Bridging Worlds
Annotation

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Background

As a field, cultural anthropology has long struggled to understand its place among the social sciences. Anthropology relies primarily on qualitative data collected through observation, participation, and interviews. Other fields, like economics, sociology, or psychology focus more on quantitative data and statistics. Both of these methods provide valuable insights into human sociality, but qualitative methods are often overlooked because of the perceived inaccuracy of data collected in a subjective way. Much more than with quantitative data, qualitative data are subject to the interpretation of the person who collects it. As a result, anthropological studies aren’t as repeatable as those conducted in other social sciences. Anthropologists also tend not to propose testable hypotheses and design experiments to resolve them. They look for situations in which they might find an important perspective on general issues of interest, like group formation, rule making and breaking, kinship structures, conflict patterns, or gender roles. This holistic perspective puts anthropology in a position to contribute in ways that other disciplines can’t, and adds in significant ways to our understanding of social and cultural issues.

Historically, anthropologists were expected to travel to exotic locations to study these sorts of questions. They would live amongst these cultures for years, building rapport with the community and interviewing its members. Based on their experiences, they would gain a rich understanding for the culture in which they spent their time. The expectation was that through building an appreciation
for the huge variety of ways in which humans organize themselves, we would learn more about what it means to be human.

In the last twenty years, some anthropologists have shifted focus, considering phenomena that are much closer to home. For example, they have published articles about: the international culture of research scientists\(^1\), urban poverty\(^2\), and international humanitarian leaders\(^3\). Using methods, often described as “ethnographic”, similar to those used in the past to study more remote cultures, these anthropologists are taking a more introspective route, studying groups that are immersed in our western cultures. It is in this more recent tradition of anthropology that I decided to study synthetic worlds.

Anthropology is supported by a rich history of both practical writing about how to conduct ethnographic studies, as well as theoretical works based on past research. One of the most famous such works is Clifford Geertz’s 1973 collection of essays titled *Interpretation of Cultures*\(^4\). In what is perhaps one of the most quoted passages in anthropology, he describes his understanding of culture:

> The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental

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In this quote he lays out a fundamental understanding of anthropology – that it is an inherently interpretive science, and that its successful execution gives us meaning, not law. Later in the same essay, he explains more practically what this means. He uses the example of a wink; a simple physical gesture, but one whose meaning is wrapped up in, as Geertz describes it, a “web of significance.”

Consider, Geertz suggests,

...two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, “phenomenalistic” observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet this difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows.⁶

This transition from description of the action to the interpretation of its meaning is the object of an ethnography, and it was what I strove to do with this paper.

Though this paper is largely an ethnography, it is an ethnography of a particular kind of place – a synthetic world. Writing about these places, scholarly and otherwise, is as old as the worlds themselves. While it would be difficult to describe the study of synthetic worlds as a discipline, it is worth briefly discussing the history of synthetic worlds and some of the canonical knowledge about them.

As part of his recent book, game designer Richard Bartle identifies five “ages” of synthetic worlds, starting with his work with other undergraduates at the University of Essex in 1978. They were inspired by the text-based single-

⁵ Ibid, p 5.
player games like *ADVENT, HAINT*, and *DUNGEN*. In each of these games, the player was presented with a description of the “room” they were in with which they could interact – picking up objects, opening doors, etc.\(^7\) The starting room for *ADVENT* (known more verbosely as *Adventure*) looked like this:

You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building. Around you is a forest. A small stream flows out of the building and down a gulley.\(^8\)

A player could move around in this world, picking up items, combining them, ultimately using them to solve a puzzle. Bartle and his coworkers wanted to extend these worlds to contain more than just one person at a time. This brought a range of challenges, both technical and social.

As the number of synthetic worlds multiplied, Bartle recognized that they differ on two basic axes: how persistent are player interactions with the world and how many people can build new objects or functionality for the world? For the sake of simplicity, I will call these axes *persistence* and *building* respectively. These two axes define a space in which individual worlds can be placed. To further simplify this space, we will consider the two most populous quadrants – low persistence, low building and high persistence, high building.

Worlds in which there is low persistence and low building are essentially owned by the designers. Designers are the only people with the ability to make changes, and almost all interactions the players have with the world itself are temporary. For example, in this type of world, every time you kill a monster it will reappear minutes or hours later, and if you drop an item on the ground it

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\(^8\) Jerz, J.G. “Colossal Cave Adventure.” Available: http://jerz.setonhill.edu/if/canon/Adventure.htm
will disappear. In these worlds, all new content (places, items, animations, quests, etc.) come from the designers. This attitude is succinctly expressed by Verant’s (designers of Everquest, an excellent example of such a world) advertising slogan: “You’re in our world now.”

On the other hand, high persistence, high building worlds vest control of the world with the people who inhabit it. They can create new environments for other players and populate those environments with interactive objects of their own design. The experience of life and creation in such a world is vividly depicted in Julian Dibbell’s account of the time he spent in LambdaMOO, the canonical example of a world in this category. As Dibbell showed in his book, worlds in this space are, first and foremost, owned by the people who inhabit them.

When Bartle placed worlds into these categories, he found that low persistence, low building worlds were almost exclusively adventure-type games, like World of Warcraft, in which players had little control over the world. Among high persistence, high building worlds, there were only what Bartle called “socially oriented” worlds. This distinction between game worlds (low building, low persistence) and social worlds (high building, high persistence) is a common shorthand for describing general types of synthetic worlds.

If we look at current users of synthetic worlds, far more people use game worlds than social worlds. All of the synthetic worlds that have more than

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9 Bartle, p. 61
100,000 US users are game worlds. This is not due to a lack of compelling social worlds. *Second Life*, a game published by Linden Labs, has been very well reviewed and falls squarely in the high persistence, high building area of Bartle’s chart. Much of the early scholarship studied social worlds, but as game worlds have gained prominence, study has shifted to them as well.

Bartle’s has also written the seminal text on player motivations in synthetic worlds, loosely dividing players into four categories: killers, achievers, socializers, and explorers. Based on his experiences building and managing MUDs, he describes how these different player types interact with the world and why they enjoy spending time in the world. He also identifies the ways in which populations of different player types interact, for example he suggests that increasing the number of killer type players in a world will decrease the number of achiever type players, and the more explorers in a world, the more new explorer type players it will attract.

Another early work to argue that meaningful sociality was taking place in synthetic worlds was the 1991 paper by game designers Chip Morningstar and F. Randall Farmer. They focus on the meaning of the world to users, and the ways in which design decisions can have profound effects on sociality within the game. Habitat was of particular importance because it the first graphical synthetic world, and unlike most other synthetic worlds at the time, was a commercial venture in which users paid to spend time in the world. The authors

wrestle with questions of immersion, player governance, and death – issues that are still quite relevant in modern synthetic worlds.

More recently, sociology student Nick Yee has taken another look at Bartle’s player types, using survey and statistical methodologies.\(^{14}\) He developed a survey with statements like “I like to say funny things in group/guild chat.” Respondents to the survey were asked to rate how much they agreed with the statement. Yee was hoping to group these motivations into motivation categories which might map back to Bartle’s player types. Based on about 6700 responses, he identified five motivations: relationship, immersion, grief, achievement, and leadership. Players are characterized by a mix of these. They differ somewhat from Bartle’s findings, most notably that Yee did not find evidence of an explorer type motivation. Yee has also done quantitative (and some vaguely qualitative) work exploring a number of other issues in synthetic worlds. He has also worked with the Palo Alto Research Center on the PlayOn project, collecting data from World of Warcraft.

Markets inside synthetic worlds are also the source of significant scholarly interest. In 2001, Economist Edward Castronova published a paper on the economy of a then-popular synthetic world called Everquest.\(^{15}\) He estimated that Everquest’s GNP per capita was “somewhere between that of Russia and Bulgaria.” The paper has been quite influential, and is currently the third most downloaded article on the Social Science Research Network website on which it

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was published. More recently, Castronova wrote a book describing some of the findings from his earlier paper, as well as a broader discussion of synthetic worlds (a phrase he coins and defends in the book) and their relationship with the real world.\textsuperscript{16} He argues convincingly that the value of money and items in synthetic worlds is real in precisely the same way that money is meaningful outside of synthetic worlds. The heart of the book argues that the boundaries between synthetic worlds and the real world are best characterized as a “pourous membrane,” and describes how events in the real and synthetic worlds influence each other in terms of markets, politics, and law. While it has been a common understanding for some time that the boundaries between the synthetic and real worlds are not solid, Castronova’s book provides a broader view on the issue than has been previously articulated.

Other work has been done to study online communities more generally. Sociologist Barry Wellman has spent most of his career exploring community issues, and has published a wide range of papers about the role of online technology in society. In his 1997 paper titled “Net Surfers Don’t Ride Alone: Virtual Communities as Communities,” he explores online communities in the way that sociologists have typically studied offline communities, and demonstrates how online communities are different than offline communities, but that they are not \textit{a priori} a bad thing, that in fact there is significant evidence that they play a positive role for many people. His findings about online communities generally are relevant to synthetic world work because they help to provide the scholarly motivation to studying sociality online in the first place.

Justification

With this project, my primary goal was to bring an anthropological perspective to the study of synthetic worlds. A lot of the work exploring synthetic worlds came from academics in disciplines other than anthropology, typically economics, law, sociology, or communications. There were some older ethnographies of synthetic worlds, but I hadn’t seen much in the way of ethnography about modern game worlds. I imagined this might have something to do with game worlds being perceived as a less rich space to study because of their lack of persistence and building, and so it might be expected that they were not an interesting environment to study. I also suspected the issues that most interested early synthetic world researchers, like identity and gender, might not be as central to game worlds.

Yet, it seemed to me that synthetic worlds in general, and game worlds in particular, were in need of a new anthropological perspective. Synthetic worlds are a different culture hidden within our own culture. This has made them easy to dismiss, because they can be simply judged as fake copies of the real world, and the fantasies within them not as weighty as what happens outside of synthetic worlds. As a discipline, anthropology has a history of explaining cultures that might be considered exotic or strange to a wide audience. In the same way, it seems like ethnography could be used to analyze, explain, and legitimize the culture of game worlds. There are already a lot of wonderful personal narratives about game worlds, but few add the analysis of an

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anthropological perspective. I’m not sure I’ve added that myself, but it’s what I was shooting for.

**Connections to Other Work**

While my original goals were vague, and more interested in methods (ethnography) and subject (game worlds) than a specific hypothesis, through the process of doing the ethnography, I settled on one particular goal: to show the ways in which sociality in the synthetic world is bound to sociality in the real world.

This is a significant proposition to make. It is not the way sociality in early synthetic worlds operated. In *My Tiny Life*, Dibbell describes a community bound mostly by interactions that took place online. Though Dibbell’s over-arching story is one of how his real life and his life in *LambdaMOO* became entwined, that was for the most part a personal story, not one that had a persistent and everyday effect on life in the world. Though there were other notable exceptions (exu and her husband who both played *LambdaMOO*, but pursued different romantic interests within the game), by and large real world relationships stayed out of the synthetic world. Still, there were early signs that the real and virtual worlds were becoming less distinct. Dibbell quotes a prescient *LambdaMOO* cynic who believed that “the radically liminal nature of VR, its irresolvably ambiguous oscillation between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, is being flattened out and tidied up to make the virtual dimension safe for general consumption.”

\[18\] Dibbell p 324.
Though there are certainly some of the same ambiguities present in worlds like *World of Warcraft*, many of them have indeed been “tidied up” as predicted.

When Castronova placed the GNP per capita of *Everquest* “somewhere between that of Russia and Bulgaria”\(^\text{19}\), he put synthetic world economics on the real world map. In the last five years, popular media has begun to notice the phenomenon, publishing vaguely incredulous articles about people making real money in synthetic worlds.\(^\text{20}\) Still, some boundaries between the synthetic and real world still exist. Synthetic world crimes rarely have real world consequences. In two notable cases, players of *EVE Online* and *Everquest II* have described the details of their shady online dealings, which we might call racketeering\(^\text{21}\) and counterfeiting\(^\text{22}\). Though buying and selling virtual items is fairly common, it still seems foreign enough to be funny; the idea that real money is paid for objects that exist only in an alternate fantasy universe is not yet a familiar one.\(^\text{23}\) I expect that as these synthetic worlds become more common, offline lawmakers and law enforcement will pay an increasing amount of attention to the events inside online worlds.

Recognizing that the boundaries between synthetic worlds and offline interaction are porous – both in terms of money as well as socially – is not in and


\(^{22}\) [http://plaguelands.com/?page_id=172](http://plaguelands.com/?page_id=172)

of itself a new conclusion. What this paper adds to the discussion is a specific understanding of the processes through which players surround themselves by people whom they know outside of the game and how this affects the resolution of conflict within the game.

This compliments the recent findings by other researchers. In a paper titled “The Sopranos Meets EverQuest: Social Networking in Massively Multiplayer Online Games” 24, Jakobsson and Taylor discuss their experiences playing EverQuest II. They describe how a character’s offline relationships can confer power on that character, through the handing down of old items or through gifts of in-game money. They also found that players would call on powerful friends or family to provide aid if they were in need. I confirm their findings that offline relationships are of central importance in game worlds, and go into more depth about the role that guilds play, how social networks can combine to form guilds, and how those networks affect conflict resolution.

While this paper is most closely related to Jakobsson and Taylor’s work, it also connects to some other recent work. While the paper isn’t yet publicly available, the abstract of a paper by James Barry 25, titled “Gamers in Motion: A Study of Online Gamer ‘Guild’ Migration” suggests important parallels with the work presented in this paper. Barry found that guilds would make en-masse

migrations from one game world to another. My interviews did show some evidence of this occurring, particularly with Aaron. Though I found few cases of entire guilds migrating, some interviewees talked about friends from previous synthetic worlds, or recognize that characters had relationships in previous games that affected their current game. This supports Barry’s findings. My conclusions build on Barry’s findings to start to explain the affect the phenomenon he describes can have in the game world.

The conclusions of this paper concur with the conclusions of studies using quantitative methods. Nick Yee has conducted extensive surveys of players of a range of virtual game worlds. He has surveyed players about playing with people they know off line, as well as more specifically about how many play with romantic partners and family members. In these studies, Yee found that “about 80% of players are playing with someone they know in [real life] on a regular basis.” This percentage is quite striking, and supports my findings about the extent to which relationships formed outside the game are present within the game as well. I propose both the process that could result in the striking results Yee found, as well as discuss how this high percentage affects sociality within the game world.

Why Study World of Warcraft?

I decided to do my ethnography in World of Warcraft. It was a world with which I had some personal experience – around 100 hours in the game – which I hoped would enable me to better connect with interviewees. I felt that if I had a basic understanding of the world, it would save them from having to explain everything to me. I also expected that it would legitimize me in some sense. I would be able to say, “I take this seriously too, because I’ve played the game myself.” In retrospect, I don’t think this was as necessary as I imagined it would be. Most of the players I interviewed operated at a completely different level in the game, that my existing knowledge was only marginally useful. It was also something of a barrier, because I took too much about the experience of living in the world for granted, when an outsider might have been more inquisitive. There also wasn’t much skepticism on the part of my interviewees; I never felt like I had anything to prove to them in terms of gamer credentials.

While popularity alone isn’t a sufficient reason to study a particular world, it did suggest that World of Warcraft was worth understanding. World of Warcraft’s popularity will also play a role in guiding the development of future game worlds. The process of developing, marketing, and supporting games has become incredibly costly. As a result, game financers tend to be conservative, trying to fund games that don’t deviate far from known successful formulas. World of Warcraft’s incredible commercial success means that many of its approaches to, for instance, guilds, raids, and item distribution, will likely be inherited in some form by future games. As these game worlds become more
popular, it is particularly important that we understand their relationship to sociality more broadly.

Investigating sociality with ethnographic methods in a game world poses some challenges versus traditional offline ethnography or ethnography in a social world. First, there is the issue of levels. As characters gain experience (and their character gets numerically stronger), they move to different areas of the game world, are involved in different kinds of activities, and have different social structures. To gain access to these diverse experiences as a participant observer would mean investing a substantial amount of time in playing the game – it takes on average 480 hours of in-game time to reach level 60.\(^2^8\) Beyond that, it takes even more time to be strong enough and skilled enough to be accepted into the established guilds that go on raids. I had spent enough time in the game (on the order of 100 hours) before this project started to have a feel for the experience, but it would still require a substantial time investment to make it to level 60. While taking a character all the way to level 60 would no doubt be instructive (and fun), it would not be an efficient way to understand sociality and guilds in World of Warcraft.

Instead of online interviews, I focused on one-on-one offline interviews to collect information. This format avoided the significant pitfalls of online ethnography, like maintaining anonymity and the frustration of conducting interviews in a text-based chat environment. What was lost in taking the interviews out of context was gained in the richness of the interviews themselves. The interviews were semi-structured around a protocol I prepared

based on my research interests and limited experience playing the game. I took typed notes during the interview. In one phone interview, I recorded the interview and transcribed it later.

**Reflection**

In some ways, this project has come full circle. When I first started thinking about studying *World of Warcraft*, I was drawn to conflicts surrounding the distribution of items. Based on the time I had spent playing the game and my general knowledge about it, I imagined that this would be where the most contentious and significant conflicts would occur, which could be a great starting point for an ethnography of *World of Warcraft*. As I began to do more reading on the subject both of synthetic worlds in general and *World of Warcraft* in particular, I shifted away from this focus. It didn’t seem like there would be enough depth there for an entire paper, and I wasn’t confident that there were significant anthropological questions to answer about this process. I was afraid I would end up describing a sort of social algorithm for the distribution of items.

Instead, I decided to focus on guilds. This happened for two reasons. First, I had been doing a lot of reading about studies done on earlier synthetic worlds. I felt like a lot of complexities and interesting questions about those worlds had already been well approached, and I didn’t want to rehash old issues of identity and gender play, language and naming, real versus virtual, and so on. I also felt like these issues had been in some ways avoided in modern graphical game worlds, like *World of Warcraft*. I didn’t see *World of Warcraft* as the same kind of social playground that worlds like *LambdaMOO* had been, and I wanted to study
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a phenomenon that was unique to game worlds, and thus might be useful in understanding the worlds that were so hugely popular. I expected that studying guild sociality would help me describe how game worlds were different from social worlds, and still home to interesting social phenomena.

In the beginning, my plan was to do a series of interviews with Olin students, and then use my findings from those interviews to craft a more involved interview process with people outside Olin. This second phase would hopefully include in-game photo diaries, and more focused in-person interviews. Based on my first phase interviews, it seemed like conflict in and between guilds was a particularly fertile area of study, and so I crafted a new interview protocol to study those issues. Ultimately, I was only able to conduct one interview using the new protocol. This meant that my data about conflicts was not as rich as I was hoping it would be.

When I finally sat down to do analysis on the data I had collected, it became clear that I had come full circle. Guilds were only part of the story. What was most significant was the extent to which the so-called real worlds and synthetic worlds were entwined, and the point at which this was most notable was in the resolution of disputes about items. Though this finding brought me back to my original idea, I had come at it from another direction – offline relationships. Had I simply tried to study etiquette and norms about item distribution, I may not have found the evidence about offline relationships.

What I Would Do Differently

Looking back, there are a number of ways in which I would approach the project differently. Most importantly, I should have started doing analysis
earlier. While the thesis I ended up with and the stories I told are good, I could have told a much more compelling story if I had known exactly what story I was trying to tell before I sat down to write the paper. If I had done more analysis of my first phase interviews, I could have discovered this thread and done more interviews focusing closely on the role of offline relationships in *World of Warcraft*. Given how frequently these relationships came up in interviews that were ostensibly about guilds and conflict, I imagine that asking specifically about how offline relationships affected online sociality would have uncovered many more stories.

I also should have relied less on anonymous recruitment to find people to interview in the second phase. I maintained postings on craigslist in both Boston and Providence for weeks, and posted to some of the major *World of Warcraft* message boards trying to attract people to talk to. Through all of these methods I received only one email response over the span of four weeks. While I really wanted to get away from just interviewing Olin students, I should have done more interviews at Olin and with people who had friends who played whom they could connect me with. Without substantial incentives, recruiting people off the Internet in a short time frame is just not feasible.

I also struggled a lot with the tone and balance of the final deliverable. The paper was supposed to be situated in the discipline of anthropology, so I needed to motivate the work in terms anthropologists would be interested in. Unfortunately, I didn’t have a lot of role models here. A lot of the materials I read about synthetic worlds were casual commentary, like the blog *Terra Nova*[^29], in

[^29]: http://terranova.blogs.com
which leading synthetic world academics discuss synthetic world issues. In that sort of context, it’s taken for granted that synthetic worlds are worth studying, and it was rare to find the kind of scholarly justification I felt like I needed. I also felt sort of overwhelmed by how much had already been done in this field. I wanted to produce something that was both new and interesting to researchers in the field, but didn’t know how to write both for current researchers and for an anthropologist interested in synthetic worlds.

I would have been helped with this had I spent more time reading major anthropological works about the themes I was writing about. In retrospect, it strikes me that this sort of recursive world within a world is not a phenomenon unique to synthetic worlds. There might be similar phenomena observed among amateur sports teams, or other games. Also, having more background in anthropological literature would probably have helped me feel more comfortable with the ways in which anthropologists justify research in this area.