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Communities of Play:
The Social Construction of Identity in Persistent Online Game Worlds

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Diasporic Game Cultures

On February 9, 2004, *Uru: Ages Beyond a Myst* (Cyan 2003)*,* a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) based on the classic best-selling *Myst* series (Cyan 1993), closed its servers, leaving an estimated 10,000 players refugees. This event, variously known among players as Black Monday or Black Tuesday (depending their time zones) precipitated the widespread immigration of an unknown number of *Uru* players en masse into other games, bringing with them *Uru* culture, building "ethnic" *Uru* communities, recreating *Uru* artifacts, and eventually developing their own unique *Uru*-inspired culture. Brought together by both a common gaming experience and a shared trauma, these players formed what I have come to call the "Uru Diaspora," a distributed game community dispersed across several games, which continues to thrive in various forms throughout a number of virtual worlds. Building on prior research in emergent narrative (Pearce 2002), I conducted an eighteen- month in-game ethnography, using a technique of "participant engagement," which entailed playing with study participants as a full member of the group. In addition, I employed techniques of visual anthropology (primarily screenshot documentation), conducted in-game interviews, and studied supplemental communications (such as forums and e-mail lists). The primary subject of the study was a "Neighborhood," or "hood," (The Uru version of a guild) called The Gathering[2] that initially formed inside *Uru* Live, then immigrated into other virtual worlds.

The goal of the study[3] was to examine the relationship between game design and emergent social behavior. In terms of game studies, emergence generally refers to complex behaviors that arise out of simple rules, and which are unanticipated by the designers. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004) *Uru* provided a rare opportunity to track emergence between game worlds and observe how it mutated to accommodate new contexts.

One key finding was that players arrived to the game predisposed to certain emergent behaviors, based in part on past play patterns and in part on demographics. *Uru* attracted a somewhat unusual audience for an online game, mostly longtime fans of *Myst*, which had been the top-selling PC game for eight years until it was surpassed by *The Sims* in 2001. Due to their experience with *Myst* games, these players were particularly adept at what have been described as "Mensa-level" puzzles, (Duke 2005) as well as having developed a sense of "spatial literacy"—the ability to read and interpret meaning and narrative embedded in virtual space in a particular way.

Players within The Gathering ranged in age from about 14-72, with the majority being in their forties and fifties, and 50% were female. When compared to other online games, this is something of a demographic anomaly. The majority of studies concern medieval fantasy role playing games, which make up the most popular MMOGs, and which tend to skew about 80% male with an average age around 25. (Yee, 2001; Castronova, 2001; Steinkuehler, 2004; Taylor, 2004; Whang & Chang, 2004; Whang & Kim, 2005)

First-Person Immersion vs. Avatar Embodiment

One of the unique ingredients that made *Uru* "the perfect storm" (as one of my colleagues has called it) for MMOG research, was the transition from the first-person perspective of the prior *Myst* games to the introduction of an avatar in *Uru*. The first-person viewpoint enabled the *Myst* series' hallmark "faux" virtual reality effect (the game consisted primarily of still images), which enabled players to

feel a sense of immersion, the panacea not only of games, but also of traditional virtual and "presence" research. (Rheingold, 1991; Pearce, 1997). But the first-person viewpoint also created an ambiguous identity and a feeling of anonymity. In *Uru*, the addition of the avatar gave the player a specific, customizable identity and a sense of embodiment. (Taylor 2002) In the role of a human explorer, for the first time, they could see *themselves* inside the beloved *Myst* world.

Figures 1 & 2: While *Myst* created a sense of immersion (left), *Uru* introduced an avatar into the imaginary world (right).

The shift in affect that resulted from the introduction of an avatar cannot be overstated. One player described it as the feeling of "proprioception," or body awareness. Suddenly they could run, jump and physically interact with the world in ways they had not before. For disabled players, some of whom made up the group's leadership, the experience was one of re-embodiment, allowing them to do things their physical bodies could not, as well as putting them on a "level playing field" with others. All players enjoyed a new kind of inhabitation and agency in the world, of which they were now physically and representationally a part. In addition, it created the possibility for social agency, which further enhanced the experience.

In interviews, most members of The Gathering described themselves as "shy" and "loners." Many were initially hesitant to interact with others once they had entered the multiplayer world. Leesa, their reluctant leader, started the group because, as a beta tester, she was expected to by *Uru*'s developer, Cyan. At first, there were no members, but eventually she invited one, and then many others followed, attracted to the values and vision she had set forth for the group. By the time *Uru* closed, The Gathering had around 350 members, most of whom joined in last the month or so, when a series of "clerical errors" caused several thousand players to be "erroneously" invited into the game.

The *Uru* Live server ran for less than a year. Even the last three months, which occurred after the game was released commercially in November of 2003—the period when most of the players joined—were characterized as a "public beta." In spite of the game's short life, the closure of the server was a highly distressing event for *Uru* players. Members of The Gathering, many of whom reported weeping as the clock struck midnight and the avatars on the screen froze in place, reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Much to their own surprise, players grieved not only the loss of their community but also the loss of their individual avatars. The shared trauma of the server shutdown served as a catalyst for fortifying the group identity, which evolved into a sort of fictive ethnicity. This shared group identity created both the necessity and the substrate for migrating their individual avatar identities into to other virtual worlds.

Figure 3: Players carry identities across game worlds, working within the constraints of each environment's avatar creation tools.

Determined to stay together, The Gathering (by now numbering about 350) convened on an online web forum they had set up shortly before the server closed. Here, they vetted options for resettlement. After much debate, a consensus emerged that all group members did not have to settle in the same game world. Over time, the group came to span no less than five game worlds, two of which they built themselves—a text-based MUD and a virtual world in Adobe Atmosphere. But the majority favored migrating their community into another "ready-to-play" game world. They ruled out games like the science fiction-themed MMOG *Rhyzom* (Nevrax 2003) because it was too violent. A different *Uru* group comprised of about 200 had settled in *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003)—an unthemed user-created virtual world—a sub-set of whom had begun to create a near-exact replica of areas of *Uru*. While The Gathering also had a small group in *Second Life,* ultimately the vast majority—about 300 members in all—chose to settle in *There,* another open-ended world with affordances for user-creation, where they founded "The Gathering of Uru." Later, when Cyan released the server code to players, The Gathering set up one of about a half-dozen player-run *Until Uru* servers, where a core group also began convening on a weekly basis. This adroit traversing of game worlds suggests that the magic circle, defined as the boundary of time and space within which a game is played (Caillois 1961; Huizinga 1950; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Turner 1982), may be more porous than previously thought, especially when seen in the larger context of all online games on the Internet—what might be characterized as the "ludisphere."

Figure 4: The Uru fountain, the center of social life in the Neighborhood: (Clockwise from upper left) In Uru, and as instantiated by players in There, Second Life and Adobe Atmosphere.

For a small and growing game world like *There*, the sudden arrival of a large group of players *en masse* placed a significant burden on the system. Because of its size, the group put a strain on processing cycles—the one limited resource in cyberspace—causing lag to its neighbors. There were also festering resentments among the "indigenous" Thereians, who were suspicious of this sudden inrush, fearing that, by sheer numbers, the Uruvians would take over *There*. Griefing (i.e., harassment) was a regular part of the early settlement process, which only served to further cement their bond. Conversely, *There* management wanted to accommodate the group, which represented a relatively large subscription base. After being forced to move five times, *There* management was finally able to secure them an Island of their own, but not without coercing its occupants to leave. Over time, The Gathering of Uru acclimated to *There* and a number of its members became pillars of the community in their new home. Its key leaders have been on the There Member Advisory Board, an elected body formed to communicate with *There* management; its artisans are among the most successful in *There*; and its members have founded a number of *There* groups and institutions, including University of There. At *There*'s Real Life Gathering, held in September 2005, nearly half the attendees were members of The Gathering of Uru.

Figure 5 & 6: Yeesha Island, home of Uruvian refugees in *There* (right). The University of There consists largely of Uru-themed cone houses by one of The Gathering's top artisans, Damanji (right).

Emergent Identity as an IntersubjectiveAccomplishment

While it was not surprising to see emergent group cultures, one of the more surprising findings of the study was that individual avatar identity is an intersubjective accomplishment and is as much a product of social emergence as the group itself. Earlier readings have tended to look at the online persona as a psychological construct, primarily a mechanism of individual agency. (Turkle 1995) I was already prepared to look at the emergent culture of the group in intersubjective terms, (Blumer 1969) both vis à vis the game design itself, as well the ways in which the shared meanings that arose from it were reiterated and mutated in other games. However, it became apparent in observing the group over time that the individual identity was also both an intersubjective and an emergent creation. This mirrors some contemporary theories of anthropology that build on non-western concepts of the relationship between the individual and the group. (Jackson 1998) Not only was the group part of the individual identity and vice versa, but the individual persona was further articulated and differentiated over time through an emergent process of social feedback. Players enacted individual agency for the benefit of the group or as a means of personal expression. Positive social response prompted further actions, ad infinitum. Various players emerged as leaders and creators through this process of improvised emergent identity formation, and many discovered and developed new talents and abilities as a result. Leesa's experience, outlined above, is just one example. A number of other cases revealed not only that the avatar character evolved through group interaction, but also that being an avatar in a social context had a palpable impact on the individual person. Most players concurred that being an

avatar *changed* them. To paraphrase from Marshall McLuhan, "we shape our avatars and thereafter our avatars shape us." (McLuhan 1964)

One key point that is often overlooked is the role of the game designers in framing modes of avatar representation and interaction. (Stone 1991; Taylor 2003) The designer must always be factored in as part of the intersubjective process of identity creation. In most popular MMOGs, like some of those referenced earlier, avatar representation is both fantastical and statistical, drawing from the character mechanics of the Dungeons & Dragons tabletop role playing game. (Gygax and Arneson 1974) In all of the games discussed here—*Uru, There* and *Second Life*—avatar representation is primarily aesthetic, a form of personal expression. The expressive qualities of the avatar were a key factor in the debate over immigration. *Second Life* avatars were more realistic, but their movements were stiffer. Conversely, *There* avatars were cartoony and "Disney-like," but had more nuanced social expressions. As Leesa later put it "Here, our avatars breathe." Since the relationship players from with not only their own avatars but those of other players is driven by the expressive mechanisms of avatar design, it is crucial to view the designers as an active part of the social mechanism of avatar identity creation.

Communities of Play
The Gathering is what Bernie DeKoven calls a "play community," a group whose commitment to playing together transcends any specific game or its rules. (DeKoven 1978) We can look at a play community as a counterpart to "communities of practice" or "communities of interest," whose goals are more pragmatic. The play community shares a strong social connection, as well as a mutual play style that is both inclusive and flexible, and can be transformed and relocated as needed to sustain the group. Different communities of play have different characteristics that arise out of the combined play styles of the individuals within them, each of whom is in turn transformed by the group play style. These play styles are also both influenced and transformed by the spaces they are enacted in.

DeKoven has proposed looking a social model of play based on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow," defined as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost." (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) DeKoven proposes that players can keep each other in a state of flow producing what he calls "CoLiberation," an optimal balance of individual self-awareness and group connectedness. Playtesting consultant Nicole Lazzaro has stated this another way "People are addictive." (Lazzaro 2004-2005) This phenomenon, which I will call "intersubjective flow," can be seen not only in digital games, but also in team sports and live music jam sessions, to name a few examples.

Figures 8 & 9: Diagrams showing the dynamics of Flow (left); and DeKoven's concept of "CoLiberation" (right).

In a persistent play community flow has a cumulative effect. The group supports the individual and vice versa, allowing persistent avatar identities to evolve, even as they traverse a variety of play spaces. Intersubjective flow, as realized by play, creates a powerful context for social interaction that brings out aspects of people's personalities that might not otherwise find expression. This may explain why many members of The Gathering of Uru say that in some ways they feel "more themselves" in the avatar persona than they do in real life. Within the context of their play community they feel both a sense of belonging and individual value that differs from other roles they may present in so-called "real life."

Conclusions
The key conclusions outlined above are a start at unpacking the relationship between game design, emergent group dynamics, and individual identity formation. Probably the most significant finding is formation of individual avatar identity through emergent social processes. Furthermore, when motivated and supported by group cohesion, these identities can be portable and malleable over time, and lead to a high level of productivity. (Pearce 2005; Poremba 2003) When motivated by the group,

players find in themselves new talents, abilities and skills, which are further enhanced through a process of group feedback. Furthermore, based on the type of games players gravitate towards, we can, to a certain extend, anticipate overall patterns of emergence based on players play styles, predilections and resident skills.
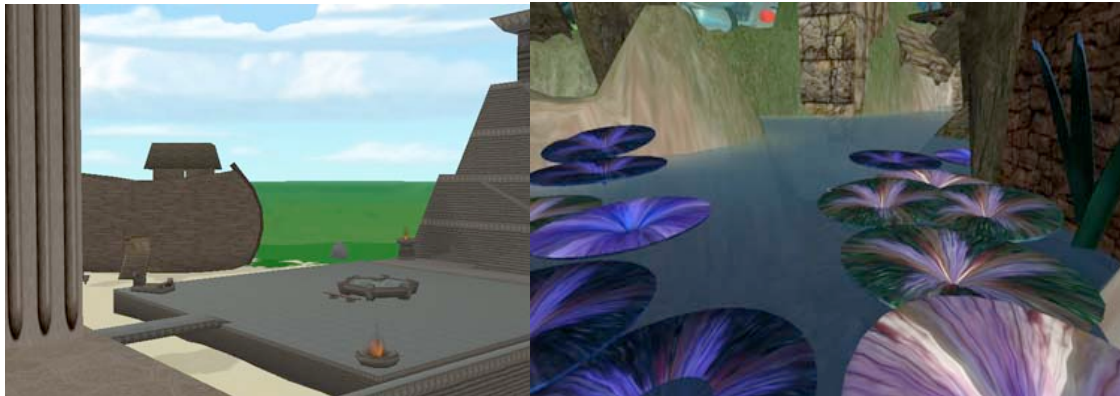

Figure 7 & 8: Original *Uru*-inspired player-created artifacts in *There* (left); entirely new *Uru/Myst* inspired game created by players in *Second Life*.

Interestingly, the storyline of *Uru* involved discovering and restoring the lost culture of the D'ni, an objective which players carried beyond the game subsequent to its demise. It should also be noted that at the time of this writing, Cyan announced it would call a close to the Myst legacy. At the same time, members of the Uru Diaspora dispersed in other games had already begun creating their own original *Uru*- and *Myst*-inspired content. In effect, *Uru* players, through emergence empowered by community, have taken over the *Myst* world, adding a poignant foreshadowing to *Uru*'s subtitle, *Ages Beyond Myst.*

Notes
[1]Artemesia is Celia Pearce's research avatar and alter ego
[2]Group and avatar names have been changed to protect the privacy of study subjects
[3]The study was done as part of a PhD research project at the SMARTlab Centre, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London
[4]For more on productive play, please see article cited in Games & Culture, Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2005.

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