I have no doubt we would do it again.

After this interview, many of the members of *Target Guild D* did try Lord of the Rings Online (Turbine, 2007) as a group, and most of them kept characters on all three games,

playing them intermittently. On my last contact with them, I learned that 27 out of the original 39 SWG founding members, along with 46 out of the 71 “new” members that joined from WoW, had decided to start playing Guild Wars 2 (ArenaNet, 2012).

Although on Dreed’s description there is mention to the grief and anger caused by SOE’s decision to implement the CURB and the NGE (two successive and dramatic overhauls to the game that are widely regarded as the main cause for SWG’s final demise in terms of loss of subscribers) there certainly doesn’t seem to exist a sense of longing and loss of their SWG “homeland”. Furthermore, their displacement was voluntary. For them, leaving SWG was more of a political statement, it was by voluntarily dispersing that they asserted their political agency as a group. Moreover, both Dreed’s words and my ethnographic accounts depict a group with a strong sense of togetherness but a loose identification with the given game environment they were playing in (SWG, WoW, Guild Wars), all of which allowed them to blend in, without major conflicts, with the receptor communities. Still, their shared awareness of being a group that, although scattered and fragmented, still lives on precisely *because of* (and *in spite of*) this deterritorialization and joint experience of displacement, makes them a clear example of a *postmodern* diaspora.

This apparent contradiction between the *classical* and *postmodern* conceptualizations of diaspora can be reduced to the historicity of these notions. The former has been modeled after millenary and ethnically differentiated diasporas in human history, whilst the latter reflects the looser sense of affiliation that globalization and transnationalism imprints into the postmodern self. In this respect, Clifford argues “we should be able to recognize the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that history a definitive model. Jewish (and Greek and Armenian) diasporas can be taken as non-normative starting points for a discourse that is travelling or hybridizing in new global conditions” (1994, 306). In this sense, Pearce’s (2009) seminal work on the emergence of an actual “online diaspora”, might equally carry the risk of being regarded as *the* way upon which to model conceptualizations of diasporic behavior in MMORPGs, as opposed to it being *a* way to describe them within the Digital Game Studies discipline.

On the other hand, the *Target Guild D* example and its contrast with the *Uru Diaspora* brings forth the inherent weaknesses of both conceptual notions. Whilst the classical notion may be criticized because of its reliance on an *essentialist view* of identity that is irrevocably articulated to the historicity of the center of origin, the postmodern notion that emerged as its reaction suffers from its *extreme relativism*, stretching the concept to the point of rendering it over-encompassing and theoretically irrelevant (Sideri, 2008; Fernández, 2008). If any online group that has been displaced from its point of formation can be considered a diaspora, then how does it differentiate from other concepts such as player migration and exile?

This *classical/postmodern* dichotomy can be diluted if we take into account the fact that MMORPGs propitiate the emergence of a multitude of gameplay patterns and social configurations (Salazar, 2006). In this regard, both the *Uru* and the *Target Guild D* diasporas can be conceptualized as differentiated expressions of how diasporic behaviors may exhibit themselves within MMORPGS. In other words, the antagonistic debate between both notions becomes artificial if we understand each of the examples as *a possible outcome* of online diaspora emergence in MMORPGs. In fact, Pearce (2009) hints at this blurring of the notions’ boundaries by citing Clifford as a theoretical source for the definition of the term (although in practice, her ethnographic description could be

interpreted as if it follows Safran's instead). In addition, the author posits the concept of "communities of play" – groups of players who initially form bonds focused on gameplay based interaction but then transition their focus to social interaction - which seems to point towards the complex, dynamic, decentered and non essentialist postmodern view of social identity.

Nonetheless, the question that is implied all throughout this subsection of the paper remains unanswered: *What is then, an online diaspora?* In order to provide a useful definition of the term in the context of Digital Game Studies, common threads must be sought. Choo (2007) proposes a useful solution to the debate by arguing that the notion of diaspora "must be understood as a *condition of subjectivity* and not as an object of analysis" (p.11). This implies the recognition that, first and foremost, besides the obvious shared experience of displacement, in order for a group to be labeled as a diaspora it is necessary for it to develop a *diasporic consciousness* (Fernández, 2008), a collective awareness of their linkage with the dispersion and scattering of the group and concomitantly, the social construction of a *hybrid identity* as a key element of their self image (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 2003). It also suggests that it might be more productive to ask "*when is an online diaspora a diaspora?*" instead that "*what is an online diaspora?*" In the same way that both the *Uru Diaspora* and the *Target Guild D Diaspora* acquired an awareness of their condition as a diaspora, an online diaspora can only be considered a diaspora *when and if* they develop this *diasporic consciousness*.

However, these conceptual aspects are just, I believe, the "tip of the iceberg" of the panoramic bricolage of views that characterizes the current theoretical state of affairs of the 'diaspora' notion. Structural and pragmatic aspects of diasporas are also intertwined in their definition, and are the subject of the next section.

On the constitutive aspects of online diasporas

Diasporas and their structural elements

Now that we've approached the definition of online diaspora as a *when* instead than a *what*, the next question is, then: *What constitutes, then, an online diaspora?* The classical triadic model (Sheffer, 1986) that portrays home country, host country and migrant community as the basic constituent poles of a diaspora has been "criticized to be simplistic as it implies a homogenous migrant community and interests" (Kissau & Hunger, 2010; p. 245). Furthermore, Bruneau (2010) suggests that the system of relations within the networked space that connects migrant communities with the other two poles must also be taken into consideration in order to achieve a holistic conceptualization.

This, in turn, leads to the assertion that diasporic groups do not live in isolation of other (non) diasporic groups. Indeed, the emergence of the *diasporic consciousness* signifies the awareness of identity boundaries between the migrant community (the ingroup) and the others (outgroups). Brubaker conceptualizes this *boundary-maintenance criterion* as an essential constitutive element of diasporas, as it delineates the existence of a "distinctive [social] identity vis-à-vis a host society (or societies)" (2005, 6). Both the *Uru Diaspora* and the *Target Guild D* case studies exemplify this fact. Pearce (2009) describes how *Uruvians* established ambiguous relationships with both allied and opposed "indigenous" groups of *Thereians* and *Second Lifers*. Likewise, Dreed's assertion that "we had allies and enemy PAs in SWG and well, now we have just a new set of friends and foes on WoW and Guild Wars" clearly states how *Target Guild D*

existed within a complex set of alliances and animosities with other groups on both their ‘home’ (originary) and ‘host’ MMORPGs.

On a previous work, (Salazar, 2006; 2009), a theoretical model for the understanding of social identity (re)production processes in MMORPGS was developed. This model (see Figure 1), although developed to explain the emergence of social identity phenomena in online groups that are not necessarily diasporic, coincidentally articulates all of the abovementioned conceptual and structural elements.

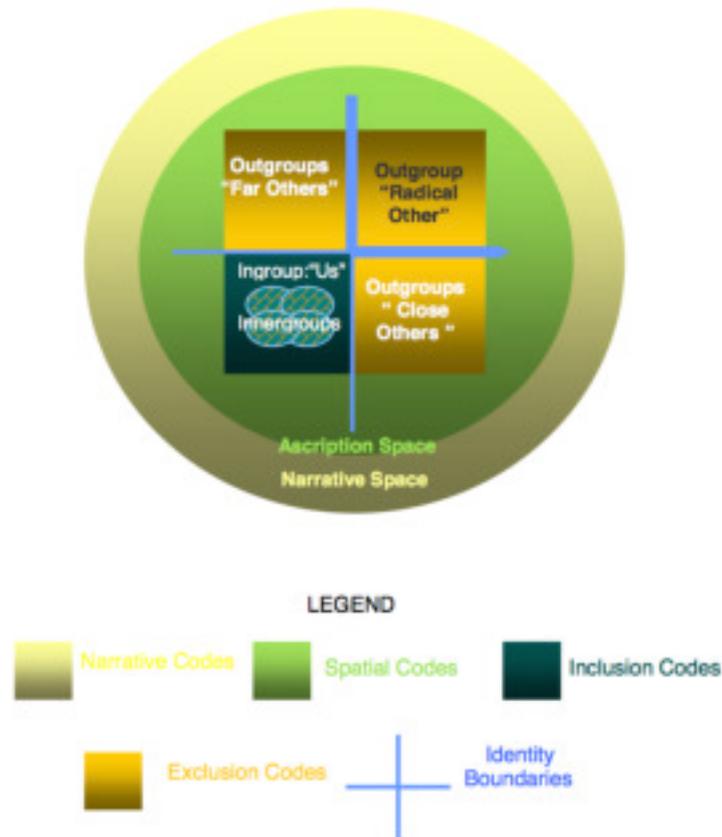


Figure 1. Social Identity (Re) Production Model. (*First Author, 2006, 78*)

The model conceptualizes social identity of online groups as constituted by a series of *symbolic codes* - both structured and structuring frames of meaning and collective representations - knotted to each other and upon which the group identifies. On this paper, I will attempt to translate them into the online diaspora experience, in order to establish them as theoretical artifacts towards the formulation of a model for its study.

The *narrative* and *spatial codes* demarcate either the “home” or the “host” MMORPG(s) inhabited by an online diaspora on a given time. In the same way that, for example, the historicity of the Jewish nation/state contextualizes a shared historical narrative for the Jewish diasporas and their ethnicity, the *narrative space* upon which MMORPGs are usually based on provides a set of codes to which online diasporas tend to adhere. Moreover, the MMORPG in itself represents an ascription space with defined gameplay structures an options through which online diasporas engage in social practices. Pearce (2009) details the importance that the mythical milieu of the *Myst* (Cyan Inc; 1993) series of games and its particular gameplay characteristics had on the definition of the *Uru*

Diaspora identity. “Uruvians” tended to not only maintain this shared identification with Myst’s ‘D’ni Culture’ althroughout their dispersion, but also to modify and bend at their will, both linguistically and materially, the spatial and narrative characteristics of their host world in order to make it fit with their idealized homeland. Dreed’s words on how “the games are different ... we’re not in the Star Wars Universe anymore, we are in Azeroth now and all that, but ... but we just play as each games makes us play” equally exemplifies how *Target Guild D*’s identity as a diaspora depends on the narrative and spatial context(s) they have engaged with.

As explained before, the emergence of the *diasporic consciuosness* carries on to the recognition of the *ingroup*. Structurally, this collective representation as a diaspora is constituted by *inclusion codes* of who is “us” as well as by *exclusion codes* of who’s the “other” (*outgroups*). *Identitary boundaries* are then delineated in order to separate the ingroup from the outgroups they engage with, namely its *close others* (allies), *far others* (enemies) and the *radical other* (the game/world developers). The latter is of special importance for the understanding of the *why* of the diasporic behavior of the case studies at hand: the *Uru Diaspora* happened as a consequence of a decision made by its *radical other* (Cyan, Ubisoft) to shut down the game, whilst *The Target Guild D* Diaspora happened as a reactive statement towards its own *radical other* (SOE) and the unwanted changes they inflicted into the game.

Diasporas and their pragmatic aspects

Asking the *why* of the online diaspora phenomenon inevitably leads to the discernment of its pragmatic aspects. Both *classical* and *postmodern* notions approach (with quite opposite answers) the question of the practical purposes that lead groups to become diasporas. Whilst the *classical notion*’s response is marked by its *apriorism* (it is because of the loss of the homeland and its idealization that the diaspora happens) the *postmodern notion*’s response is marked by its *teleologism* (the emergence of the diaspora is the end in itself, instead of it being just a means).

Bruneau (2010) solves this dichotomy by positing that diasporas may be better understood as social formations that are governed by rules of attraction to societal poles. The author identifies four major types of attraction poles upon which diasporas may be structured upon, namely the *entrepreneurial*, the *political*, the *religious* and the *ethnic/cultural* poles. Translating this into the realities of the case studies at hand puts in evidence that, these types of forces of attraction are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that the pragmatic conceptualization they entail possesses an acute descriptive power in regards of explaining the *why* of the online diasporas.

For example, Pearce (2009) depicts how, at least some of the diasporic offshoots of TGU, were attracted by an *entrepreneurial pole*. After *Uru Prologue*’s servers were shut down, some TGU members engaged in the enterprise of either creating an new Uru world from scratch (*Atmos Hood*), or restoring the original world by reverse-engineering both client and server sides of the game’s software and running it on player owned servers (*Until Uru*). Even more, some of the “Uruvian-Thereians” and “Uruvian-Second Lifers” artisans and architects became well known for their entrepreneurial effort of taking advantage of the malleability of *There.com*’s and *Second Life*’s environment in order to materially recreate distinctive features of *Uru Prologue*.

The attraction power of the *political pole* is evidenced by how Target Guild D’s diasporic behavior is a result of an effort to assert their political agency towards *the radical other*:

“it was like... like leaving was our statement to them. ... our ... our way of giving the finger to SOE and making them understand that... that we decided to speak with our wallets“ (Dreed). In the same vein, Pearce (2009) narrates how some of the entrepreneurial poles of the Uru Diaspora (specifically, *Until Uru*) used their knowledge of the game’s software as political ammunition for both negotiating with Cyan the release of Uru Prologue’s Age Building-tools as well as for promoting the re-opening of Uru in some form.

Although none of the studied cases exemplify the *religious pole*, it is entirely possible that a online diaspora may somehow feel that a given MMORPG shares their alignment with a particular set of religious beliefs and hence, becomes attracted towards it. However, the examples of online diaspora described so far *do* show that, as a structural substitute to religion, the mythical context of the MMORPG does have an enormous diasporic attraction power. In this sense, I propose the inclusion of one more pole into the analysis, namely, the *narrative pole*. Based on Pearce’s (2009) accounts, it can be assumed that the attraction power of *Uru Prologue* as a “lost homeland” is, in part, of narrative nature: their knowledge and identification with the *Myst* Mythos and the D’ni Culture is one of the reasons why they yearned for their homeland and why they attempted to reproduce it through various means. Another illustration of the attraction power a MMORPG narrative can exert can be found on Dreed’s assertion about how, the fact that “all of us had read Tolkien’s book and how awesome the Lord of the Rings movies were, and all” was one of the reasons why *Target Guild D* decided to disperse yet again into LotRO.

The *ethnic/cultural pole* of attraction refers to the fact that diasporas tend to be associated with the image of ethnic groups that, although dispersed from their point of origin, form a unity based on a shared cultural background. On a separate interview, another one of the founders of *Target Guild D* narrates:

“ *Researcher*: So, what would you say is that thing that has kept you guys together ..even.. throughout all these different games?

Dralion: Well, I guess it’s the time ... it’s all these time we’ve known each other ...or actually, perhaps it kinda also has to do with most of us being Aussies... well Aussies and Kiwis ... you know we all met on SWG because we are all on the same timezone, so we kinda always ended up playing at the same times and so we crossed each other’s paths frequently... So, it’s like all of us being Aussies and Kiwis and being able to share the same jokes and meet in real life and stuff might be in part why we’ve been together so long... not that is all about that you know, we do have some few members that aren’t Aussie or Kiwi ...it’s not like with are prejudiced to other people and won’t let you in if you’re not an Aussie or a Kiwi .. , but still, because of the timezone, even the new members we’ve got here in WoW are all mostly from New Zealand or AustraliaAnd the guys at Guild Wars are also all mostly from there as well...”

This hints towards the idea that, *Target Guild D*’s diasporic behavior was at least partly due to the attraction power of a cultural pole. Specifically, their shared background as “Aussies” and “Kiwis”.

Towards a theoretical framework for the study of online diasporas

The articulation of all the conceptual, structural and pragmatic elements insofar analyzed in this paper allows the unveiling of a tentative model for the understanding of online diasporas. Figure 2 shows a visual representation of the model in regards of the *Uru Diaspora*.

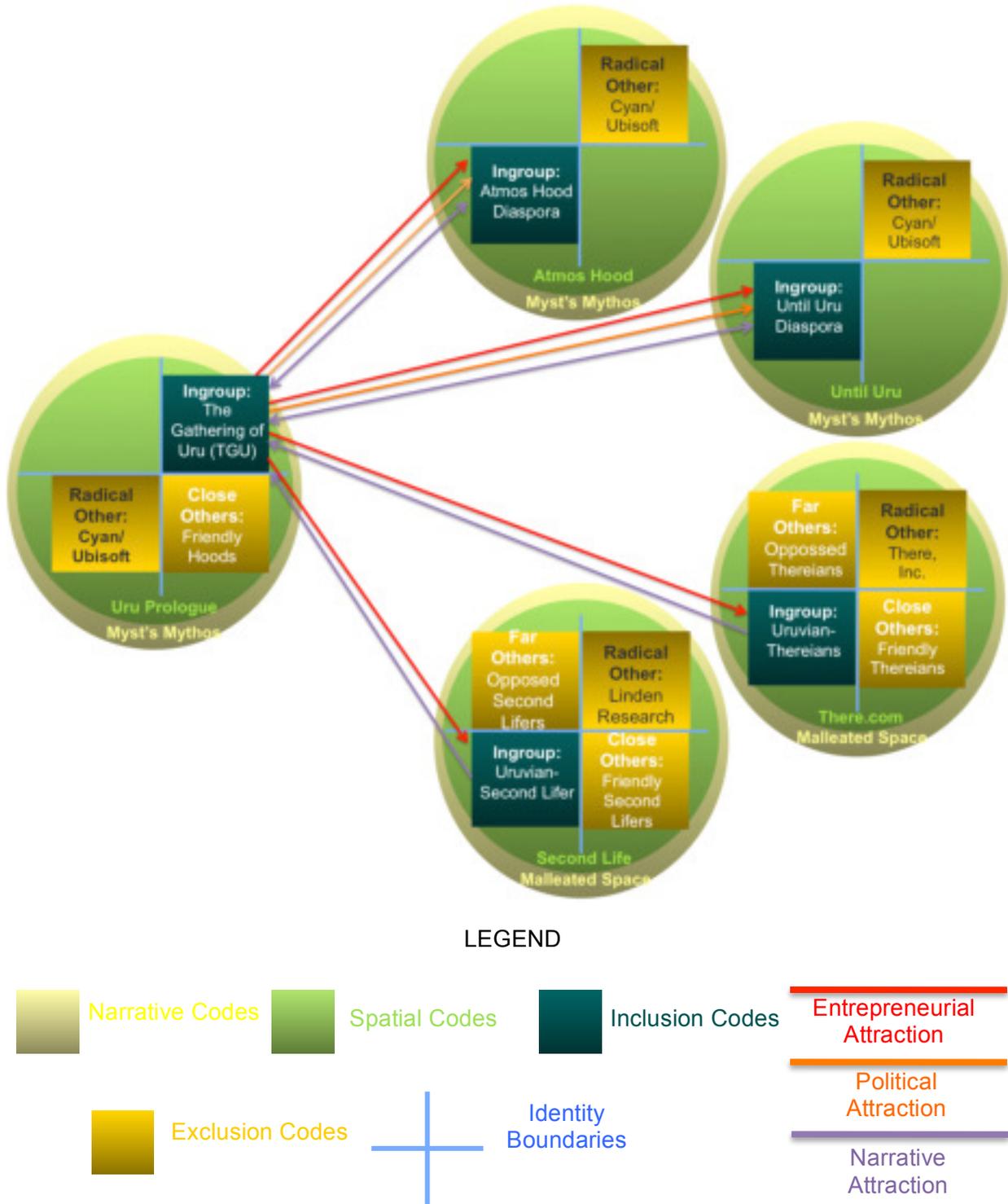


Figure 2. The Uru Diaspora

The directionality of the attraction poles signifies which end of the pole is the attraction being exerted upon. Interestingly, Figure 2 depicts how the *Uru Diaspora* is irrevocably being pulled towards *Uru Prologue* by its narrative attraction: the yearning for the homeland and the desire to return and inhabit within *Myst's* mythos again.

Figure 3, on the other hand, illustrates the particular configuration exhibited by *Target Guild D* and the way the attraction forces determined the directionality of the diaspora. Since this diaspora does not yearn for the return to the SWG homeland, consequentially, there is no bidirectionality between Target Guild D and its Guild Wars counterpart towards their original point of formation (the XACT PA in SWG).



Figure 3. The Target Guild D Diaspora

These models suggest that diasporic attraction forces may exist even before the emergence of the *diasporic consciousness*, and that this collective awareness of their condition as a diaspora (and its resulting *hybrid identity*) implies that group members must experience, on a subjective level, these forces of attraction. Therein lies the crux of Cho's (2007) conceptualization in regards of diasporas being *a condition of subjectivity* rather than an object of analysis. Under this line of thought, this paper concludes that this subjective condition is irrevocably articulated to a *formal structure*, a system of symbolic codes, spaces and forces of attraction that not only can be structurally represented, but that also possess a concise analytical and descriptive power for the diaspora experience.

FORMAL STRUCTURALISM VS. THE HYPERREALISM OF (UN)REAL DIASPORAS

Most of the theoretical sources examined in this article refer to “real life” diasporas, as opposed to the “online” diasporas that are the main concern of this analysis. Nevertheless, the fact that these theoretical threads were knotted and articulated into a thorough model for the understanding of online diasporas prompts the question: *How far can (unreal?) online diasporas model real life diasporas?* and vice versa.

This in turn points towards the potential *hyperreality* of (un)real diasporas, regardless of whether they are of “online” nature or not. Although they are supposed to represent an actual social phenomenon, modeling them in its likeness carries the danger of converting them into *simulacra* - a symbolic representation that although initially had a referent in reality, becomes reality in itself by simulating it (Baudrillard, 1994). This is the realm of the *hyperreal*, the blurring of the frontiers between reality and its simulated representation.

There is evidence that even “real life” diasporas may become *hyperreal* when they become digitally mediated. Ignacio (2005, 2006) uses “nethnography” (ethnography of digitally mediated spaces) to demonstrate how the national, racial, and ethnic identity of the Filipino diaspora was articulated, reified, and re-created within the *soc.culture.filipino* newsgroup on the Internet. The newsgroup in itself becomes, then, the *de facto* reality and place of interaction upon which to refer to the Filipino diaspora. Likewise, on a current ethnographic study I am conducting of the Venezuelan diaspora², I am applying textual analysis of and participating in, exclusively, the digitally mediated representations of this diaspora (Facebook profiles and group pages, forums, mailing lists, blogs and twitter accounts). I don't even have to leave my computer and travel in order to get in contact with the Venezuelan diasporas in Spain, Canada, Germany or the UK, as it is their online manifestations the basic foci for analysis (Salazar, 2013). The question of whether these two studies are actually studying online diasporas as referents to real diasporas, or if they are in fact studying the “real life” Filipino and Venezuelan diasporically displaced communities all over the world, denotes the *hyperreal nature* of these (un?) real diasporas.

Although the *Uru* and *Target Guild D* diasporas do not necessarily have a real life referent in the sense that there hasn't been an actual geographical displacement of the players in the real world, they are still *hyperreal* inasmuch as they refer to the subjective condition of displacement felt by the players through their avatars. In other words, the advent of digital media turns all diasporas, “real” or not, into *hyperreal*.

This, I believe, is exactly the reason why studying online diasporic behavior in MMORPGs has repercussions not only within the Digital Game Studies discipline, but

also in all social sciences and disciplines concerned with the diaspora phenomenon. Leaving philosophical questions of virtuality aside, the *formal structure* of a diaspora as portrayed by the model proposed in this paper, resolves the *hyperreality* question by rendering the real/unreal opposition as non-existent.

For instance, from this formal point of view, the *Uru Diaspora* and Jewish millenary diaspora bear similar structures: the loss of a homeland, its yearning and idealization due to its attraction power and the social construction of a replacement for it. Granted, the *religious* and *ethnic/cultural poles* of attraction are protagonic in the Jewish diaspora (while for the *Uru Diaspora* they are not). Moreover, from a non structuralist interpretation, they may not be necessarily equalized in the sense that the loss of the *Uru Prologue* homeland due to a server shutdown does not, in a visceral way, compare with the bloodshed and grief associated with the loss of the Kingdom of Judah. Still, *from a formal structuralist* standpoint, their parallels are striking. In this same sense, beginning a “political revolution in the internet and then letting others [Filipinos] in our respective areas join in soc.culture.filipino [...] into one united Filipino community” (Ignacio, 2005, 20) is structurally comparable to using the representational power of *Atmos Hood* and *Until Uru* to “start a revolution” and prompt Cyan and Ubisoft for the return of the original homeland. Likewise, leaving Venezuela as an antagonistic reaction towards the political ideologies of a government is structurally equivalent to leaving SWG as a political statement towards SOE. Thus, studying MMORPG online diasporas from a *formal structuralist* approach presents an alternative to think about, describe and analyze their “real life” counterparts as well.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical model presented in this paper is a good example of how Digital Games Studies can assert its agency as a discipline *vis-à-vis* other established disciplines and social sciences. By studying MMORPGs, Digital Game Studies has the potential to tap into complex social phenomena and send ripples throughout all other areas of knowledge that are concerned with them.

Under this line of thought, the relevance of the diaspora construct (for all disciplines and social sciences involved) strides on the fact that this phenomenon is as current now as it was thousands of years ago. Recent world events, such as the “arab spring”, bring forth repercussions to the study of present day Syrian and Lybian diasporas (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). The weakening of the current Venezuelan political regime in terms of its loss of votes on the latest 2012 and 2013 elections is affecting the way Venezuelan diasporas are construing themselves (Salazar, 2013). The closing of MMORPGs such as Star Wars Galaxies and The Matrix Online (Monolith Productions, 2005) and the subsequent efforts of its players to restore their homeland via emulation projects such as ProjectSWG³ and MxoEmu⁴ are all clear examples that diasporas are characteristic features of the age of digital media, globalization and transnationalism.

Although this paper was conceived with the intention of paving the way towards the construction of a comprehensive framework for the study of diasporas, it is limited in terms of its empirical roots and methodological considerations. On one hand, The *Uru Diaspora* and *Target Guild D* case studies represent possible configurations of online diasporas in MMORPGs, but more research is needed in order to contrast whether other online diasporas follow (or even challenge) the structuralist approach contained herein. On the other hand, the model explained in this paper (as a theoretical construction), leaves open the discussion of how to methodologically approach the study of online

diasporas. For instance, Social Network Analysis (SNA) might prove to be useful for identifying the networked and emergent structure of diasporas on each of their poles of attraction, but the SNA method in itself carries a theoretical baggage that needs to be addressed and adapted to the particular realities of online diasporas as described in this article. Nonetheless, the analytical and descriptive power of the conceptual, structuralist and pragmatic elements articulated by the formulated model are, in essence, its major strength and contribution to the disciplinary debate of the diaspora phenomenon.

ENDNOTES

¹ Said research is bound by an agreement between the researcher and the studied groups that guarantees the anonymity of all sources of information. Therefore all player, guild and server names have been changed in order to preserve the identity of the respondents and their respective guilds.

² Herein the recognition of my subjectivity as a researcher of online diasporas. Ethnography is widely regarded as a subjective endeavor in the sense that, the researcher's subjectivity, provides the locative aspect of the study. Admittedly, I am irrevocably positioned as more than just a spectator of the Venezuelan diaspora: I am myself of Venezuelan nationality and I left my home country 10 years ago as a result of my discontent with the political ideology my country was being (and still is) governed with. For the study, I almost exclusively use the internet as a means for interacting with Venezuelan diasporas all over the world. In other words, I am part of the Venezuelan (online) diaspora.

³ <http://projectswg.com/>

⁴ <http://mxoemu.info/>

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