SHAIFALI GAUTAM

SEARCHING FOR VIRTUAL VENUS IN LIFE SIMULATION GAMES

ABSTRACT

This article stipulates on the successfully generated social aspects of fictional virtual simulation games bound in time and space such as Sims and Farmville. These simulated virtual gaming worlds are an extension of our reality where we recognise motivation and self-fulfilment and approve of it as a successful, thriving and engaging society. A society that emerges and overlaps with the real world of the players, their families, friends and workplace; based on Anselm Strauss's concept[1] of overlapping social worlds (Lehdonvirta, 2010). Further, in time our actions and patterns of behaviour that prevail in the form of our 'Avatar' are being stored within these virtual gaming worlds thereby blurring the boundaries between virtual and real. Therefore, as an analogy, by examining the existing paradigms (mental and emotional frameworks) within these virtual gaming worlds and drawing on conclusions as to what makes virtual gaming worlds successful and thriving, I seek to propose if it would be possible to harness the 'Virtual Venus', a concept where paradigms of Utopia that may abide in virtual gaming world could be transferred into real social worlds to promote harmony. Therefore, the 'Virtual Venus' model would be a research tool in understanding the implications of combining the virtual with the real and observing mankind's behaviour through the act of play. 'Virtual Venus' would then act as interactive, immersive virtual-real world that can overcome these limitations and foster a better understanding of communities or cultures.

INTRODUCTION

As noted at the UNRISD conference on Rethinking Social Development, held in conjunction with the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen on 11-12 March 1995, mankind today resides in societies with ever emerging man-made themes of crisis and disorientation as a result of an accelerated globalisation process. There is a need for conscious reflection at manufactured risks generated by personal relations that do not conform to earlier patterns (Giddens, 1995). Therefore the need to examine alternate social and economic paradigms (mental and emotional frameworks – Allport, 2012) is generated. Potentially one such paradigm may exist in the virtual gaming worlds. As part of globalisation, cyberspace has become the 'new home for mind' (Barlow, 1996) where individuals or groups can simulate aspects of self in a fantasy reality. Attributed by Gibson in 1982 and defined by J.P. Barlow in 1996, Cyberspace is an alternative realm where the user is immersed in transactions, relationships and thought itself. It can be argued that children of today are already natives to this new global social realm.

In contrast, while cyberspace could be described as 'the virtual world', Paasonen (2005: 5) suggests that it is not situated elsewhere in the Virtual

Venus Universe, but a phenomenon derivative of sets of practices and narratives that have effects in this world for there is no other world to inhabit. Further, Paasonen (2005: 5) asserts that the appeal of cyberspace as parallel reality owes a great deal to 'the power and attraction of fiction'. Hence, presuming digital technology as an extension of self and virtual environments as a living reality of that extended self, it could be deduced that our thoughts, experiences and feelings are real even if we experience them in virtual world.

Central to this paper is a research question that could establish super simulation games as an integral part of virtual worlds that allow us to create our representation and then interact with other individuals' representations, landscapes and social structures. Fascinatingly, both could endogenously produce economies and social orders that are emerging in these virtual worlds. Evidently, political candidates are campaigning in virtual worlds, while some sales of virtual assets are producing demand (paid for virtually e.g. Pay Pal) in the real world for equivalent items blurring the boundaries of the real versus the virtual. These arguments formed a key discussion in the Virtual Worlds and New Realities in Commerce, Politics, and Society Conference announcement, December 2007 (Lehdonvirta, 2010).

VIRTUAL VENUS MODEL

It could be argued that virtual gaming worlds do not fall within the proximity of modern visionary Jacques Fresco's Utopia. However, in a subtle manner they reflect 'post-scarcity', a trend coined by Giddens (1995) that simply means a hypothetical form of economy or society in which goods, services and information are free, or practically free. Conversely, Bentham (2013) argues that 'post-scarcity' might become essential for our transition towards a new kind of civilisation within the virtual gaming world. Consequently Wallerstien, (2005) utilized theories of sociology, focusing mainly on the 'World System' a 'capitalist world-economy' where dominant countries profit due to free movement of people and resources. Wallerstien does not believe that there is a third world. Similarly, this paper can argue that virtual gaming worlds are a one world system where resources and virtual economy is thriving, as there is free movement of people, goods and services. Therefore, Cyberspace itself 'is a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force or station of birth' (The Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace promulgated in Davos, Switzerland on February 8 1996). According to Barlow (1996) anyone anywhere would be able to express his or her beliefs (no matter how singular) without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.

At the same time, one could examine the complex relationship between subjectivity, desire and virtual gaming world. In the same approach, Mathews (2011) draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis[2] to explore the ways in which a subject immerses in a virtual game and in return, the analysis of virtual game sheds light on the way a subject relates socially in a society. Contrasting with that of Castronova, that Virtual worlds satisfy our need to play in a safe way[3] (Huizinga 1971; Castronova, 2004). Therefore considering the important

concept of 'theory of mind'[4], awareness that one's thoughts may differ from those of other persons and that there are a variety of perspectives each of us is capable of, is closely related to 'imaginative play' (Jenkins & Astington, 2000; Leslie, 1987; Singer & Singer, 2005). This could mean trade-offs might be established between different simulation games that are about playing and creating a virtual structure of desires in conjunction with solutions for keeping them secure and expand further. Through performing in the virtual game your extended self evolves and demonstrates your own aspirations such as an ambition to lead. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) highlighted how the boundaries between real and virtual world blend and become blurred. In the scholarly world it is referred to as the 'magic circle'. In this case, the 'Virtual Venus' model would be a research tool in understanding the implications of combining the virtual with real and observing mankind's behaviour through the act of play.

RE (CREATION)

Virtual environments provide the leisure to endlessly design and customise appearance thus providing escapism for individuals and serving a therapeutic purpose. However such an advantage does not exist in the real world, so a hybrid society of virtual and real could inflict negative consequences. Proteus Effect[7] (Yee, 2007) has shown that users conform to stereotypes based on their avatar's appearance. Issues of self-esteem and desire thus remain similar in the virtual gaming world as an extension of self.

Encouragingly, more research on Transformed Social Interaction (TSI)[5] that purposefully breaks and alters the rules of social interaction in order to gain insight into communication and interaction processes, is proposed here. Predominantly, in the physical world, it could be argued that two people interacting in the same space share the same reality in a face-to-face interaction.

However, virtual gaming worlds permit computer-mediated communication that could easily be integrated with collaborative virtual environments (CVEs), allowing geographically separated players to interact verbally and nonverbally in a shared virtual space in real time. This can be utilised extensively in any environment, including virtual and other realms where differences in behaviour or attitudes are believed to be explained by underlying values, a worldview, or a paradigm. It is further suggested that this new hypothesis takes into account collaborative virtual environments based on research paradigms that transform (i.e. filters and modifies) nonverbal behaviours during social interaction as prescribed by Bailenson & et al. (2004).

This proposition revolves around my Ph.D. research, which proposes that in a virtual environment where users view the shared environment from their own computer terminals, their realities need not be congruent. Since the technology underlying CVEs allows a strategic decoupling[6] of rendered behaviour from the actual behaviour of the players, conceptual and perceptual constraints inherent in face-to-face interaction need not apply (Bailenson & et al., 2004). Thus, as an analogy, the 'Virtual Venus' model could provide real

scenarios of decoupling and rendering behaviour in the real world to open up a range of studies in stereotype threat, behavioural confirmation[8], and self-perception theory[9] among other psychological theories.

In theory, with 'Virtual Venus', the context of application could be similar to uses of 'Virtual Reality (VR) Exposure' therapy in medicine aimed at providing relief from post-traumatic stress at the University of Southern California Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT, 2013). ICT researchers have added Virtual Gaming World by leveraging virtual art assets of the X Box game 'Full Spectrum Warrior' in conjunction with cognitive behaviour therapy. The current applications consist of a series of virtual scenarios specifically designed to represent relevant contexts in addition to the visual stimuli presented in the VR head mounted display, directional 3D audio, vibrations and smells that can be delivered into the simulation. Rather than relying exclusively on imagining a particular scenario, a patient can experience it again in a virtual world under very safe and controlled conditions. This is an 'evidence-based' treatment for patients of PTS (Post Trauma Stress) to confront their trauma memories in a controlled environment (ICT, 2013).

This paper therefore suggests that distinctions between the real and the virtual become difficult to establish (Castronova, 2006). Virtual worlds are manifested and influenced by various subjectivities that inhabit the real world and replicate the structure of mankind's desires, which guide everyday experiences. The act of play in these virtual worlds is correlated to mankind's involvement with reality. Therefore an understanding of the social and economic paradigms abiding in virtual gaming worlds and their transition into reality could provide a successive 'Virtual Venus' model driven by motivation and self-fulfilment. Furthermore, such paradigms based on virtual to real transitions could provide the necessary balance required to sustain the natural (real) world by understanding behaviours and social patterns that prevail in virtual gaming worlds and their relation to social theories that may guide mankind to Utopia. Virtual world or Cyberspace has been a discussion of negative connotations for a while. However, as suggested by Giddens (1995), reformation should be through 'the active mobilization of life decisions rather than the passive calculations of risk' (6).

Notes

1. Anselm Strauss created the concept of social worlds to describe communities with reference to their internal form of communication: social worlds may overlap and intersect.

2. Lacanian psychoanalysis enables the formulation of a model of institutional behaviour that goes beyond more mainstream approaches by focusing on behaviour at the unconscious level. Meaning is created as a part of the signifying chain of language due to the impact of the other on the self, rather than being signified by the self. Lacan says that the unconscious is inserted into the symbolic order from the 'outside' and is 'structured like a language', operating according to differential relationships in language. It thus does not 'belong' to the individual and is an effect of signification on the subject.

3. According to Castronova, all humans have a fundamental need to play. To define what qualifies as play, he refers to Huizinga, who states that ‘nothing can be a game if it involves moral consequence, if a consequence matters in the end, the game is over’. Castronova concludes that impermeability of the 'magic circle' should be protected such that the real world does not seep into the virtual or vice versa (Castronova, 2004: 188-189).

4. A 'Theory of Mind' is a specific cognitive ability to understand others as intentional agents, that is, to interpret their minds in terms of theoretical concepts of intentional states such as beliefs and desires. It has been commonplace in philosophy (see Davidson 1984; Dennett 1987) to see this ability as intrinsically dependent upon our linguistic abilities.

5. Transformed social interactions (TSI) in the virtual gaming world is a research paradigm and theoretical framework related to social interaction in virtual environments. It is a CVE-based research paradigm that transforms (i.e. filters and modifies) nonverbal behaviours during social interaction. Because the technology underlying CVEs allows a strategic decoupling of rendered behaviour from the actual behaviour of the interactants, conceptual and perceptual constraints inherent in face-to-face interaction need not apply.

6. Decoupling: separating the representation from behaviour and form in collaborative virtual environments.

7. Proteus Effect: Studies show that our virtual bodies can change how we interact with others in actual avatar-based online communities as well as in subsequent face-to-face interactions.

8. Behavioral Confirmation: Behavioral Confirmation is a process in which people learn to behave in ways that get a consistent and expected reaction, and then use those reactions to confirm their beliefs.

9. Self-perception theory, suggests that all individuals analyze their own behaviour much as an outside observer might and, as a result of these observations, make judgments about why they are motivated to do what they do.

References

Allport Glen.D. (2006). The Paradise Paradigm. Murphy, NC: E. Dianne Publishing.

Bailenson J.N., Beall A.C., Loomis J., Blascovich J. & Truk M. (2004). ‘Transformed Social Interaction: Decoupling Representation from Behaviour and Form in Collaborative Virtual Environments’. In: Presence 13/4: 428-441.

Barton Richard. F. (1970). *A Primer on Simulation and Gaming*. New jersey: Prentice Hall Inc.

Barlow John. P. (1996). 'Declaring Independence'. In: Wired 4.06: 121-122.

Bentham Harry. J. (2013). 'A world awaiting on Post-Scarcity'. In: H+ Magazine. [online] available at : < http://hplusmagazine.com/2013/03/20/a-world-waiting-on-post-scarcity/> Accessed on 24 June 2013.

Castronova, Edward. (2006). *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Davidson, Donald. (1984). *Essays on Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dennett, Daniel. C. (1978). *Brainstorms. Philosophical Essays on Mind and Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dennett, D. C. (1987). *The Intentional Stance*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. & Guattari, Felix. (2009). *Anti-Oedipus*. New York: Penguin Books

Giddens Anthony. (1995). *Affluence, Poverty and the Idea of a Post-Scarcity Society.* United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

Huizinga, Johan. (1971). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

ICT Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy (2013) University of South California, Institute of Creative Technologies. Project leader Albert 'Skip' Rizzo [online] available at < http://ict.usc.edu/prototypes/pts/ > Accessed 27 October 2013.

Jenkins, Jeniffer.M., & Astington, Janet.W. (2000). 'Theory of mind and social behaviour: Casual models tested in a longitudinal study'. In: Merrill-Palmer Quarterly 46: 203-220.

Kruse, Martin. (2010). fo012010 The Utopia Issue [online] available at: < http://www.cifs.dk/doc/fremtidsorientering/fo-2010-01-en.pdf > Accessed 3 June 2013.

Leslie, Alan.M. (1987). 'Pretense and representation: The origins of 'theory of mind'. In: Psychological Review 94: 412-426.

Lehdonvirta Vili. (2010). 'Virtual Worlds Don't Exist: Questioning the Dichotomous Approach in MMO Studies'. In: The international Journal or Computer Game Research 10/1 [online] available at: < http://gamestudies.org/1001/articles/lehdonvirta > Accessed 26 June 2013.

Maines David. R. & Strauss Anslem. (1991). *Social Organization and Social Process: Essays in Honour of Anselm Strauss*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, Inc.

Mathews G. (2011) Philosophy of Computer Games Conference in Athens, on April 6th-9th 2011.

Paasonen Susan. (2005). *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women, and Cyber discourse*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Salen Katie & Zimmerman, Eric. (2006). 'The Game Design Reader – A Rules of Play Anthology'. In: Johan Huizinga *Nature and Significance of Play as Cultural Phenomenon.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Salen, Katie, & Zimmerman, Eric. (2004). *The Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Singer, Dorthy G. & Singer, Jerome L. (2005). *Imagination and play in the electronic age.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Turkle, Sherry. (1997). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster

Wallerstien Immanuel. M. (2005). *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. USA: Duke University Press.

Yee, Nick & Bailenson, Jeremy N. (2007). The Proteus Effect: Self Transformations in Virtual Reality. Human Communication Research. [Online] available at < http://www.stanford.edu/~bailenso/papers/proteus%20effect.pdf> Accessed 7 June 2013.

Biography

Shaifali Gautam is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. Since completing her MA in Graphic Design and Advertising, Shaifali has worked as a professional in the Film and Media industry. Her area of proposed research examines the Contemporary Tableau Photography under the current debate of anxiety and dreads that permeates our culture, which discusses how dimensions of uncanny-ness are present and contribute to the aesthetic ambivalence of such photographs. Shaifali's research interests include the relationship between media and cultural history; digital arts; virtual worlds, virtual robots and the gaming industry; digital mapping of new theories and territories; and using digital technology in collaborative creative work.