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Synthetic Worlds, The Business and Culture of Online Games

Posted on March 1, 2006 by Editor

Review by IProfess, Elvin Druid of Zulijin, Azeroth
All communications care of barlowj@pacificu.edu (Please place “For Iprofess” in subject line)

Castronova, Edward. Synthetic Worlds, The Business and Culture of Online Games. The University of Chicago Press, 2005,

Introduction by the Editor: Once again we publish an anonymous contribution purporting to be written by “Iprofess,” who presents himself as a cartoon character living in the cybernetic confines of an online game, The World of Warcraft. [1] Mr. IProfess’ first contribution “The Tales of Azeroth,” can be found at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2005/03/iprofess.php. Because his initial piece was well received, and because his belief system is so consistent, we have agreed to publish this review essay of what IProfess believes to be an important recent book in the field of Online Gaming and culture. For additional concerns relative to this author, please see note below. [2]

Here is his review.

Gentle Readers of The Real World (TRW): Please pardon my absence from these pages. I have been exceedingly busy in Azeroth, rising ceaselessly in rank, to the point where I am now within several months of reaching the current apogee, level sixty. I have much wider experience with the World of Warcraft and some sharper insights into the interactions between our world and yours.

I also believe that since I last wrote in these page, TRW as you like to think of it, is getting so extremely weird that some of my more disturbed Undead acquaintances in Azeroth are well-adjusted by comparison. One of these changes seems to me to be a heightened apprehension, or better, misapprehension, as to the nature of my worlds and their relationship to the so-called Real World.
In some cases the ignorant and dishonest thrash about for some explanation for the relentless degradation of their society beyond the obvious ones of greed, corruption, and a general continual unwillingness to postpone gratification in favor of gobbling up all possible resources, natural, human, and spiritual. In this frenzy critics strike out at the splinter of video gaming and gamers, ignoring the television beam in their eyes, and a political system which may as well be listed on E-bay, so close is the relationship between wealth and power.

However, there is now available a serious, even scholarly work which can do much to clarify the relationship between the real world and the many so-called virtual worlds. The work, *Synthetic Worlds*, is by Edward Castronova. Mr. Castronova so sympathetically but competently explains and analyzes the world of online gaming that I suspect that he, like myself, actually lives in a game—in his case, “Everquest” which was earlier mentioned in these pages. I believe that he occasionally crosses over into TRW in an attempt to enlighten readers such as you.

The author addresses, indirectly, the critical question that must be examined in trying to understand the interactions between our two worlds. Simply put, it is this: “What, after all, is *real*?” While Professor Castronova (his guise in TRW is as an Associate Professor of Communications at Indiana University) somewhat hedges his analysis, continually choosing to speak as a learned economist, he does much to break down the artificial barrier between game worlds and TRW.

Naturally, economics is the area where Castronova speaks with most authority. His analysis of economic behavior in TRW and in game worlds is fascinating. He tells us that game world markets behave much like real-world markets and, in fact, many academics are now illuminating economic behavior in the real world by studying “virtual” markets. His analysis of the economic context of accumulating virtual items should be read by any game player. You will be dragged through the usual dismal economic analysis, but you will emerge with a better understanding of what it means to spend hours and hours searching for that equipment upgrade, and will make more rational decisions as you do so.

One of his more interesting concepts, building on earlier research, is to view “synthetic worlds” (ugly term!) as “a locus of migration.” His point, with which I am in full agreement, is that increasing numbers of people from TRW are choosing to live increasingly larger portions of their lives in online games because they find those carefully selected and constructed lives more meaningful and more satisfactory than their shadow lives in TRW. In our worlds you are who you appear to be, though that may be an identity, even a gender, quite different than the one which nature so capriciously assigned you. And our worlds most often enforce a generally cooperative and social existence, unlike the dreadfully competitive and increasingly lose-lose calculus of TRW.

Each part of this work has particular value to those in TRW who may not yet have a subscription to an online game or are so unfortunate as to be barred by economic or mental limitations from experiencing them directly. For example, Part I, “The Synthetic World, a Virtual Tour, “ should be read by anyone wondering why so many humans are entering these worlds.
And I must tell you, such entrants are everywhere. Recently, for example, I was shopping at my local “Safeway”—a supermarket in which player-to-player violence is strictly forbidden, as the name implies. I was shopping for some Koldorei Spider Kabobs, (love the +strength buff it provides) but could not find them. I mentioned this to the checkout person, a wonderfully piratical eye-patched young man who revealed that, in fact, he was a level 60 Paladin himself! He did not need the Koldorei Kabobs he said, because of his superior self-healing spells, and so had not ordered any. But when I explained my own more complex nutritional needs, he agreed to do so.

I had also come in to replenish my supply of Moonberry Juice (+1992 mana!), but I again came up dry. Fortuitously, I picked up some Momokawa Saké, a variety called “Moonstone Asian Pear,” a name so wonderfully delicious that I presumed it to have been inspired by Azerothian draughts themselves! I contacted the firm via their webpage [7] and discovered a virtual nest of game players, including additional level 60 characters at the highest ranks of this very successful international corporation.

None of these highly productive, intelligent and amusing members of TRW can be said to be anything other than “normal”—especially when compared to politicians or academics— but I can tell you that to create a level 60 player implies thousands of hours passed in Azeroth.

But Dr. Castronova tells us that so many humans withdrawing for such extended periods from TRW to enter Artificial Worlds is going to present many challenges. An important question, of course, is whether or not the violence in artificial worlds influences behavior in TRW. Or is it the other way around? Why, in some games, when PVP, (player versus player violence) was permitted if not encouraged, did these worlds quickly become marked by endless rounds of massacres and homicides? [8] What should personal security be like for players? Should anonymity be permitted? Should one’s reputation be portable from world to world, game to game? Do digital objects have value in TRW? The answer to this one, a Chinese court recently decided, is “yes”, and the author demonstrates why this is true.

The intersection between our two worlds is like any frontier, a possible source of conflict. I fear that if some of your human parents knew how their children behaved in Azeroth, there could well be a typical human outcry, with hearings angrily dominated by your bewigged corporate lackeys—Congressmen—or self-aggrandizing “experts” who will say anything for a few seconds of display on your pitifully inadequate top-down one-way communications channel, television. (And I should warn you, some of these Congressmen, and many of their experts, are, in fact, ‘toons who have been cast out of Azeroth and other game worlds because they could not conform to a few simple rules intended to enforce civility and to restrict greed.)

However, neither is life all Moonberry Juice and Spider Kabobs in the virtual worlds. Acts in the game worlds have real life consequences; when on-line relationships seem more exciting and intimate than those in TRW, relationships here suffer, even collapse. Some will be so engaged in a world designed most often for profit, that the experience may constitute what the author
provocatively calls “toxic immersion.” And in the author’s opinion the question of game addiction is well worth considering. [9]

Castronova also covers politics and security, throughout affirming the degree to which behavior in TRW in fact mimics behavior in the world of online gaming. And of, course, he goes on to discuss appropriate public policy—he should be careful or he will find himself speaking before exiled ‘toons at a congressional hearing! Some of his policy considerations are mind-boggling. Imagine, as he does, for example, a closed server environment which cannot be legally breached by government at any level. In this environment, some players are being harmed, and have surrendered all of their rights by agreeing to the conditions that gave them access originally. They are so immersed or addicted that they no longer recognize the harm being done them. Should “agents” from TRW be sent in to foment rebellion or revolution in the game environments? [10]

The scale of the author’s imagination, as he extrapolates from current realities to those which will result as new levels of technology enable ever more immersive environments, is staggering. Great wealth is being built in game worlds (the value of virtual items being auctioned in E-Bay alone was well beyond 30 million dollars well before this book was published). Where wealth goes, struggles for wealth follow. Might we imagine wars waged by the state-controlled avatars of warring powers fought entirely in game worlds? [11]

Can we imagine terrorists training in carefully designed virtual environments to take over nuclear facilities in TRW? The author can and does. And why not? The U. S. army has long utilized games both as recruiting and training devices.

This work is a wonderful introduction to these worlds and to those challenges. If you have wondered what exactly is going on online, or if your loved ones are wondering why you are continuously migrating across the cyber frontier, buy them this book!

I must warn all readers, however, that this is a very serious, even academic book, with more than a few charts and graphs and even formulas. It is probably the first book that one should read, however, if interested in the question of the social and cultural impacts of online gaming. And the author strikes a wonderful balance between his real-world persona as a practitioner of the dismal science, and his chosen identity as a ‘toon. And to him we say, “Woot, Sabert, you have fulfilled your initial promise!”

**IProfess**
Elven Druid
Zuljin, Azeroth


[2] Note from the editor: Because we are uncomfortable with publishing an anonymous mss, we
now require that any responses resulting directly from the publication of this review be sent to Mr. IProfess via our own office. Mr. IProfess, for his part, has agreed that not only any responses from readers, but also his responses to readers will go through our office. In addition, Mr. IProfess has applied to become an editor for Interface. We are debating this request. We admit to being somewhat chary of being the first online journal to be edited in part by a ‘toon, no matter how literate he or she appears to be. We are so far agreed that if we consent, he or she will have to reveal a verifiable real world identity our editor.

[3] See Jeffrey Barlow, “Upon the Importance (and Dangers) of Playing Video Games” at http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/07/edit.php It was my reading of this rather sympathetic if overly-alarmist piece by Dr. Barlow that emboldened me to send my first submission to Interface.


[8] See Chapter 9, “Governance”.


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ONE THOUGHT ON “SYNTHETIC WORLDS, THE BUSINESS AND CULTURE OF ONLINE GAMES”

Nicky Mccoard

on January 30, 2014 at 6:15 PM said:

Thank you for the good writeup. It actually used to be a enjoyment account it. Look complicated to far added agreeable from you! However, how can we keep in touch?