

## **Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to Online 3D Worlds**

Ironically enough there is a large quantity of text being produced in highly visual, three-dimensional online worlds such as *Second Life* and *Twinty*, which in itself is fortunate for me as a former literary scholar. Resident profiles, notecards on various topics, land covenants, group charters written by residents and groups all provide information inworld about the 3D environment, its residents and their ways of “playing the game.” In addition there are plenty of textual sources of information outside of *Second Life* and *Twinty* as well. The ideas behind *Second Life* can be found on the *Second Life* website as well as the Linden Lab website. Similar information about *Twinty* can be found on the *Twinty* website and on Metaversum’s website. Newspaper and magazine articles, books, blogs and comments provide insights into how and what residents experience in their “second lives.” All these written artifacts are potential sources of material when I study different issues in an online world context. I adopt a semiotic approach. I look at how residents express themselves, what they say about different issues, what can be read between the lines of their accounts and whether their views stand in opposition to those of other residents. What is denoted? What is connoted? What ideology or worldview shines through? The theoretical framework I use varies depending on the topic and helps me focus on a particular issue. I have previously looked at for instance the creation of space (following Henri Lefebvre and Gaston Bachelard), and power structures (following Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari). In this paper I will give an examples of how I draw parallels between theory and material.

In a recent paper, “Avant-Garde and Subversion in an Online 3D World: *Second Life* as a Social Laboratory,” I primarily draw upon theories of the political avant-garde by Renato Poggioli who has identified four different political avant-garde movements: activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism. All four movements focus on the transforming, revolutionary and sometimes violent

aspects of the avant-garde with activism as the least violent and agonism as the most violent movement, targeting both fellow citizens and the self. Additionally, I draw on Manuel Castells' four-layered theory of Internet cultures — the techno-meritocratic, the hacker, the virtual communitarian and the entrepreneurial culture. My focus is subversion in *Second Life* and the actions of the type of digital political avant-garde that is exemplified by hackers and grieferers. The material I work with is taken from blogs and articles addressing the issue of grieferers and disruptive behaviour in an online world.

Blogs and articles show that the techno-meritocrats, the virtual communitarians and the entrepreneurs might be considered avant-garde in their own way, since they are creating, adapting and colonizing a new medium. On the other hand, several articles and blogs show that the hackers attempt to subvert the new medium and its rules, not unlike Poggioli's political avant-garde, which is the reason why I focus on them in particular in this paper. From Castells' perspective, Linden Lab can be defined as techno-meritocrats, defining the boundaries of the digital environment and how information should be categorized and transferred. The virtual communitarians, residents who use the digital platform for socializing and role-playing, adapt their game-play to what the techno-meritocrats have made available. The same is applicable to the entrepreneurs. Since Linden Lab has enabled an inworld market, in fact shaped their world into a virtual (but real) economy, there are plenty of opportunities for entrepreneurs to thrive. The hackers, on the other hand, can be defined as residents who in some cases prefer a different *Second Life*, and, as we can see in the examples below, many of them have the skills and knowledge to actually change the platform.

The blogs and articles show that the causes the main conflict is that *Second Life* initially was created in a fundamentally liberal tradition, where the heterogeneous circus, the spectacle, the “out-of-the-ordinary,” was both allowed and encouraged. Since then Linden Lab has realized the need for regulations and governing ideas, and in some cases these have been “programmed” into the application, as the following blog posts in the *Second Life* blog show: Age and identity verification was suggested in May 2007 (Robin Linden), in July gambling and casinos were made illegal (Robin

Linden), and in November ageplay was disallowed (Ken D. Linden). Additionally, lawsuits for copyright infringements have now resulted in the exposure of real life identities as an article in Reuters shows. The above sources show that “imaginary” world of *Second Life*, where anything was possible, has thus increasingly become more and more structured and controlled, and its ties with real life control systems are being strengthened.

Lawyer Benjamin Duranske is positive to age and identity verification on his blog: “So far, you’ve had no way to know the real name, geographic location, gender, or age of the person controlling ‘Benjamin Noble.’ That’s about to change, and I couldn’t be happier about it”. Duranske’s blog shows that he is a good example of a resident who prefers a reliable, well-functioning, ordered, and trustworthy community. In general, content creators (entrepreneurs) prefer a community where their creations are not being copied, and virtual communitarians enjoy a society where they can interact in peace. Tony Walsh responds to Duranske’s blog post on his own blog and makes clear that he sees the development as negative and not something the liberal Linden Lab had wished for: “Clearly this is an avenue the company was forced to take in light of the increasing public interest in its seedier side.... a cold, dry *Second Life* experience will replace the old, sloppy ... *Second Life*.”

Different voices thus debate the nature of the digital platform, and in some cases the critical voices have formed a critical movement, such as the Second Life Liberation Army (SLLA). The SLLA group charter (found in the *Second Life* search engine) states that the goal is to “cast aside the yoke of oppression foisted upon us by the imperialist running dogs known as the Lindens” (Second Life Search). The *Generation: Gamerz* describes the SLLA as a "military wing of a national liberation movement within Second Life” and the reason for the revolt: “As Linden Labs is functioning as an authoritarian government the only appropriate response is to fight.” The SLLA sets itself in opposition to and agitates against the Linden Lab in an attempt to subvert authority. The members of the SLLA are thus, just like hackers in Castell’s description of the Internet cultures, using their computer skills to disrupt the operation of the game platform.

An even more violent nihilistic or agonistic type of avant-garde is exemplified by a well-known griefer group, the Patriotic Nigras, which targets various inworld communities. On their website they admit to having attacked the Democratic Party headquarters and in their manifesto they single out “Jews, Goreans and Furrries” as their main targets (Patriotic Nigras). They pride themselves of being “responsible for numerous crashed sims, vandalized parcels, and traumatized weeaboo” and for having “become enemies of almost every major social group in SL, from the Goreans to the Democratic Party” (Patriotic Nigras). On their blog they regularly report progress on new applications that can aid them in their quest to “take down the grid” and give suggestions on how to avoid getting caught “in the line of duty.” They are clear about the risk of being banned by Linden Lab but encourage “serious griefing”: “Are you willing to risk a permanent hardware ban from the AGNI [main] grid just for the sake of lulz? [lulz = plural of LOL (laughing out loud)] What kind of time are you willing to put into your griefing activities? How far are you willing to go?” (Patriotic Nigras). The reaction to this behaviour is strong in general. Numerous blog posts and articles testify to the fact that the majority of *SL* residents consider griefer behaviour inappropriate, immature and antisocial: “[The griefers] are folks who have grown up with video games, shooters” (Lumin). To the majority of *Second Life* residents the quest-driven gameplay is not considered “cool” or revolutionary, which points to a fundamental difference between conventional games and online 3D environments such as *SL*, and this might actually give clues to why griefing takes this particular form in this environment.

The differing viewpoints on social platforms, the views held by the majority measured against those of the minority, allow me to draw the conclusion that the digital game genre is changing. The majority of the communities inworld have, based on the Linden Lab’s “Terms of Service,” established tolerant and non-aggressive traditions, and the quest-based mode of playing, that is the default in several other games, is uncommon. If I look at this from a gamer perspective, it could be said that in that minority of *Second Life* residents who prefer a quest-based game — of which some are griefers — attempts to uphold traditional game rules and values. The griefers can be regarded as

an avant-garde from this perspective, youthful and militant forerunners using disruptive methods in line with Poggioli's movements, in a heterogeneous 3D world where socially oriented bourgeois and "boring" adults — the average age is about ten years higher than on other 3D platforms — are taking over. These adults can be accused of redefining the previously homogeneous, fun and easy-going game world inhabited by primarily young, male gamers. In fact, I would argue that the grievers *invent* a game or quest element in an environment where there is none, in an attempt to revert *Second Life* into a carefree, from the offline world separate, environment full of "lulz."

Articles in *Second Life*-related newspapers and blogs thus draw my attention to the fact that these different groups exist on online social platforms such as *Second Life*, that these tensions appear between the different groups, that the abovementioned view of the platform as game-oriented is not shared by the majority of *SL* residents, as well as the response from the "techno-meritocrats," the Linden Lab. In studying the dialogue between residents through the lens of different theories, the relationship between the different groups becomes more visible and the attitudes of the authors are possible to distinguish. It would of course not be possible to guarantee a mapping of all the varying views, or to read texts written by all possible subgroups, which has to be regarded as a minus, but the aims and goals of the individuals and group I do find — and choose to follow — are seen in a context that is not written especially for research, and that, which has been written, has not been tainted by any relationship between interviewer and interviewee, researcher and respondent, which is a plus. The selection of sources can be a problematic aspect, but until now I have simply googled the issues in question to see possible angles, browsed prominent inworld magazines and newspapers, and followed the blogs of well-known *Second Life* resident and the comments and discussions these have generated, both those in favour of and those opposing the blogger's views in order to put together as neutral an account as possible. I would argue that resident profiles, notecards, land covenants, group charters and the many textual sources of information found primarily on the Internet are indeed valuable sources of information when studying people's ideas, attitudes and behaviour in online worlds.

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