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Playing Ethnography:
A study of emergent behaviour in online games and virtual worlds



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Abstract

This study concerns itself with the relationship between game design and emergent social behaviour in massively multiplayer online games and virtual worlds. This thesis argues for a legitimisation of the study of 'communities of play', alongside communities perceived as more 'serious', such as communities of interest or practice. It also identifies six factors that contribute to emergent social behaviour and investigates the relationship between group and individual identity, and the emergent ways in which these arise from and intersect with the features and mechanics of the game worlds themselves.

Methodology: Under the rubric of 'design research', this study was conducted as an ethnographic intervention, an anthropological investigation that deliberately privileged the online experience whist acknowledging the performative nature of both game play and the research process itself. The research was informed by years of professional practical experience in game design and playtesting, as well as by qualitative methods derived from the fields of Anthropology, Sociology, Computer-mediated Communications and the emerging field of Game Studies. The process of conducting the eighteen-month ethnographic study followed the progress of a sub-set of members of the 'Uru Diaspora,' a group of 10,000 players who were made refugees when the massively multiplayer game 'Uru: Ages Beyond Myst' was closed in February of 2004. Uru refugees immigrated into other virtual worlds, using their features and capabilities to create ethnic communities that emulated the culture, artefacts and environments of the original Uru world. Over time, players developed 'hybrid' cultures, integrating the Uru culture with that of their new homes, and eventually creating entirely new Uru- and Myst-inspired content. The outcome is the identification of six factors that serve as 'engines for emergence' and discusses their relationship to each other, to game design, and to emergent behaviour. These include:

- **Play Ecosystems: Fixed-Synthetic vs. Co-Created Worlds:** Online games and virtual worlds exist along a spectrum, with environments entirely authored by the designer at one end, and those comprised primarily of player-created content and assets on the other, with a range of variations between. The type of world will impact the sort of emergent behaviour that occurs, and worlds that include player-created content will be more inclined to promote emergent behaviour.
- **Communities of Play:** Distributed groups formed around play demonstrate distinct characteristics based on shared values and play styles. The study describes in detail one such play community, and analyses the ways in which its characteristic play styles drove its emergent behaviours.
- **The Social Construction of Avatar Identity:** Individual avatar identity is constructed through an emergent process engaging social feedback.
- **Intersubjective Flow:** A social reading of the psychological notion of 'flow' that describes the way in which flow dynamics occur in a social context through play.
- **Productive Play:** Countering the traditional contention that play is inherently 'unproductive' as some scholars suggest, the thesis argues that play can be seen as a form of cultural production, as well as fulcrum for creative activity.
- **Porous Magic Circles and the 'Ludisphere':** The magic circle, which bounds play activities, is more porous than game scholars had previously believed. The term 'ludisphere' is used to describe the larger context of aggregated play space via the Internet. Also identified are leakages between 'virtual worlds' and 'real life'.

By identifying these factors and attempting to trace their roots in game design, the study aims to contribute a new approach to the making and analysis of user experience and creativity 'in game'. The thesis posits that by achieving a deeper cultural understanding of the relationship between design and emergent behaviour, it is possible to make steps forward in the study of 'emergence' itself as a design material.

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Book I

The Rules of the Game

All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.

—Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* 1959

Live in your world. Play in ours.

—Sony Computer Entertainment, Marketing Campaign Slogan, 2003

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1 Overview/Research Question

The principal aim of this investigation was to determine the relationship between the design of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and the emergent social behaviour that arises within them. The term 'emergent social behaviour' refers to large-scale group activities or trends that fall outside the intention of any game's design. This research project was conceived and conducted under the auspices of the practice-based PhD Programme in Site-Specific and Performative Media Arts at the SMARTlab Centre, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, the University of the Arts London. The project itself is framed as 'design research', conducted as an ethnographic performance/intervention. The focus of the research was to look at the ways in which software design and implementation (including consideration of design flaws and 'bugs') shape and influence certain types of large-scale emergent behaviour(s).

The project developed for purposes of this scholarly inquiry was an ethnographic study of the Uru Diaspora: a group of online game players who were rendered refugees when their MMOG *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* (Miller, 2003) closed after nine months of operation. Subsets of this diaspora - some 10,000 *Uru* players - migrated into other games and virtual worlds, creating 'ethnic' communities based on *Uru* culture. The thesis studies the ways in which these migrant communities utilised 'affordances' for player creation within their new virtual homes to craft artefacts based on and inspired by *Uru*, combining the cultures of their new settlements and those of their imaginary homeland to develop a unique 'hybrid'

The primary subject of the study was The Gathering of Uru (like all other group and individual names in this thesis, a pseudonym), initially a group of some 350 players, the majority of whom settled in the virtual world *There.com*. The criteria for selection of this group was threefold: 1) Both *Uru* and *There.com* represented significantly different game genres than those previously studied; 2) The group demographic was atypical for MMOG research, primarily 'Baby Boomers', 50% of whom were women; and 3) The migration phenomenon created the unique opportunity to observe a single group within multiple online game contexts, providing a means to compare the influence of their properties and design features on emergent behaviour.

An eighteen-month ethnographic field study was conducted in the various games and virtual worlds inhabited by the group, borrowing methods from anthropology, qualitative social science, computer-mediated communication and Game Studies. The findings of this study were then compiled into a 'participant blog' posted on a password-protected web site for annotation by the study subjects.

A constraint of the project is that all presentations of this research, including portions of the final viva oral defence, were conducted 'in situ', as Artemesia, the avatar developed for this research, within one

or more of the game worlds featured in this study; all texts produced from this research, including academic papers, are credited to co-authors Celia Pearce & Artemesia.

The thesis itself is structured in three parts, plus front and concluding material and appendices. The rationale for this structure was a desire to integrate three different voices into the document, a theoretical perspective enumerated in more detail in the literature and methodology sections of Book I. Each of these voices represents a different perspective on the material, and seeks to reinforce the notion of 'crystallisation' as a method for interrogating ethnographic data. This addresses the problematic of a positivist approach that presupposes a singular and absolute account of events. Rather, this polyphonic perspective acknowledges that a variety of viewpoints can collectively reveal to a deeper truth, one that better represents human experience at a variety of scales, and through a variety of disciplinary and experiential lenses. These three sets of voices are meant to complement one another to provide a multi-faceted perspective on the research. They are as follows:

Front matter includes the title page, abstract, contents, acknowledgements and list of illustrations.

Book I: ***The Rules of the Game*** summarises the literature review, and describes the theoretical underpinnings of the project, the methodology, and the fieldwork methods used, presented in the traditional writing style of an academic publication.

Book II: ***My Imaginary Homeland*** comprises the study findings. This includes a narrative of the group's story, analysis of play patterns and their relationship to design features and flaws, and conclusions, annotated with selected commentary from participants solicited through the participant blog. While representing the voice of the study participants, the literary style of this section follows after the fashion of the anthropological monograph.

Book III: ***Being Artemesia: My Life as an Avatar*** presents highlights of the personal transformative, emergent experience I underwent as a result of conducting this research. This section is presented in the more informal, subjective style of a journal or diary, after the style of 'confessional' anthropological memoirs, examples of which will be described shortly.

Conclusion: Concludes the three books.

Appendix A (printed): Published Papers on the Research

- 'Productive Play: Game Culture from the Bottom Up' (2006), *Games & Culture* Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2006. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- 'Communities of Play: The Social Construction of Identity in Persistent Online Game Worlds' (2006), *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* (Wardrip-Fruin, Harrigan, eds.) Cambridge: the MIT Press. (Forthcoming Summer 2006)

Appendix B (CD-ROM): Field notes/chatlog database and selected presentation videos

Appendix C (DVD): Video of full-length project presentation at USC, 15 September 2006

2 Literature Review

2.1 Game Studies

Game Studies, the academic study of computer games, is a relatively new discipline, or set of disciplines, devoted to a wide range of research questions encompassing the expressive qualities of digital media (Murray, 1997), the critical analysis of 'ergodic texts' (Aarseth, 1997), the structure of rules (Juul, 2004) and the social dynamics and economies of virtual worlds (Taylor and Jakobsson, 2003, Castronova, 2002). This 'interdiscipline' is not to be confused with game theory, a branch of applied mathematics focused on conflict resolution and strategic decision-making, applied primarily to economics and military strategy (Morgenstern and von Neumann, 1947). While game theory has some application in Game Studies, it is generally viewed as an unrelated and separate field.

The advent of single-player genres as the central paradigm for games is an aberration of digital technology (Pearce, 1997), and even the first arcade game, *Pong,* was multiplayer (Pearce, 1997, Herz, 1997). In fact, prior to the advent of digital games research, virtually all games research was sociological or anthropological in nature, as limited as it may have been. The 'seminal' text on games, *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga, 1950), was produced by a Dutch cultural historian and its follow-up *Man, Play and Games* by a scholar who counted both literary theory and sociology among his areas of expertise (Caillois, 1961). While these two books have become canonical texts in the field of Game Studies, both suffer from a complete disregard (perhaps historically inevitable) for female play styles and culture, a point that is made transparent by their titles: *Man, the Player* and *Man, Play and Games*. Huizinga explores every conceivable aspect of male human culture through a 'ludic' (play-oriented) lens, but makes only passing reference to girls' play activities, such as dress-up and doll play (Huizinga, 1950). Caillois repeatedly asserts, somewhat dismissively, that girls' play is, 'of course', entirely devoted to rehearsal for motherhood (Caillois, 1961). [For a feminist theory of game design, see (Flanagan, 2005).]

The 1970s and 1980s saw a significant growth in the discussion of games and play as socio-cultural phenomena. Gregory Bateson famously put forth his 'Theory of Play and Fantasy', describing the astonishing ability of both animals and humans to distinguish between real and play fighting (Bateson, 1972). Anthropologists Victor Turner and Richard Schechner have both encompassed games and play within the rubric of theatre, performance and ritual (Turner, 1982, Schechner, 1988a); however, as Schechner points out: 'In the West, play is a rotten category tainted by unreality, inauthenticity, duplicity, make-believe, looseness, fooling around, and inconsequentiality' (Schechner, 1988b). Brian Sutton-Smith is perhaps the best known contemporary academic to have devoted his entire oeuvre to play and games (Sutton-Smith, 1997), including founding the academic journal *Play & Culture*. In parallel with these movements, we also see a handful of examples of the

sociological study of contemporary (analogue) play practices, such as Iona and Peter Opie's comprehensive investigation of street and playground games throughout Britain in the 1960s (Opie and Opie, 1969). We also have instances of 'independent game writers' who might be characterised as 'game philosophers', such as Bernard Suits, Bernie DeKoven (Suits, 1978, DeKoven, 1978), and the founders of the 'New Games' movement in the 1970s (Brand, 1972, Fluegelman, 1976).

All of these trajectories are principally concerned with the act of play, particularly as a socio-cultural phenomenon, rather than with the artefacts of play. It is not until we enter the realm of the digital that the game 'object' becomes the prevalent focus of scholarly attention. As Ermi and Mäyrä have argued, this tendency towards social contextualisation of Game Studies over what might be considered an 'object-orientation' of and within gaming, has emerged as a popular approach partly due to the disciplinary origins of many game scholars in art, literary theory, film and media studies (Mäyrå and Ermi, 2005).

In this game-centric research, the primary focus of study is the game as an object or artwork in the tradition of critical theory and comparative media studies, where the 'text' and 'conventions' of the media content are analysed and discussed in detail (Aarseth, 1997, Murray, 1997). Most game scholars agree that it is necessary to 'play' games in order to perform such an analysis (Konzack, 2002, Aarseth, 2003), however, the focus here tends to be on analysis of the *game,* rather than the player. As much as game designers themselves often speak of 'gameplay' as the elusive quality that makes a game 'fun', they often fail to distinguish between different types of players, referring instead to a generic player who typically has the same characteristics and play preferences as the designers themselves (Crawford, 1984). Most commonly, game designers tend to use the word 'fun' in a generic sense, as if the experience of 'fun' were the same for all people (Falstein, 2004). Others argue that 'fun' is overused, misleading, an oversimplification or difficult to quantify; nonetheless, these writers continue to work with the unstated assumption that a 'one size fits all' approach can be used in evaluating the success of gameplay (LeBlanc, 1999, LeBlanc, 2000, Crawford, 2003). The one place where some designers do begin to articulate distinct player styles and play preferences is in discussion of MMOGs (Koster, 2005, Bartle, 1996), an area that shall be developed further in the subsequent section.

With the advent of multiplayer games, we are beginning to see a return to the player-centric approach more typical of pre-digital games research, a tradition that concerns itself with the individual and social act of playing, the practice of play itself. Play practice can be studied from a variety of scales and perspectives, ranging from the individual's phenomenological, psychological or cognitive experience of play to behavioural aspects of play and larger patterns of social interaction and fan culture, including subversive and productive play. Player-centric research inevitably converges with

game-centric research, as Game Studies continues to encounter the ways in which game objects are activated and transformed through play practice. This echoes de Certeau's notion of consumption as a form of production (de Certeau, 1984), a concept that appears in my earlier work as well as in this thesis (Pearce, 2002a, Pearce, 2006).

2.2 Massively Multiplayer Games

The study of massively multiplayer games is by far the fastest-growing branch of Game Studies, in part because the MMOG is the fastest growing genre of commercial computer game. Even within this relatively narrow scope, we see a vast array of research ranging from quantitative studies of player psychology (Yee, 2001), to the economies of fictional worlds (Castronova, 2001), the relationship between learning, cognition and learning (Steinkuehler and Squire, 2006 (in press), Steinkuehler, 2005), to critiques of power structures and representation (Taylor, 2002, Taylor, 2003a), to social and cultural aspects of online gaming (Taylor and Jakobsson, 2003, Whang and Chang, 2004, Whang and Kim, 2005, Lin et al., 2003), to gender play preferences (Taylor, 2003b, Kerr, 2003) to governance and law in online games (Lastowka and Hunter, 2003, Reynolds, 2002), as well as poetics and typologies of virtual worlds (Aarseth et al., 2003, Klastrup, 2003). There has also been a parallel growth of interest in text-based MUDs (multi-user domains) and MOOs (multi-user object-oriented environments), as well as MMOGs from researchers in the area of computer-aided collaboration (Dourish, 1998, Duchenaut et al., 2004, Nardi and Harris, 2006, Duchenaut and Moore, 2004), and we are now seeing traditional corporate research centers such as PARC (formerly Xerox PARC, the birthplace of the graphical user interface) incorporating MMOG research into their purviews.

It is perhaps curious that a search of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* reveals virtually no coverage of games, with the notable exception of Jennifer Mnookin's classic analysis of the emergence of law in the text-based virtual world LambdaMOO (arguably *not* a game) (Mnookin, 1996) and a special issue on 'Play & Performance', which included one article on a web-based learning game for children (Danet, 1995). A number of texts also explore the social aspects of network environments. Danet's *Cyberplay,* for instance, published in 2001, makes only two mentions of games, about a dozen references to MUDs and MOOs and no references whatever to online virtual worlds. Even within the world of networked communications, games continue to be marginalised.

One of the fundamental questions yet to be fully addressed in Game Studies is the distinction between 'virtual worlds' and 'games', a topic considered in greater depth in Book II. While both can be described as virtual worlds, this distinction becomes particularly important when looking at patterns of emergence. Due in part to the obscure nature of this distinction, as well as to near-uniform tendency towards historical amnesia in digital media, the majority of games researchers seem to have overlooked a number of pioneers, both practitioners and independent writers and scholars of 'virtual

worlds', who predated the advent of Game Studies and whose work anticipated many of key issues in contemporary MMOG discourse (Mnookin, 1996, Curtis, 1992, Curtis, 1993, Damer, 1997, Damer et al., 1999, DiPaola, 1998-2005, DiPaola and Collins, 2003, DiPaola and Collins, 2002, Horn, 1998, Farmer and Morningstar, 1991, Kim, 1997, Pearce, 1997, Rheingold, 1993, Benedikt, 1991, Taylor, 1999, Dibbell, 1998, Dibbell, 1995, Bruckman, 1992, Bruckman, 1997, Schroeder, 2002, Heudin, 1999). To cite just two examples, Bruce Damer, founder of the Contact Consortium and author of *Avatars!* (arguably the first 'guided tour' of virtual worlds), has hosted a series of conferences on the avatar since the mid-1990s (Damer, 1995-2006, Damer, 1997), while Steve DiPaola has introduced such notions as 'binding the pair', techniques to create a bond between player and avatar, and discussed issues of 'avatar personal space', noting that a player will back away when another avatar stands too close (DiPaola, 1998-2005). While virtual world designers such as Cory Ondrejka, lead designer of *Second Life*, claim to be 'the first' (Ondrejka, 2004), they have ignored the half-dozen or so 'metaverses' (another term for virtual worlds coined by science fiction novelist Neal Stephenson (Stephenson, 1993)), that preceded theirs by almost a decade. Fortunately, researchers such as Taylor and Book integrate earlier inceptions of virtual worlds into the discourse, an inclusive stance that greatly benefits the field of Game Studies (Book, 2003-2006, Taylor, 1999). In informal conversation, I have frequently heard both students and game scholars discount a number of virtual worlds because they are 'not games' and therefore not in the purview of games studies. I would argue that all of these spaces could be considered 'ludic' worlds, and to selectively negate any one genre due to its perceived lack of 'gameyness' is at best parochial and at worst, in the pejorative sense, 'academic'.

One refreshing shift is that practitioners are highly engaged with academics in the quest for a better understanding of MMOGs. Whilst some MMOG designers have published books and papers on the subject (Mulligan and Patrovsky, 2003, Bartle, 1996, Bartle, 2003, Ondrejka, 2004, Koster, 2005), the majority of practitioner writings tend to be published in more informal or discursive digital contexts such as list-serves (email discussion groups), discussion forums or blogs (Appelcline, 2000-2006, Koster, 1998-2006, Mulligan, 2001-2003, MUD-Dev, 1998-2006). The Terra Nova blog has become the 'virtual centre' for an ongoing discussion between practitioners and scholars embracing the full spectrum of virtual worlds, 'metaverses' and MMOGs (Castronova et al., 2003-2006).

The greatest shortcoming of much research into contemporary MMOGs to date is perhaps that inherited from its subjects. While a comprehensive history of MMOGs is not feasible within the scope of this thesis, it is however important to give a brief account of the situation of the MMMOG in relation to other gaming forms. In short, we might say that, due to the roots of MMOGs in MUDs and MOOs and their origins in the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson, 1974), the vast majority of MMOGs, and especially the most popular examples, tend to revolve around Tolkienesque medieval fantasy themes. Games like *Ultima Online, EverQuest, Dark Ages of*

Camelot, the Korean hit *Lineage* and the American blockbuster *World of Warcraft* embody this role-playing genre, existing as they do within a very narrow set of narrative and gameplay frameworks. Researchers are beginning to extend their studies into other types of games, most notably science fiction-themed games such as *Star Wars Galaxies* (Steinkuehler and Squire, ?, Duchenaut et al., 2004, Burke, 2005, Steinkuehler, 2004, Steinkuehler and Squire, 2006 (in press)).

Research into MMOGs is inevitably bound or delimited by what the game industry offers up for play and for study. Consequentially, much of it is highly genre- and gender-specific. Most studies tend to corroborate the finding that in a typical MMOG between 10% and 20% of the audience are female players who tend to be slightly older than their male counterparts. The median age of MMOG players in these typical demographics tends to range from around 25-29 years old (Yee, 2001, Seay et al., 2004, Castronova, 2001). Virtually all MMOGs, with a small handful of exceptions, are combat-based and work within a similar leveling structure to the earlier medieval fantasy games, regardless of their themes. Players select from a variety of classes and races to determine the capabilities of their characters; they earn experience points by killing 'enemies', typically non-player characters, but also other players with whom they can do combat in player-versus-player, or 'PvP', modes. Players accumulate virtual currency and gear, known as 'loot', from their kills, which can be utilised (armour or healing potions, for example), sold for game currency to purchase appropriate gear and even exchanged on the virtual currency 'black market' for real-world currency and real-world profit.

As players gain experience points, they 'level' in the game. Levelling represents an increase in status and strength, the ability to fight higher-level enemies and the ability to use both new skills and special gear. Unlike first-person shooter games, which entail actually aiming at targets, killing in MMOGs is generally based on a statistical virtual dice throw, mimicking the polygonal dice used in *Dungeons & Dragons.* The outcome of each battle is calculated based on the dice throw in relation to the current level of the player and the target, including the target's attack on the player. Players can incur damage in the process, which may result in a temporary death. At higher levels, such a death typically results in a loss of gear and experience points. In some cases, a player has to return to his 'corpse' to reclaim any gear he wishes to keep.

Aesthetically, these games tend to be dark and eerie, with looming castles, underground dungeons and labyrinths, and tangled forests populated with magical, sometimes threatening, creatures. Monsters such as Orcs, Zombies, Golems, Goblins as well as oversized rats, rabid wolves and giant spiders abound. At higher levels, players working in groups can take on a larger monster (dragons being the prime example), also known as a 'boss'. *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest* (Figure 2.1) are the 'canonical' examples of this aesthetic (Garriott, 1996, McQuaid et al., 1999); *Lineage* (Figure 2.2) and *World of Warcraft* (Figure 2.3) have attempted to create a more friendly aesthetic, using animé-style character

designs and brighter color palettes (Kern et al., 2003, Song, 1998, Emmert, 2004).The recent 'remake' of the classic series *The Bard's Tale* has even gone so far as to parody the medieval fantasy genre (Fargo and Findley, 2004). Thematic departures include science fiction games such as *Star Wars: Galaxies* (Koster, 2003), *Anarchy Online,* and *Eve* and the unique superhero game *City of Heroes* (Figure 2.4) (Emmert, 2004). Nonetheless, the core mechanic is structured similarly, around a level system that entails gaining experience points by repetitive killing also known as 'grinding'.



Figure 2.1: A typical battle in *EverQuest.* (Source: Sony Online Entertainment)



Figure 2.2: *Lineage* players traverse through a quaint medieval village.
(Source: http://www.gamigo.com.cn)



Figure 2.3: *World of Warcraft* players confer in a pub.



Figure 2.4: Superheroes in *City of Heroes* display their powers in the public square.

Through no fault of the researchers, the bulk of MMOG research tends to inherit the limitations of this genre, namely a fairly narrow age spectrum, an audience consisting primarily of male players and a proclivity towards certain game mechanics and play styles. As a result, generalisations are beginning to emerge about MMOGs that say more about these particular genres than about MMOGs in general. The best example of this is the current effort to create a refined taxonomy of MMOG players. The basis for much of this work is a response, or in same cases a counter to Richard Bartle's famous taxonomy of MUD players (Bartle, 1996).

While Bartle's taxonomy appears to hold up in certain instances, some have argued that it is overly simplistic and have attempted to test his assumptions against empirical research, developing more multi-dimensional approaches to player taxonomies (Alix, 2005, Karlsen, 2004). However, these studies also tend to focus on the same game genres. There is a tacit assumption that play style is somehow independent of the game and its affordances. Rather, I would argue that Bartle's taxonomies are a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', with play styles and preferences that emerge largely from the properties of the game itself, and that the Bartle model and its antecedents do not factor in MMOGs where puzzle-solving is a major feature of gameplay such as *Puzzle Pirates* (James, 2001-2006) or *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* (Miller, 2003), the game discussed in this report. Bartle's types begin to fall apart outside of combat- and level-based play. His Killer type, for example, is not relevant to games that have no killing; his model of the Achiever type derives from a level-based system, and does include players even in the classic medieval fantasy genre whose achievements are more economic in nature.

In determining a study subject for this research, one of the criteria was to study a game and game community that did not fit the standard template of MMOG gameplay or demographics. The initial exploratory research was conducted in game worlds of significantly different genres, including *The Sims Online* (Wright et al., 2002), *There*.com (There and Makena Technologies, 2003), and *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003). These environments, more virtual worlds than games *per se*, have a significantly different structure to the games described above, which comprise the majority of MMOG research and thus offer the possibility of expanding the discourse to include different genres and audiences. Notably, all three of these game worlds have a high level of female participation, helping to eschew the often unintentional androcentric orientation that pervades the field due to the low participation of women in most MMOGs.

2.3 Spatial Narrative

Since virtually all MMOGs take place in simulated spaces -- whether these are configured as isometric (as is the case with *Ultima Online* and *Lineage*) or as real-time 3D environments (as with *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft* and *City of Heroes*) -- these games can universally be categorised as 'spatial' in nature. The concept of spatial narrative, which appears throughout the study, has been discussed previously, albeit in different contexts and without the same situated perspective of process-based study, by a number of games researchers.

Janet Murray introduced spatiality as one of the four properties of computational media in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997, pp.79-83). That same year, in *The Interactive Book*, I described architecture as a storytelling medium, discussed the craft of creating 'narrative environments' and described virtual reality and games that use spatial navigation as their primary interface metaphor as 'spatial media', a

term I inherited from a course I began teaching at San Francisco State University in 1996. (1997, pp. 25-29). The following year, Jenkins described games as 'gendered play space' in the volume of essays *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games,* which he co-edited with Justine Cassell. (Jenkins, 1998). Espen Aarseth has also written a critical theory analysis of the relationship of play to space (Aarseth, 2000) and Marie-Laure Ryan embraces this topic within her discussion of *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (Ryan, 2001). In 2002 I contributed an article entitled 'Story as Play Space' to the catalogue for the *Game On* exhibition of video game history, exploring spatial storytelling methods used in games (Pearce, 2002b). In *A Poetics of Virtual Worlds*, Lizbeth Klastrup begins to enumerate some tools for defining and analysing virtual environments (Klastrup, 2003), the same year as Aarseth et al.'s typology of virtual worlds (Aarseth et al., 2003); Jenkins subsequently contributed to the discourse in his article on 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture' in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game* (Jenkins, 2004). Norman Klein's *The History of Forgetting* is a spatial history of Los Angeles, and his more recent *The Vatican to Vegas,* an extensive study of what he calls 'scripted space' with an emphasis on the use of special effects and technologies of illusion (Klein, 2003, Klein, 1997).

I have long argued that spatiality is a characteristic feature of contemporary digital games and that because of this, games may have a stronger tie to disciplines such as architecture and theme park design than they do to traditional 'media' such as literature and film. In this thesis, I make the argument that 'spatial literacy' is a key characteristic of the players in this study, and a hallmark of games that leverage the narrative capabilities of architecture and physical space.

2.4 Other Disciplines Explored

The application of cybernetics to this investigation was explored but ultimately arrived at a dead-end. Cybernetics has not been adopted widely in the social sciences, although, as will be seen in the outcomes, the key principle of feedback has relevance to studies of social emergence (Wiener, 1948). Since cybernetics is a discipline tied most strongly to mathematics, engineering and statistics, while it may have some applications in quantitative social science research it does not lend itself readily to an application of qualitative research methods. Norbert Wiener, who pioneered the theory of cybernetics, was himself ambivalent about its applications to social science, principally because cybernetics required a 'high degree of isolation of the phenomenon from the observer'. In his words, 'It is in the social sciences that the coupling between the observed phenomenon and the observer is hardest to minimise'. The remark that 'There is much we must leave, whether we like it or not, to the un-"scientific" narrative method of the professional historian' (pp. 162-164) even suggests a disdain for the humanistic disciplines. (Wiener, 1954)

An extensive survey by Geyer and van der Zouwen found that, although cybernetics has not been widely embraced by the social sciences, a small number of researchers outside of its core disciplines, dubbed sociocybemeticians, have built on Wiener's ideas, but with significant modification (Geyer and van der Zouwen, 1994). Even its key proponents, such as Arvin Aulin, felt that sociocybernetics would have to 'choose another way and one that radically differs from computer-and-automation-oriented cybernetics...' Aulin, however, argues nonetheless that one fundamental notion from cybernetics particularly useful to the social sciences is the concept of feedback (Aulin, 1982).

Social network analysis was also looked at but found to be unsuitable for the purposes of this study as it concerns itself primarily with the relationships (ties) between individuals (nodes) and with 'patterned communication flow' (Rogers, 1986). Based on the goal of observing emergent patterns of culture, rather, this study aimed to capture broader social patterns, especially in terms of large group behaviour.

Social network analysis also tends to take a more quantitative approach and is concerned with sociometry, that is, the measurement of social relationships. One of the shortcomings of this approach in terms of studying play patterns is that play happens in 'real time' and is difficult to 'measure', especially in graphically-based virtual worlds. However, some researchers have developed methods for conducting quantitative discourse analysis in games, such as computer programs that automate the process of harvesting and analysing chatlogs (Steinkuehler, 2004, Duchenaut et al., 2004). While these methods are very effective for tracking quantities and types of textual conversations, they do not necessarily quantify or even capture the activity of 'play'. These techniques are typically used in tandem with qualitative methods such as ethnography and interviews. One interesting principle of social network analysis is the 'Dunbar Number', which indicates that 150 people is the optimum group size in order for all members to know each other (Dunbar, 1993). This figure correlates to village size of many indigenous cultures and also seems to fit with the pattern of group size in online games.

2.5 Anthropology, Sociology, and Computer Mediated Communication

The primary theoretical and methodological frameworks for this research were derived from the social sciences, principally anthropology and sociology. The subsequent chapters will explore the literature from these fields in more detail and describe their applications to this study.

3 Theoretical & Methodological Framework

3.1 The Social Construction of Virtual Reality

It is almost inevitable that this research should sit within a social constructivist context, as opposed to a positivist framework that asserts an 'absolute' objective reality. Although the notion that all of (human) reality is a social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) can be countered from a positivist perspective, it would be difficult to make a compelling case against the notion of virtual worlds as social constructions.

Furthermore, the sorts of worlds studied and analysed in these pages can be seen to have been socially constructed in specific, deliberate ways, and can thus be analysed with regard to the variety of discourses enabled between the designers and the players. Designers construct the worlds they envision; players then reconstruct those worlds through lived practices that engage, subvert and transform the space to make it their own. The aim of this investigation is to study that process in an attempt to understand the relationship between the designers' social construction -- the game and the tacit values and assumptions it embodies -- and the players' social construction of their own play culture through lived experience and play practice.

The notion of the situated perspective is also germane to the study of virtual worlds. Virtual reality is, by definition, subjective, and only exists through a particular, situated viewpoint. There is literally no 'objective' reality in a virtual world because each instantiation of it appears to a specific player. Between the players there is only code, silicon and wires. The world itself is entirely imaginary and entirely subjective, yet at the same time, entirely intersubjective. It is possible to obtain 'objective' information about virtual worlds through quantitative data-mining techniques, such as tracking log-ins or player circulation through game space, but these exist as a statistical record of past events rather than an observation of practices-in-progress.

It has been said that all games take place within a 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1955 [1972]), a bounded system that players enter to participate in a dynamic, structured play experience (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, Caillois, 1961). Players in such systems, whether board games or virtual worlds, enter into a mutual agreement to abide by an alternative set of social conventions to those of the 'real world'. Victor Turner makes a similar distinction between the liminal space of ritual, a space of transition from one stage of 'real life' to another (such as seasons or phases of life), and liminoid, a space of respite between 'real life' activities, characterised by leisure practices in post-industrial, Western culture (Turner, 1982). Each of these modes provides participants with an alternative set of social conventions by which to abide while participating in the liminal or liminoid context. Games are probably best characterised in terms of Turner's liminoid space; however, an argument can be made

that online games may sit somewhere between these two states. On the one hand, they represent a 'space between', but they can also become a site of transformation, as indicated by some of the findings of this study. It is not an accident that the word *avatar* originates from the Sanskrit term for a god's embodiment on Earth (Farmer and Morningstar, 1991); the spiritual overtones that this implies are borne out in many avatar experiences recorded here and elsewhere (DiPaola, 1998-2005, Damer, 1997, Dibbell, 1998).

Virtual worlds create a particularly strong boundary around the 'magic circle' through the ritual of 'logging in'; however, as we shall see, the borders of this magic circle may be more porous than such a formal framework might indicate. Some game scholars have expressed a wish to protect the integrity of virtual worlds to operate 'a world apart' from real world laws, customs and culture (Castronova, 2004-2005), but this study illuminates a number of fissures in the magic circle that undermine the desired 'purity' of the illusion created by such worlds. In practice, because games played on a PC (as opposed to a console or portable device) share the computer with other games, real-life activities and distributed communication practices such as instant messaging and voice-over-IP, the borders are not impermeable; and, just as in the real world, cultures cross borders with ease, intermingling and hybridising to create new cultural forms. Cultural miscegenation of this sort is an inevitable outcome of emergent behaviour.

While games may fall under the rubric of Turner's liminoid space, they are much more like his liminal space in that they require a higher level of participation than typical entertainment contexts. Although they are initially created by a design team, once the players enter in their avatar personae they begin to engage in the co-construction of the world, especially through the enactment of narratives within it, but sometimes, quite literally, by adding artefacts and architecture to the world itself (Pearce, 2002a, Poremba, 2003). The extent to which players become co-creators and co-constructors of the ongoing participatory drama that virtual worlds inevitably become is bounded and influenced by the design of the world. Both Damer and DiPaola have looked at the ways in which player creativity emerges in virtual worlds, especially the range of expressiveness afforded by particular design features and social mechanics (Damer et al., 1999, DiPaola, 1998-2005). Mnookin and Dibbell have explored the ways in which social order and democratic structures emerge (Dibbell, 1998, Mnookin, 1996) while Taylor has explored in depth the role of designer ideology and corporate governance versus players' sense of or need for forms of self-determination (Taylor, 2002, Taylor, 2003a).

The aim of this study is to examine this intersection, considering the virtual world as designed by its creator(s) and the cybercultures that emerge among its resident avatars. The study seeks to explore large-scale emergent group behaviour patterns and to understand the ways in which the game's

design, narrative, structure or social mechanics influence the emergent patterns to which they give rise.

3.2 Games as Emergent, Complex Systems

One of the underlying premises of this investigation is that online games and virtual worlds can be classified as *complex social systems,* and that the social phenomena this study endeavours to explore represent a form of *social emergence.* The conception of games as complex systems with emergent properties is so prevalent in the worlds of both game design and Game Studies that it would be impossible to cite its origins. Descriptions of emergence can be found in a diverse array of contexts, from books on 'popular science' (Johnson, 2001) to 'game design theory' (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, Juul, 2002).

Emergence falls under the general rubric of 'complex systems' or 'complexity theory', the study of which spans an unwieldy array of fields and disciplines and as a result has become a fulcrum for interdisciplinary research. For instance, the Santa Fe Institute, one of the preeminent centres for the study of complex systems in the United States, encompasses fields as diverse as social science, economics, mathematics and 'game theory', ecology, evolution, neuroscience, intelligent systems and network infrastructures. The Human Complex Systems group at University of California Los Angeles embraces every permutation of its theme, from economics to urban planning and computer-generated 'synthetic cultures' to multiplayer online games.

The term 'emergence' describes how complex, often decentralised, systems self-organise in ways that cannot be predicted by their underlying structures or rule sets (Bar-Yam, 1997). Anthills, freeways, neural networks, stock markets, terrorist cells, cities, the Internet and computer games are among the examples used to describe emergence (Johnson, 2001). These disparate systems share in common a display of collective behaviours and even collective 'intelligences' that arise out of and yet transcend the actions of the individual parts or elements.

According to Steven Johnson, author of *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software*, complex systems exhibit emergence because they

> *...solve problems by drawing on masses of relatively (simple) elements, rather than a single, intelligent 'executive branch'. They are bottom-up systems, not top-down. They get their smarts from below. In more technical language, they are complex adaptive systems that display emergent behaviour. In these systems, agents residing on one scale start producing behavior that lies one scale above them: ants create colonies; urbanities create neighbourhoods; simple pattern-*

recognition software learns how to recommend new books. The movement from low-level rules to higher-level sophistication is what we call emergence.

(Johnson, 2001, p.10)

In his essay for the book *Virtual Worlds: Synthetic Universes, Digital Life and Complexity,* the mathematician and complexity expert Yaneer Bar-Yam defines emergence as a set of 'collective behaviors' in which all the parts are 'interdependent', arguing that the more distinct and specialised the individual interdependent behaviours, the more complex the collective behaviour likely to arise (Bar-Yam, 1999).

For the purpose of this study, I am working with the concept of emergence as defined by Bar-Yam, who is also President of the New England Complex Systems Institute (www.necsi.org), and who describes emergence thus:

1. *...what parts of a system do together that they would not do by themselves; collective behavior.*
2. *...what a system does by virtue of its relationship to its environment that it would not do by itself.*
3. *...the act of process of becoming an emergent system.*

Further:

According to (1) emergence refers to understanding how collective properties arise from the properties of the parts. More generally, it refers to how behavior at a larger scale of the system arises from the detailed structure, behavior and relationships at a finer scale. In the extreme, it is about how macroscopic behavior arises from microscopic behavior.

(Bar-Yam, 2000b)

In discussing methodology, Bar-Yam suggests a holistic approach to observing the relationship between the parts and the system as a whole:

...emergent properties cannot be studied by physically taking a system apart and looking at the parts (reductionism). They can, however, be studied by looking at each of the parts in the context of the system as a whole. This is the nature of emergence and an indication of how it can be studied and understood.

(Bar-Yam, 1997, p.10)

To describe this process of 'the emergence of emergence', Bar-Yam invokes the metaphor of '[seeing] the forest and the trees at the same time... We see the ways the trees and the forest are related to each other' (Bar-Yam, 2000b). Sociologist C. Wright Mills has drawn upon the same metaphor to describe the essential character of what he calls 'the sociological imagination', namely, the ability to observe the forest and the trees simultaneously (Mills, 1959). This approach lends itself to a qualitative study of emergent behaviours and cultures, enabling one to observe and analyse phenomena at different scales concurrently. In other words, it enables us to study concurrently the behavior of individual units in a complex system, their relationship to each other, and the overarching patterns of the system as whole.

MMOGs have several properties that make them unique contexts for emergent behaviour:

1. MMOGs are closed systems, discrete synthetic worlds that possess and maintain a consistent set of internal rules. Within that closed system, we can observe classic properties of emergence, such as feedback, and multi-generational patterns (Bar-Yam, 1997, Johnson, 2001).
2. MMOGs are open-ended. Unlike many other games, they do not have and end state that can be considered 'winning'.
3. MMOGs are 'persistent state worlds'. This means that whatever is done in them remains and is cumulative over time. This includes both the individual player identity and the world as a whole.
4. Because the game is persistent and remains 'on' at all times, players can inhabit and construct the world asynchronously from one another.
5. Engagement in MMOGs is long-term. Typical console games, as an example, allow for anywhere from ten to forty hours of total play time. The typical MMOG player spends an average of twenty-one hours per week in-game, and some spend significantly more (Yee, 2001, Seay et al., 2004). It is possible for players to maintain involvement in the game for as long as it is operating, although it is typical for players to experience 'burn-out', which leads to a 'churn rate' (rate of subscription turnover) of roughly 18 months (Appelcline, 2000-2006, Yee, 2001).
6. In MMOGs we see several forms of temporal distortion. On the one hand, basic tasks such as communication take longer yet players often report a 'time flies' quality of losing track of time; conversely, there appears to be a phenomenon of time compression in which social processes that would ordinarily take long periods to develop are perceived to occur at a highly accelerated rate. Players report that friendships form at accelerated rates, and the growth and decline of communities seems to progress much faster than would be the case in 'real world' settlements.

In studying phenomena within online game worlds which appear to be emergent, I used the following criteria. This list serves as a sort of 'litmus test' for emergence:

1. *Events Over Time.* The study had to be longitudinal in order to detect emergent behaviour over time; eighteen months was selected as the time frame for practical reasons, and also in line with the 'churn' figure described above.
2. *Scale.* The study had to focuses on a group that was sufficiently large to exhibit emergent behavior, yet small enough for a single researcher to study in a qualitative fashion. The main focus of this investigation, The Gathering of Uru, comprised between 450 and 160 players during the course of the study. They were a subset of two larger meta-groups, the Uru Diaspora comprising an estimated 10,000 players, and the inhabitants of *There.com*, whose exact number is unknown but is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands.
3. *Components vs. System.* Emergent phenomena transcend the life cycle of any one of the elements within the complex system. Therefore, the emergent phenomena studied had to demonstrate recognisable patterns across a diverse sampling of individual participants.
4. *Relationship to Game's Intent.* Emergent behaviour was defined as falling outside the formal structure of the game as intended by its designers.
5. *Method.* The study had to utilise a method that would enable observation of the 'forest and the trees at the same time'; in other words, it had to be possible to observe the system and its parts concurrently.

3.3 Play Communities and Flow

This project can be characterised as a study of a play community, using the definition put forth by Bernie DeKoven, namely a group of people whose desire to play together transcends their interest in any one game, and who develop their own set of socially specific rules with which to engage in various game activities (DeKoven, 1978).

DeKoven has also explored the relationship of Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and developed the notion of 'CoLiberation', a more social reading of flow which looks at the ways in which players enhance and maintain the quality of flow for one another through the play act (DeKoven, 2003, DeKoven, 1992a).

These two concepts will be explored further in *Book II.*

3.4 Anthropological Perspectives

3.4.1 Multi-Sited Cyberethnography

> *What research strategy could possibly collect information on unpredictable outcomes? Social anthropology has one trick up its sleeve: the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the investigator is aware of at the time of collection. Anthropologists deploy open-ended, non-linear methods of data collection which they call ethnography; I refer particularly to the nature of ethnography entailed in anthropology's version of fieldwork (Arizpe 1996: 91). Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact. In the field the ethnographer may work by indirection, creating tangents from which the principal subject can be observed (through 'the wider social context'). But what is tangential at one stage may become central at the next.*
>
> (Strathern, 2004, pp.5-6)

Marilyn Strathern's description of the anthropological method, quoted by anthropologist Tom Boellstorff in the inaugural issue of *Games & Culture* (Boellstorff, 2006), resonates on a variety of levels with the larger project of this thesis: the study of 'cultures of emergence' in online games and virtual worlds. The ludic environments of online games are characteristically 'open-ended', 'non-linear' and 'participatory', unpredictable and labile, and thus require an agile and responsive approach to research. They are also characterised by 'lived experience', which is one of the central concerns of ethnography: the apprehension of day-to-day practice. Contemporary, post-colonial, post-structuralist cultural anthropology avoids arriving at cultural contexts with 'hypotheses' or preconceived scenarios about what might occur and what it might mean. This is the appropriate approach to take in the social studies of games because of their inherent unpredictability and emergent qualities.

Ethnography has been widely adopted among researchers from computer-mediated communication, computer supported collaborative work, Game Studies, and a range of other disciplines related to networked communication. This study can be viewed a merger of techniques and might be construed as 'multi-sited cyberethnography', borrowing from George Marcus' concept of 'multi-sited ethnography', which addresses the problem of anthropology in a 'global system'. Although it was not in its original conception developed as a method for the study of networked cultures, Marcus anticipated its applicability to media studies, which he describes as 'among a number of interdisciplinary (in fact, ideologically antidisciplinary) arenas' that might find utility in such a concept (Marcus, 1995).

The term 'virtual ethnography' has also come into vogue as a way to describe ethnographies of networked cultures. This term seems to have been introduced by Bruce Lionel Mason, a folklorist, in 1996 (Mason, 1996) and later adopted and popularised by Christine Hine (Hine, 1998, Hine, 2000). Although I concur with the basic tenets that both Mason and Hine describe as a framework for this style of research, I prefer the terms 'cybersociology' and 'cyberethnography' rather than 'virtual ethnography', which implies a lack of authenticity or veracity to the work and its outcomes.

In defining 'virtual ethnography', Hine describes the sociology of technology as being:

> *...particularly provocative in exploring the ways in which the designers of technologies understand their users and the ways in which users creatively appropriate and interpret the technologies which are made available to them. Among the questions preoccupying workers in this field has been the extent to which values, assumptions and even technological characteristics built into the technologies by designers have influence on the users of technologies. A view of technology emerges which sees it as embedded within the social relations which make it meaningful.*
>
> (Hine, 1998)

Unfortunately, few sociologists of technology are as conscientious about considering the design of the software they are describing. In the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, for instance, there are very few references or descriptions of the software or interfaces of the communications technologies within which social interaction takes place. Scholars of human interface design, in particular those who study network collaborative workspace, seem to have a greater focus on software design (Dourish, 2001, Nardi and Kaptelinin, 2006 in press, Bardram and Czerwinski, 2005). Still, the focus of this work is often on productivity or knowledge management, with a few exceptions, such as Nardi's study of incidental interactions over workplace networks motivated purely by the social need to 'connect' with co-workers (Nardi, 2005). Numerous other researchers have used an ethnographic approach to studying various aspects of network culture, including the World Wide Web, irc/chat, MUDs and MOOs, and blogs (Miller and Slater, 2000, Markham, 2003, Reed, 2005, Nocera, 2002, Paccagnella, 1997, Mnookin, 1996, Kendall, 2002, Turkle, 1995).

Because of the nature of this study, concerning the migration of game communities between virtual worlds, multi-sited ethnography provides a means to, in Marcus' words, 'examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse space-time' and '...investigates and ethnographically constructs the lifeworlds of various situated subjects...' as well as 'aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests among sites (Marcus 1995, p.98).

This last point is key because Marcus sees multi-sited ethnography as a means of understanding a 'world system', or in this case a 'virtual world system', encompassing the totality of networked games and virtual worlds on the Internet, what I am calling 'the ludisphere'. I am also looking at a more microscopic level at the social system within the particular group I am studying, and the ways in which large group behaviour begins to take on emergent properties of self-organisation. Marcus' framework of the complexity of anthropology within the world system, and especially the transmigration of peoples, cultures and artefacts across borders, is highly applicable to the project at-hand in which players are migrating across borders of 'magic circles' in virtual worlds. It also allows for the multi-scaled approach of looking at both the individual players and the system as a whole, in order words, looking at the 'forest and the trees concurrently'.

> *Thus, in a multi-sited ethnography, comparison emerges from putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand, but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has different, complexly connected, real-world sites of investigation.*
>
> (Marcus, 1995, p.102)

Marcus outlines a number of approaches each of which entails 'following' some aspect of culture across borders. The two being applied here are 'follow the IP', or intellectual property, in this case the *Uru* game and its emergent fan cultures, and 'follow the people', specifically, the migrations of players between different game worlds after the closure of the original *Uru* game. I would also add to this the methods of 'following up' and 'following leads', which often entail taking on the very tangents to which Strathern alludes above, and are described in more detail in the methodology section.

In ethnographies of play, this strategy of 'following' requires a highly improvisational approach, and one which I would characterise as opportunistic: being in the right place at the right time and 'going with the flow' of whatever is happening in the moment. Play is by nature spontaneous and unpredictable, requiring what Janesick describes as a choreographic approach (Janesick, 2000).

3.4.2 Feminist, Alternative and Experimental Ethnography

This study operates from a framework of contemporary, post-colonial, feminist ethnography. It may be construed as 'experimental ethnography', although the methods used are relatively 'traditional' within the rubric of these contemporary movements. The aspects that can be construed as experimental are the subject, the context, the 'field' in which the ethnography takes place; its framing as a performative process; and the polyphonic approaches to the text of this thesis.

The project at hand is essentially a study of the everyday practice of popular 'fan' culture. As such it may be seen to overlap to some degree with the concerns of ethnographers such as Paul Willis, whose interest in cultures of subversion this research parallels. Willis' studies of working class youth in a UK secondary school, and of 'bike boys' in a UK motorbike gang, both focus on the ways in which alternative and subversive sub-cultures serve to reinforce or deconstruct the status quo, and on the role that consumer practices play in this process (Willis, 1981, Willis, 1978). Willis argues for an approach to ethnography that frames the process of meaning-making in everyday life as an art practice. Similarly, this study explores the relationship between play and creativity, and celebrates the artistic instinct that underlies all play practice. Willis also points out the strong connection between the construction of meaning and identity, a key theme of this thesis:

> *Cultural practices of meaning-making are intrinsically self-motivated as aspects of identity-making and self-construction: in making our cultural worlds we make ourselves.*
>
> (Willis, 2000, p.xiv)

Of the relationship between social constructs and individual behaviour, Willis asks: 'Do we speak language, or does it speak us?' The study could easily reframe the question: 'Do we play games, or do they play us?'

In discussing post-colonial approaches to anthropology, Michael Jackson argues for intersubjectivity as a key framework for understanding cultures, which, he suggests, may be particularly appropriate conceptually when working with non-western cultures. As Jackson points out, different cultures conceive differently of the relationship between 'the one and the many'. He highlights Joas' notion of the 'intersubjective turn' (Joas, 1993) in which 'subjectivity has not so much been dissolved as relocated' (Jackson, 1998, pp.6-7) Digital social networks such as online games further support this intersubjective turn, materialising the abstract notion that theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin characterised as the 'noosphere', a kind of shared knowledge space that Marshall McLuhan observed was realised through electric media (McLuhan, 1964, Teilhard de Chardin, 1959 (1955)).

Jackson also speaks of 'playing with reality':

> *If life is conceived as a game, then it slips and slides between slavish adherence to the rules and a desire to play fast and loose with them. Play enables us to renegotiate the given, experiment with alternatives, imagine how things might be otherwise, and so resolve obliquely and artificially that which cannot be resolved in the 'real' world.*
>
> (Jackson, 1998, pp.28-29)

Merging Willis and Jackson, life might be construed as both a game and a work of art whose practice comprises both the exploration of and the bending of rules. In addition, Wills envisions ethnography as a puzzle to be solved, a position that this project explicitly embraces as integral to its methodology (Willis 2000, p.113). Thus ethnography itself becomes both a game and an art practice.

Many of these tensions are also at the heart of 'feminist ethnography', which, Kamala Visweswaran notes, has long challenged boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity, individual and society, researcher and subject, fact and fiction, self and other, art and science, and is frequently dismissed as 'subjective' and hence 'unscientific' (Visweswaran, 1994). She highlights anthropologists such as Ruth Behar, who argues that taking the role of the 'vulnerable observer' and accepting emotional engagement as a legitimate part of the ethnographic process, may ultimately lead to a deeper truth (Behar, 1996).

Visweswaran also cites the ways in which female anthropologists draw an entirely different 'reading' from a culture by gaining access to women's cultural practices and seeing the world from their perspective. Male subjects as well might react differently to a woman ethnographer, who may harvest different insights than their male counterparts. The work of Margaret Mead, Marjorie Shostak and Hortense Powdermaker, for instance, gives us insight into female attitudes, practices and rituals to which male ethnographers would not have been privy. (Shostak, 1981, Powdermaker, 1966, Mead, 1963, Mead, 1928).

Visweswaran also describes shifts in structures of power and authority in which subjects take the roles of collaborators, or even drive the research. Ruth Behar was chosen by her research subject 'Esperanza', a Mexican street peddler who adopted the ethnographer as her 'comadre' because she wanted Behar to tell her story (Behar, 1993). Hortense Powdermaker describes being drawn into a dance ritual by her Lesu subjects and 'losing herself' in the experience (Powermaker 1966, pp.108-116). Feminist ethnographers Elenore Smith Bowen (*nom de plume* Laura Bohannan) and Zora Neale Hurston blurred the boundary between fact and fiction (Hurston, 1935, Bowen and Bohanna, 1964). Hurston's work may be categorised as an early example of 'auto-ethnography', as one of her study subjects was the town where she was born. 'In Hurston's ethnography', states Visweswaran, 'community is seen not merely as an object to be externally described, but as a realm intimately inhabited'. Likewise, the play community is best studied when 'intimately inhabited' (Visweswaran 1994, p.33). As with Hurston, this research also serves as an oral history alongside the players' own oral histories of their diasporic experience.

This study acknowledges the subject position of the female gamer (and ethnographer), though it does not purport to be a systematic analysis of feminist theory or thought. However, because it represents a

disproportionately high percentage of women relative to other MMOG communities (exactly half, to be precise), it may stand as a feminist ethnography strictly on the basis of demographics alone. At the same time, this study is philosophically aligned with the definitions of feminist ethnography as defined by Visweswaran as it explores a different and perhaps opposing border between fiction and reality.

3.4.4 Ethnography of Fictional Worlds

> *If we agree that one of the traditional ways to think about fiction is that it builds a believable world, but one that the reader rejects as factual, then we can easily say of ethnography that it, too, sets out to build a believable world but one that the reader will accept as factual. Yet even this distinction breaks down if we consider that ethnography, like fiction, constructs existing or possible worlds, all the while retaining the idea of an alternative 'made' world.*
>
> (Visweswaran, 1994, p.1)

What, then, of an ethnography of a fictional world? This study is not a fiction. Rather, it sets out to create a non-fictional account of a fictional world, and explores the emergent culture of a 'fictive ethnicity', an identity adopted around an imaginary homeland. Proponents of Baudrillard's theory of the simulacra might find such a notion alarming. Indeed, an appropriate subtitle for this endeavour might be 'Baudrillard's nightmare'. In his disdain for the synthetic, Baudrillard failed to recognise the immediacy and *reality* of imagination, and the human need for alternative modes of being (Baudrillard, 1994), a fact that is well-documented by Victor Turner and others (Turner, 1982, van Gennep, 1960 [1908], Schechner, 1988a). Similar to the way in which play has been marginalised in Western thought, Baudrillard marginalises the synthetic, as seen in theme parks and virtual reality, as 'fake' and 'false'. Players within virtual worlds, conversely, might argue that in some respects, their synthetic homes are more 'real' than 'reality' because they allow for the exploration of alternative roles, realities and identities.

Although denizens of fictional worlds, the Uru Diaspora shares qualities in common with real-world diasporas, commonly characterised by 'experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home...' and relating to such notions as 'border, creolisation, transculturation, hybridity' (Clifford 1994, pp.302-304). In conceiving a contemporary definition of diaspora, Clifford cites Rouse who describes diaspora as a single community that maintains 'transnational migrant circuits' through 'the continuous circulation of people, money, goods and information' (Rouse, 1991). However, as Safran points out, some real-world diasporas may ultimately be just as mythological as the fictive identity of the Uru Diaspora, whose communal identity is of choice, rather than geopolitics or genetics. This fictive identity presents us with a unique conflation of global corporate culture and

fan-based media subversion. While on the one hand, the *Uru* identity is built upon an artefact of corporate media, namely the *Uru* game, on the other, it provides its denizens with the freedom to build and extend their own vision and values around a fictional identity that provides an additive alternative to their various real-life roles. Furthermore, Uruvians frequently make a point of highlighting their nonviolent ludic values, as juxtaposed against those of most other MMOGs and their players.

While this notion of a fictive ethnic identity may seem like a conundrum, anthropology is a discipline that has long blurred the boundary between science and art; anthropologists have written along a spectrum from a more formal style of the ethnographic monograph to anthropologically informed works which are baldly framed as fiction. The question of whether anthropological texts can or should be viewed as 'literature' has vexed anthropologists going back as far as Malinowski (Malinowski, 1967). Thus anthropological perspectives provide a theoretical context for exploring the contested territory between 'real' and 'fictional' cultures, and the role of the ethnographer in their construction.

In large part due to its historical relationship with colonialism, contemporary anthropology also provides us with a means to reflect on and interrogate the relationship between the researcher and her subjects, both in the field, and in matters of representation. Visweswaran points out that:

> *Since Malinowski's time, the 'method' of participant-observation has enacted a delicate balance of subjectivity and objectivity. The ethnographer's personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, are recognized as central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and 'objective' distance. In classical ethnographies the voice of the author was always manifest, but the conventions of textual presentation and reading forbade too close a connection between authorial style and the reality presented.*
>
> (Visweswaran, 1994)

She adds: 'States of serious confusion, violent feelings or acts, censorship, important failures, changes of course, and excessive pleasures are excluded from the published account'. Ironically, these types of events are often the most important and can also have significant implications on the research. Ethnography is a messy business, and while the common practice is to present a 'cleaned up' version of events, there is also value in exposing the ethnographer's process of what Edward Shils calls 'learning as he stumbles' (Shils, 1957). Some of these stumbles are alluded to in the core findings, *Book II* of this text, but a more detailed account can be found in *Book III: Being Artemesia*, which provides a series of vignettes chronicling my personal experiences and transformation through the research process. This text is separated into its own section to avoid 'interrupting the flow of the main

ethnographic narrative' (Behar, 1996) or allowing my own narrative to eclipse that of my subjects (Wolcott, 1990). At the same time, some of the more challenging moments of rupture ultimately precipitated both a stronger relationship with the subjects, and ultimately, I would argue, a better outcome for the research. Therefore, although these details are 'personal', they were germane to the research and thus warrant inclusion in this account of the results.

Clifford and Marcus have pointed out that 'Hermeneutic philosophy in its varying styles...reminds us that the simplest cultural accounts are intentional creations, that interpreters constantly construct themselves through the others they study' (p.10). Thus the researcher must take a reflective stance towards her relationship to her subjects, and the ways in which each constructs the other, a point at which ethnography often blurs the boundary between science and art. 'It has become clear that every version of the "other", wherever found, is also a construction of the "self"...' Furthermore, they add that culture is '...contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and explanation—both by insiders and outsiders—is implicated in this emergence' (p.19). Thus the representation itself also becomes part of the cultural process. Not only is it true that '"cultures" do not hold still for their portraits' (p.10), but they may shift in direct relation to their portraitists. This is particularly the case in network play culture, where cultures are constantly shifting in a highly compressed frame of both time and space (Clifford and George E. Marcus, 1986).

What Clifford and Marcus may have overlooked is the role that the studied culture has in constructing the ethnographer. Time and time again, especially in the feminist ethnographies described above, we see that the researcher is as much constructed by the subjects as the other way around. Thus a mutual construction may take place that transforms both the researcher and the subject, what I refer to as 'the social construction of the ethnographer'.

3.4.5 Playing Ethnography

While the sociologist Erving Goffman's 'dramaturgical' approach to sociology (Goffman, 1959) predates the preponderance of electronic media, it also prefigures the current state of affairs in which the relationship between performer and audience is increasingly blurred to create a milieu of concurrent and dialogic co-performance. As ethnographer/theorist Norman Denzin puts it: 'We inhabit a performance-based, dramaturgical culture. The dividing line between performer and audience blurs, and culture itself becomes a dramatic performance.' In *Performance Ethnography,* Denzin points to the 'nearly invisible boundaries that separate everyday theatrical performances from formal theatre, dance, music, MTV, video and film' (Denzin, 2003).

Yet in enumerating the media that blur the boundaries of performance, he neglects to mention the medium that perhaps most epitomises the world-as-stage philosophy: the Internet. With proliferation

of personal web sites, blogs, photosites and forums, the Internet is perhaps the world's largest stage. The notion of 'computers as theatre' is not new (Laurel, 1991); however, the advent of networked computers has transformed them into a discursive space where every participant is both performer and audience. Online games and virtual worlds, with their fantasy narratives and role-playing structures, are perhaps the most dramatic instantiation of the network stage. While all the *real* world may not be a stage, it can be argued that all virtual worlds most definitely are.

Performance ethnography has been defined in two ways. The first, characterised by the work of anthropologists Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, entails the study and analysis of the role of performance and ritual in cultures. This form of anthropology has typically embraced play and games as a subset of ritual and performance, although generally not as its focal point. Turner and Schechner also collaborated to pioneer the second type of performance ethnography, that which Denzin describes, specifically, the theatrical performance of ethnographic texts and narratives, often with audience participation (Manning, 1988). Yet Denzin's assertion that 'performance approaches to knowing insist on immediacy and involvement' (Denzin, 2003) suggests a third type of performance ethnography, that in which the ethnographic method of participant observation is itself framed as a performance. The study of game culture demands such an approach because its object, play, can only be adequately understood through immediate and direct engagement.

Game worlds provide a unique context for the ethnographic study of virtual worlds because they are, by definition, performative spaces. One cannot enter into an online game or virtual world without joining in the performance. Goffman's concept of the performance of everyday life (Goffman, 1959), especially in the context of public space (Goffman, 1963), provides us with a starting point for understanding network game space as a kind of 'everyday' performance. In *Behavior in Public Places* (1963), Goffman describes the concept of 'occasioned' behaviour that is appropriate for one context and not another. (He also famously pointed out that the inability to recognise socially appropriate behaviour is a hallmark of mental illness). In game space, however, within the magic circle of the play context, certain often subversive behaviours become sanctioned which would, in other contexts, be considered socially unacceptable. Goffman's conception of the dynamics of how people perform in these occasioned spaces was perhaps a bit too rational. His descriptions of such everyday performances suggest that people are highly self-conscious about their public behaviour; he may thus have underestimated the extent to which such behaviour is improvised, reflexive, and emergent. However, his overarching concept provides a framework for better understanding the liberties that can be taken within a game space, and the co-performative quality of the experience.

The entrée into this co-performative space is the creation of a fictional character. The first gesture of a player entering a virtual world is to invent a character name; this becomes the signifier of her situated

identity going forward: the marker of her reputation, the vehicle of her agency, and the representation of her cumulative actions. The player also crafts her visual representation in the world, given a kit of parts provided by the designers. This creative act, much like choosing a costume for a masquerade ball, the renaissance faire or Mardi Gras festival, is the first performative gesture in the gaming experience, and the scaffolding on which her future identity will be built. From this point forward, players both play and play *with* their emergent identities through an *intersubjective* process. Far from being singly a creation of the individual, the avatar is a mechanism for *social* agency; and the player's identity-creation will emerge in a particular social context through a set of interactions with a particular group of people. Avatars do not exist in isolation, and through this intersubjective co-performative framework players may discover sides of themselves that may not have other avenues of expression in the 'real world'. Often these forms of expression can be subversive, in both negative and positive ways. Part of what this study explores is the relationship between the emergence of individual identity and that of the group identity through the performance and practice of play.

*f*4 Methodology: Performing Ethnography

4.1 Participant Observation

The method chosen for this research was ethnography, which consists of participant observation. This entails 'fieldwork', observing and encountering subjects in their 'native habitat'. This approach was selected over methods such as out-of-game interviews, surveys or isolated study of chatlogs primarily because it privileges the online experience and allows for real-time engagement with study subjects, a necessary feature for the study of play. Such an approach also allowed for the multi-scaled observation, observing both individual and group behaviors, required to detect patterns of emergence.

Miles and Huberman in *Qualitative Data Analysis* describe qualitative research as 'raw experience... converted into words (Huberman and Miles 1994, p.9). These experiences may be captured as still or moving images, often involving conversation or linking to words, and text based on 'watching, asking or examining' carried out close to a local setting over a sustained period (Wolcott, 1992). These are often open, unstructured and event-driven.

In studying cybercultures, I agree with Taylor's assertion (Taylor, 1999) that the approach initially taken by Turkle (Turkle, 1995) of utilising face-to-face interviews as a primary data collection method is problematical on several fronts. As Boellstorff and others have pointed out, the participant observation method has shown that what people say and what they do can often be quite different (Boellstorff, 2006), and each can shed light on the other. The real-world interview privileges face-to-face interactions over in-world interactions, suggesting that online observation and interviews are somehow 'less trustworthy' than those conducted in the so-called 'real world'; like Taylor, I would argue that privileging the online experience frames it as 'normative', and de-emphasises the prejudice that online life is somehow a sign of psychological or psychosocial dysfunction. Fourth, related to point three, as Markham and others have found, interviews conducted in-situ with the online persona can often yield more authentic responses, in part because by meeting the subject 'on their own turf', the researcher is also forced to give up her own preconceptions and prejudices (Markham, 1998a). Lastly, because 'play' is a cultural practice uniquely 'of the moment', it demands a level of immediacy and immersion.

In the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC), Paccagnella famously promotes a 'getting the seat of your pants dirty' approach of real-time, in-world participation, which follows on well-established methods from the social sciences, including anthropology (Paccagnella, 1997). This in-world, participant observation approach is crucial in rectifying the discrepancies between what people do and what they say. Conversely, the cyber-archaeology approach proposed by Quentin Jones

contends that chatlogs can be considered and treated as material culture, as artefacts of cybercultures (Jones, 1997).

While this forensic approach has merits, taken alone, it runs the same risk as traditional archaeology: artefacts out of context, whether physical or digital, do not paint a complete picture of a culture (Robbins, 1997). Furthermore, while a certain amount of wordplay takes place in online graphical game worlds, much of the activity is nonverbal in nature, involving exploration, co-ordinated activities, dancing, playing various sports, and other types of physical play that are not adequately captured in chatlogs. The study of player forums can also be helpful, but often represents a limited sampling of the larger community. Chatlogs can be extremely useful in augmenting in-world participant observation and interviews. Taken together, these data provide us with a number of sources from which to draw in 'crystallising' ones data (Richardson, 1994).

Interestingly, Jones' archaeological approach takes on new relevance in graphical virtual worlds such as those covered in this study, highly visual cultures which players have a hand in creating. An archaeological approach to the study of visual culture in this context can serve as a supplement to participant observation, or, perhaps in cases where artefact creation is the main concern of the study, (Poremba, 2003) it can stand on its own as a methodological approach. In addition, live screen shots of players taken in-world can also provide a kind of 'visual anthropology' and may even comprise their own unique art form (Poremba, 2005).

Given the need for variations of scale in the study of emergent social phenomena within complex systems, I have chosen to fold together some of the techniques described above and use what Laurel Richardson describes as *mixed genres.* Richardson identifies post-modern approaches to 'Creative Analytic Practices,' or 'CAP' ethnography, using multiple methods to achieve what she calls 'crystallisation'. She describes crystallisation as the 'postmodernist deconstruction of triangulation', and more relevant to contemporary post-positivist, hermeneutic approaches that reject the notion of 'objective' reality:

> *In traditionally staged research, we valorize "triangulation". In triangulation, a researcher deploys "different methods"—such as interviews, census data, and documents—to "validate" findings. The methods, however, carry the same domain assumptions, including the assumption that there is a "fixed point" or "object" that can be triangulated. But in post-modernist mixed-genre texts, we do not triangulate, we* crystallize. *We recognize that there are far more than "three sides" from which to approach the world.*

> *I propose that the central imaginary for "validity" for postmodernist texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose...In postmodernist mixed-genre texts, we have moved from plane geometry to light theory, where light can be both waves and particles. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know.*
>
> 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry', *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Richardson, 1994, p. 934)

'Crystallisation' is also an apt metaphor when trying to understand emergence in complex systems. In the context of an artistic enterprise, crystallisation provides a deeper level of insight, one that acknowledges and embraces the wide range of scales and viewpoints needed in order to understand the ways in which cybercultures are constructed by individual players through emergent intersubjective processes over time. It allows for variegated and various subjective viewpoints and intersubjective processes to be collected into a composite *bricolage* that creates a single, coherent image of the life of a community. Crystallisation provides us with a viable means of studying the forest and the trees concurrently.

Janesick also advocates crystallisation and adds to it the metaphor of choreography. This is especially relevant with respect to the improvisational nature of both the study of and the creation of cybercultures, as well as the performative framing of this investigation. Janesick advocates an approach that combines rigor and flexibility, as trained performers can improvise within a proscribed set of parameters (Janesick, 2000). This metaphor is apt, as dance and games share in common the framework of acting spontaneously within a formal structure of rules.

Online worlds have some unique affordances that can serve to aid the data collection process. The presence of the computer as the interface to the field site makes it possible not only to collect more data, but also to do so in a much less obtrusive way. The first and most obvious data collection aid is the chatlog, mentioned earlier, which can be automatically or manually archived, and provides a full account of verbatim text to review alongside field notes, although this can sometimes be complicated by multimodal communication combining text and voice chat. Second is the ability to take extensive notes in real-time without being observed by informants. Real world field researchers must either take notes in front of informants or record notes after the fact of an event or interview. The mediation of the screen creates a kind of veil, and while players often know you are taking notes, as related in one

amusing episode in *Book III* of this thesis, the fact that they cannot observe it allows one to blend more seamlessly with the milieu. Third, the most useful and interesting tool for data collection is the screenshot and video capture, whose potential for visual anthropology is only beginning to be explored. In early writings by Bateson and Mead, ethnographers are encouraged to use new media technologies, most specifically, movie cameras, to document their work (Brockman, 1977). Yet few technologies are more obtrusive in 'real life' than a movie camera; furthermore, the operation of either a still or movie camera tends to create an interaction barrier between the researcher and the subjects.

Screenshots and in-world videos, on the other hand, can be taken with the touch of a button, do not require any special photographic skill, and are entirely imperceptible to the study subjects. These stealth documentation modes present some ethical challenges. For instance, should cyberspace be considered 'public space' and therefore not subject to disclosure to research participants? Following the practice of real-world anthropologists, I made my research activities known to community leaders, and requested permission (recorded in chatlogs) to conduct interviews. In contexts that might be construed as 'public', it was not always possible to disclose the research activities to all those present, although most of the members of the community were made aware of the research over time.

Finally, perhaps the most unique and useful feature of cyberspace from an ethnographic research perspective is the online discussion forum. Many fan groups have discussion forums to which players actively contribute on a daily basis. These are important because they can be the main means for group co-ordination and problem-solving, but they are also particularly useful for their archival function. The other benefit of the forum is that it often includes demographic information about members, which can be helpful in obtaining an overview of a community. The one drawback of forums is that they generally represent the points of view of a small and vocal minority, and are not always indicative of the positions of the broader populace. Furthermore, in-world leaders are often not the most vociferous forum posters, and vice versa. Thus I would caution researchers against using forums as a single or even a primary data source as they tend to give an imbalanced picture of the community as a whole.

Researchers can also take advantage of group forums as a means to communicate with their subjects. When a controversy arose around the research, I was able to engage in a discussion with participants via the forum. In addition, the forum became useful in soliciting participant feedback for the research blog.

5 Research Method: Playing Ethnography

5.1 Playing and Performing Ethnography

In order to conduct this game/performance/ethnography, I created Artemesia, a 'research avatar' with a trans-ludic identity that enabled me to follow players across borders into the different virtual worlds they inhabited. As it is common for players to abbreviate one another's avatar names, the name Artemesia was almost always colloquially reduced to either 'Arte' or 'Art'.

The creation of trans-ludic identities was a custom already practiced by the players in the study. This involved not only using the same name in each virtual world, but also frequently attempting to create as close a resemblance as possible between avatars across games, and often based loosely on the person's real-world appearance. Below are images of Artemesia in *There, Second Life,* and *Until Uru,* as well as a photograph of the author (Figure 5.1). In each case, the general appearance includes red hair, a fair complexion, and one of a number of hairdos that attempted to approximate either past or current 'real life' hairstyles. It should be noted that each of these games has different affordances for modifications in player representation, which are reflected in the images below. *Uru* has the most limited palette of avatar options, followed by *There.com*, where players can create, buy and sell their own clothing, and *Second Life*, which provides affordances not only for highly customised player-created costumes but hairstyles and even avatar skins.

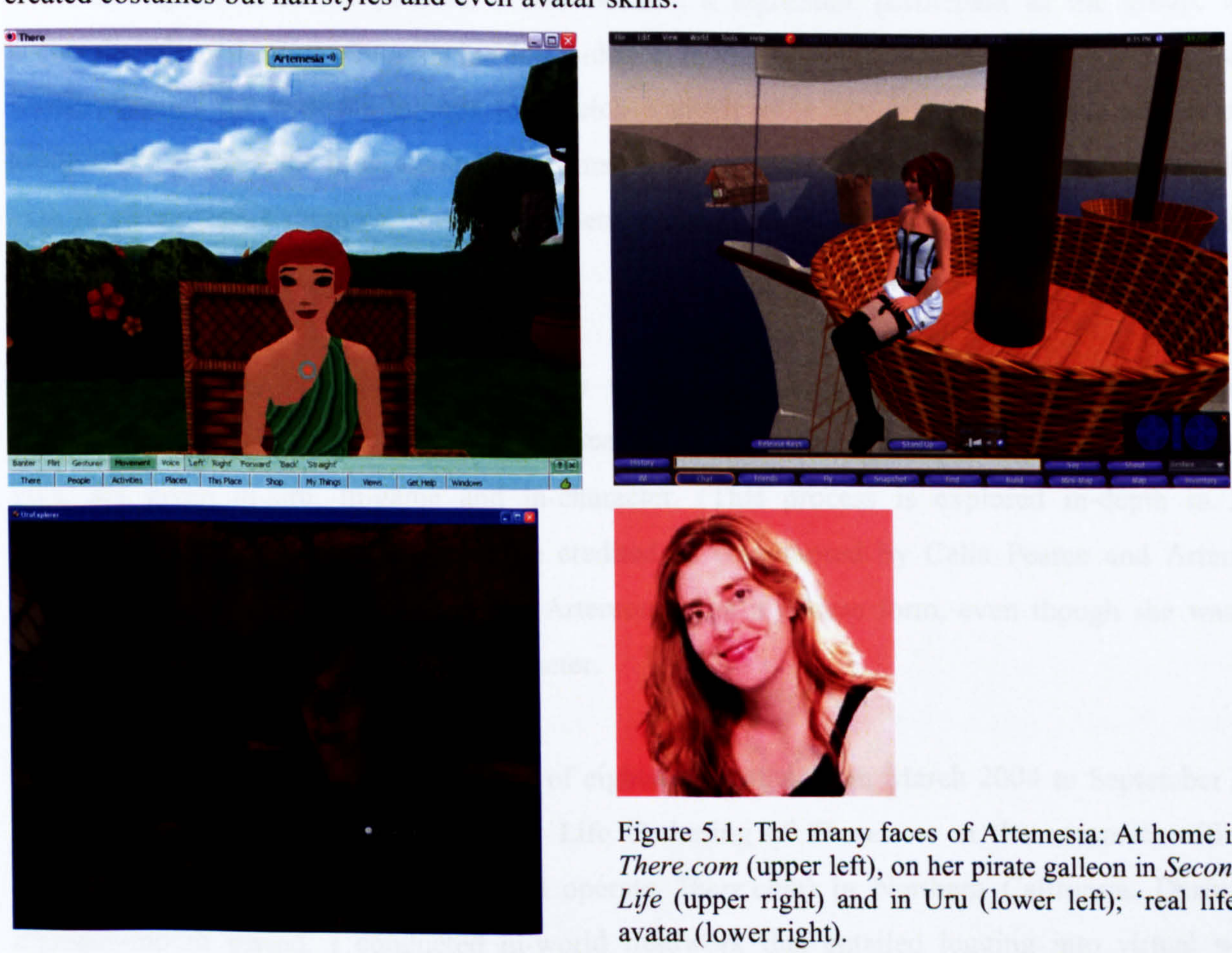


Figure 5.1: The many faces of Artemesia: At home in *There.com* (upper left), on her pirate galleon in *Second Life* (upper right) and in Uru (lower left); 'real life' avatar (lower right).

The intersection between myself and Artemesia, the central topic of *Being Artemesia,* the 'novella' section of this thesis, is what James Gee calls 'the third being', a new creation that exists between myself and a fictional character (Gee, 2003). Gee's definition pertains more to characters in single-player games, characters that are already somewhat defined by the game's narrative, whereas massively multiplayer game characters tend to place character agency more squarely in the hands of the player, given a constrained 'kit of parts' made available by the designers. Thus the player constructs her avatar character over time through the improvisational performance of play. In terms of traditional play culture, Schechner describes this as a play and performance paradox in which a third character is formed that is 'not me, and not not me', but somewhere in between (Schechner, 1988b).

I initially played Artemesia like a game character, following certain parameters suitable to the 'role-play' of an ethnographer. In addition, the ethnographic process was itself a game, filled with mysteries to be revealed and puzzles to be solved. Thus I was engaging in a meta-game (the ethnographic project) within a meta-game (the Uru Diaspora), both of which can be characterised as forms of emergent behaviour. This role-play/research methodology defined a new praxis, ethnography-as-performance-as-game.

Ironically, one of the outcomes of this research was that in *playing* this role, I eventually became a 'real' ethnographer. In the process, I also became a legitimate participant of the group, which eventually adopted me as ethnographer-in-residence. In this role, I became a kind of 'inside-outsider', which provided me with the inroads to develop a much more accurate and intimate picture of the group while at the same time attempting to maintain my 'objective' perspective. As is generally the case in ethnographic research, the development of trust and rapport was vital to the success of the research.

In developing both this character and this method, I have also integrated Artemesia into the presentation and writing process for this research. All presentations of this research, including the viva, are given in-situ, in-game and in-character. (This process is explored in-depth in *Being Artemesia.*) In addition, publications are credited as co-authored by Celia Pearce and Artemesia, prompting one publisher to request that Artemesia sign a release form, even though she was well aware that Artemesia was a fictional character.

The field study took place over a period of eighteen months, from March 2004 to September 2005, culminating with my attending the Real Life Gathering of *There.com* at the corporate offices of Makena Technologies (which owns and operate *There.com*) in Northern California. During this eighteen-month period, I conducted in-world fieldwork that entailed logging into virtual worlds, primarily *There.com*, as well as other virtual worlds that the players inhabited and/or visited.

My method for engaging with the group was consistent with traditional anthropological methods; the process of research included considerable investigation into standard anthropological methods and discussion with anthropologists of 'real world' and 'in-game world' studies. The research entailed making contact with key group leaders, and informing them of my interest in doing a study of their group(s). Early contacts with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of The Gathering of Uru in *There.com* were met with great support, and provided an entrée into the community at-large. When interacting with players, I was diligent in informing them of my research activities and utilised the chatlog record as confirmation of their permission to conduct interviews. Over time, I found that all of the players were quite willing to participate, and some actually sought me out requesting that I interview them for the study.

Field visits typically took place between two and four times a week, and varied in length from two to as many as five or six hours, depending on events and activities underway. Field visits primarily involved observing and participating with players in formal and informal, structured and unstructured play situations. The vast majority of time in-world was spent talking in various locales and concurrent with other activities. Exploring, identified as the primary play pattern of the community (as will be discussed in *Book II*), was manifested in a variety of different forms. In *There.com*, exploration was generally done in air or land vehicles. Vehicle exploration posed a particularly good opportunity to conduct informal interviews as explorations tended to take place in multi-person vehicles, or in separate vehicles with a shared instant message window. I often took the role of passenger so that my hands were free to type and take screenshots and I could attend carefully to the conversations, which took place in both voice and text chat.

In addition to participant observation of play activities, I also conducted both formal and informal, group and individual interviews on an ongoing basis. Group interviews were useful not only because they provided data but also because they allowed me to observe the players' relationships to one another and the ways in which they collectively constructed the reality of their game experience. This is a crucial because the underlying basis of the social construction is precisely that it *is* social, thus a social method of data collection can provide additional dimensions of understanding. The 'consensual hallucination' described by Gibson when he first coined the term 'cyberspace' (Gibson, 1984) is constructed collectively by the persons in the group, and the way in which they relate to each other through their fictive identities within the game world, including their group discursive style, is key to understanding the ways in which these cybercultures emerge. Players were engaging in a collective social construction of both a fictive ethnicity and an imaginary homeland, and so their collective discourse on these topics was highly informative. Since dialogue is a vital part of the social construction process, group interviews can often yield productive results because they provide a

collective understanding and viewpoint. Individual interviews, on the other hand, are often less censored and details that might not come out in a group context might also be revealed. A combination of individual and group interviews provides a means to corroborate perspectives and distinguish between different subjective interpretations and meaning-making strategies. It should be noted that anthropologists recommend a mixture of interviews and observation in order to form a complete picture of cultures: interviews provide a narrative of subjective events through a filter of qualitative insight. This can often result in a level of self-reflexive interpretation that frames the participants as the leading authorities on their own experience. At the same time, there may be factors of which participants are not conscious or are unable to articulate, and which can only be apprehended through direct observation. (Boellstorff, 2006) This is especially the case with play experiences. When one is fully immersed in a play activity, it is often difficult to apply a more objective analysis to events. These 'mixed-methods' thus provide the opportunity for 'crystallization' of data (as opposed to triangulation), creating a well-rounded portrait of cultural nuance that combines both subjective interpretation and objective analysis. (Richardson, 1994)

During site visits, I generally worked with a second computer that enabled me to keep detailed field notes; this was in part aided by the effect that things take longer in virtual space, so there were often adequate pauses in conversation or activity for me to do this effectively. This become more challenging as I became more actively involved in play activities that required a high level of participation and interaction, some examples of which are described in the findings. Where possible, I transcribed speech interactions within my field notes; I also captured chatlogs for all text chats. In addition to formal and informal interviews, I also conducted in-world discussion groups towards the end of the study with themes based on conversations and observations culled from the participant observation process. Textual data captured in this fashion was entered into a database, along with field notes, which each set of notes and transcripts coded by date, context, participants' names, activity and keywords. While the database used (Filemaker Pro) did not easily accommodate the integration of images, screenshots were coded by date and time in order to do cross-comparisons between textual and visual data.

Over the eighteen-month period of the field study, I took approximately 4,000 screenshots of players and player-created artefacts, as well as a small sampling of short video clips. I studied and documented *There.com*'s in-world auction site to survey player-created items, especially those that were based on or influenced by *Uru*. In addition to in-game observation, I made regular reviews of the group's forum, which served as an historical archive (including documentation of the *Uru* closure), as well as current discussion topics and issues of concern to players, announcements of upcoming events in the various worlds the group inhabited, as well as notices of real-world encounters between players. The group forum also included profiles of members, and this enabled me to sketch out a rough

demographic profile of the group. After Mills and others, I also kept a journal, which became the basis for the memoir portion of this text, *Being Artemesia* (Mills, 1959, Janesick, 1999).

One of my informants with a strong interest in the group's history and progress volunteered to assist me with data collection. She was more familiar than I with the history of the group, and so was able to point me to specific pages on the group's forum where significant historical events were recorded. She also assisted in some additional demographic research, especially *vis-à-vis* tracking fluctuation in group size. This informant also assisted me in editing chatlogs from group discussions and took me on a tour of all of the different locales the group had tried to settle in before they finally settled on Yeesha Island. She and other players also provided some of archival images included in *Book II.*

In addition to The Gathering of Uru, I also conducted supplemental research in *Second Life* interviewing former *Uru* players and documenting the *Uru*- and *Myst*-based areas in the world. I attended some meetings and events, but this research was primarily concerned with player-made environments within *Second Life*, and less with the group's culture and play patterns.

While it seems that different games researchers favour different data collection methods, I would argue that multiple and diverse data collection generates more dimensions to data and a better opportunity for crystallisation. The ease of data collection, however, creates the added challenge of generating even more data than is generated by 'real world' ethnography. As Huberman and Miles point out, 'the "quality" of qualitative research aside, the quantity can be daunting, if not overwhelming' (Huberman and Miles, 1994). The upside is that having one's notes typed, having numerous images that are pre-labelled with context and date, and having all this material in digital form, makes it much easier to organise, manage and maintain quality data than more traditional methods involving hand-written notes, note cards, or analogue photographs. Sometimes data loss can occur due to technical problems or lack of aptitude with the technologies being used. Initially, for instance, I had some challenges in taking and labelling screenshots, but eventually found a piece of software that allowed this process to be effortless and reliable, minimising data loss.

The textual data collected was input into a database, integrating each set of field notes, chatlogs, and transcripts into a single record by locale and date. I had initially hoped to integrate the screenshots I had collected into this database, but the software I was using was not well suited for cataloguing of images, and the process was too labour-intensive given the quantity of images collected (roughly 4,000 in all). In the future, I would like to find a better means for integrating textual data and visual records. All of the images were labelled by game, date and time, so it was not difficult to review images in sync with a review of textual data in the database. Various search methods were used to review data. As each textual entry included the names of participants in that event, it was possible to

sort by informant and thus study interviews and interactions with individuals. The database also allowed for word searches, so I could sort for particular references, narratives or themes. I also added a database field that specified the type of event, e.g., game, party, interview, informal conversation, etc. It should be noted that as voice came into use in the worlds I was studying, both through in-game voice technology and through supplemental use of voice-over-IP programs, the combination of transcripts and text chats become more involved and often challenging to analyse.

Sociologists Huberman and Miles suggest a highly formal sequence to data collection and analysis, including such steps as noting patterns and themes; seeing plausibility—making initial, intuitive sense; clustering by conceptual grouping; making metaphors; counting; making contrasts and comparisons; differentiation; shutting back and forth between particulars and the general; factoring; noting relations between variables; making conceptual or theoretical coherence (Huberman and Miles 1994, pp.245-246). Clifford Geertz, perhaps in a tradition more typical of anthropologists, writes of the distinction between the three operations of observing, recording and analysing, that 'distinguishing these three phases of knowledge-seeking may not, as a matter of fact, normally be possible; and, indeed, as autonomous "operations" they may not in fact exist' (Geertz, 1973), I would concur with Geertz that an orderly sequence of data collection followed by analysis is not plausible in practice. Analysis was well underway during the data collection process, as many patterns of emergent behaviour became evident almost immediately. Furthermore, the subjects themselves conducted data analysis during the data collection process, thus the data collection and analysis emerged as an iterative process rather than a linear sequence of events.

One critical technique was the visiting and revisiting of various data points. The same questions were asked and re-asked over the duration of the study. While some players found this annoying, it was an important tool to verify long-term patterns, and also to look at changes over time, a key quality of emergence. Furthermore, because part of what I was looking at was large-scale group behaviour, it was important to ask similar questions of many different players. For instance, questions such as 'what keeps the group together?' were commonly asked to numerous study subjects. Somewhat surprisingly, the answers were so consistent that a recognisable pattern could clearly be identified very early on during in the fieldwork. These data were revisited and interrogated after the basic fieldwork was complete to again reaffirm that these patterns did, indeed, exist and continued to persist.

5.2 Writing Ethnography

The process of representing the outcomes of the study was critically important, and a great deal of consideration was given to the format of the written thesis. As Clifford and Marcus point out, the writing process is much a construction of the author as of the subjects, and I was engaged in a

reflexive process throughout that constantly bore this in mind. (Clifford and George E. Marcus, 1986) Writing was viewed as a 'method of inquiry' (Richardson, 1994) and many of the core conclusions of the study emerged through the writing process itself.

Following from Willis (Willis, 1981) and as recommended by both Wolcott and Clifford and Marcus (Clifford and George E. Marcus, 1986, Wolcott, 1990), the narrative of events is kept separate from the analysis. Thus, *in Book II: My Imaginary Homeland,* Chapter 5 describes the events that took place in a narrative format, after the fashion of an anthropological monograph. The subsequent chapters in *Book II* provide description and analysis of various patterns observed in the course of the study, including attempts to draw a correlation between specific game design features and various types of emergent behaviour. Most of the conclusions enumerated in this section were arrived at through and during the writing process. The method of writing as an active means of thinking through ideas is one I have found consistently effective and was further developed in the course of this research.

The narrative section is very consciously intended to de-mystify game culture by putting a human face on the avatar, so to speak. The writing approach combines principles of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), empathy, working with Behar's notion of 'anthropology that breaks your heart' (Behar, 1996) combined with 'polyphonic texts', (Fisher, 1990, Helmreich, 1998), also promoted by Huberman and Miles (1994). In particular, by utilising direct quotes from conversations and players' own writings and poetry, I tried to bring out the essence of their experience through the painful process of becoming refugees and finding a new homeland; I then sought to describe the transformation that occurred as a result of that process. I also worked with the concept of 'thick description', with the objective of evoking as much immediacy for the reader as possible.

An important approach to the writing was that I considered this very much a collaborative effort addressing the question of 'my work' versus 'our work' cited by Visweswaran (Visweswaran, 1994).

Clifford and Marcus point out:

> *Once 'informants' begin to be considered as co-authors, and the ethnographer as a scribe and archivist as well as interpreting observer, we can ask new, critical questions about all ethnographies.*
>
> (Clifford and George E. Marcus, 1986)

Cushman and Marcus argue that experiments with dispersed authority risk 'giving up the game', (Cushman and Marcus, 1982). By contrast, Visweswaran argues that acknowledging native authority *is* giving up the game (Visweswaran, 1994).

The approach taken to the sensitive area of authority in this thesis put emphasis on experiential distinctions. In other words, I chose to consider the subjects of this story as the ultimate authorities on their own experiences. Thus my roles as 'scribe' and 'archivist' as well as 'interpreting observer' were clear and distinct, and labelled appropriately.

Visweswaran's notion of 'our subjects writing back' was a strong strategy identified and adopted for use in the participant blog, giving the subjects the opportunity to corroborate or refute my findings.

In many writings from the perspective of 'traditional anthropology', it is common to find instances where direct feedback on ethnographic texts are absent, whether due to linguistic or literacy barriers, or to the fact that in some cultures, self-reflection is not part of the repertoire. Furthermore, methods for collecting feedback ought to be carefully considered and conducted in a form that is consistent with the primary modes of discourse of the group being studied. In this case, for a group who were 'at home' with forum or blog-style communication, this method was 'indigenous' to their regular modes of discourse and therefore appropriate for collecting their feedback on the findings. This approach brings with it the risk of self-censorship, but I was careful to separate the participants' comments form my own, and made no substantive change to the text as a result of their feedback, other than error correction.

Book III, Being Artemesia: My Life as an Avatar is inspired by Julian Dibbell's *My Tiny Life* (1998), which has been described as a 'cyberspace memoir', Margery Wolf's *Thrice Told Tale* (Wolf, 1992), which provides three different accounts of the same events, and *Stranger and Friend: The Way of the Anthropologist,* Hortense Powderdmaker's 'behind-the-scenes' account of her work in the field (1966). Thus *Book III* serves as a supplement to *Book II*, filling in the blanks, so to speak, of my own personal and subjective experience, including description of troubling and painful moments, relationships and revelations that emerged during the course of the research. This section also details my experience of what I call 'the social construction of the ethnographer', a process whereby my own identity was in many ways transformed by my interactions with the group. It is significant that the culmination of this transformative process is the conferring of PhD itself, a rite of passage that will ultimately have a profound impact on my real-world identity as well.

5.3 The Social Construction of the Ethnographer

Book III also chronicles the ways in which the players themselves sculpted both the methodology, and thus my identity as ethnographer, as they progressed. Precipitated by a crisis about midway through the field study, I was forced to shift my methodology to a more participatory, less passive approach. The events that triggered this crisis as well as its outcome are described in more detail in subsequent sections, but one of the key critiques that players had of my approach was that it was to passive. From this point I began to take an approach that I dubbed 'participant engagement', which enabled me to become more engaged with the group while at the same time attempting to maintain a measure of analytical objectivity. At the same time, through circumstances beyond my control, it became apparent at a certain point that I myself was also engaged in and subject to the very emergent processes I had set out to study. Intellectually, I knew that this should occur, but I think I was surprised to a certain extent by how it played out. Being engaged at this level required a certain measure of reflexivity, and to a certain extent, the ability to observe myself in the same way I was observing my subjects: both as an individual element of emergence, and within the context of a larger complex system. To build again on Bar-Yam, I was attempting to study the forest and the trees at the same time, while myself being a tree (Bar-Yam, 2000b).

One interesting digression from traditional ethnographic research has to do with the non-geographical nature of 'the field'. Powdermaker describes an emotional scene at her departure from the Malaysian village of Lesu in which her subjects wept, begged her to stay, and even went so far as to suggest a marriage arrangement for her (Powdermaker, 1966). As the main thrust of my research was drawing to close, players expressed regret at my imminent departure from their midst. And while admittedly, I could not spend as much time with them as I had previously during the process of writing the thesis, I could see no compelling reason to 'leave' as is required of the real-world field ethnographer. Instead, I set up a field station on their new island settlement in *There.com*, which I hope will serve as a home-base for further study of the *Uru* community, the *There.com* community, and also as a base for course instruction in cyberethnography. I am also in discussion with the founder of the University of There, an *Uru* refugee, to set up a cyberethnography research centre on its virtual campus.

6 Contributions to the Field and Further Research

6.1 Contributions to the Field

In the field of Game Studies—within which this thesis situates itself—the rapid advancement of technological possibilities and of broadband coverage to the homes of more and more people internationally calls into being a need for more complex studies into the cultural contexts of game play and for scholarly research in the field of multiplayer games. This thesis introduces both a framework and a methodology for the study of emergent cultures in online games, identifying play patterns as 'engines of emergence,' and analyzing the roots of those play patterns in game design and play mechanics. It addresses the gap in research on social behaviour in non-combat-based MMOGs and is perhaps the first study of this size and scope of a game community with an equal representation of male and female players. In addition, this thesis argues for a legitimisation of 'communities of play' as a valid research topic in computer-mediated communication and related fields that have previously marginalised or ignored computer games within their scope of interests. It also expands on the concept of 'productive play,' arguing that play is not, contrary to canonical texts of games studies, inherently unproductive.

This study also seeks to expand the theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of MMOGs and MMOWs. The method developed is rooted in contemporary theories of post-colonial, feminist anthropology, and introduces a new category of 'performance ethnography' in which the field research itself is framed as both a performance and a game. Finally, it seeks to explore the possibilities of 'writing ethnography,' using narrative techniques, as well as journalistic reflection, to both convey the subjects' story and reflect on the ethnographic process, and integrating 'polyphonic texts' by inviting the participants into the writing process. Ideally, this narrative will also become part of the 'folklore' of the group, both a synthesis and an equal partner in the narrative of the Uru Diaspora.

6.2 Further Research

One of the key research topics that has been addressed by this thesis, and identified as ripe for further analysis beyond these pages, is the question of 'emergence as a design material'. I intend to explore this idea further on both the conceptual and theoretical levels, and also plan to create a set of practical experiments to test the application of these principles to the design and production of next generation multiplayer games.

In addition, at the time of writing, I have been commissioned by a company that is investigating the possibility of funding a re-launch of *Uru Live*. My role in this project has been defined as 'Uru Anthropologist', which means that I will be engaged as an active player in the cultural project of

further developing these methodologies in an *Uru Phase 2* study that will involve assisting in developing a new, improved version of the game that includes a framework for community involvement and affordances for player creation.

Book II

My Imaginary Homeland

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0 INTRODUCTION

0.1 Introduction to the Artemesia/Uru Participant Blog

This document represents the findings of an 18-month ethnographic study of The Gathering of *Uru*, a 'neighbourhood' of the online game *Uru*, and its immigration into *There.com* and other virtual worlds. It also draws some comparisons between immigration by other *Uru* groups into multiplayer virtual worlds, most notably *Second Life*, and explores the role of the player-run *Until Uru* servers in community cohesion.

This study was conducted as part of a practice-based PhD research project in site-specific media and performative arts, undertaken at the SMARTlab Centre at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, The University of the Arts, London (www.smartlabcentre.com). The study takes an ethnographic approach to 'design research' employing a method for sociological/anthropological research that serves to inform game design. Building on my background as a game designer, my primary focus was to study the ways in which the design of games and online virtual worlds influence or constrain the emergent social behaviour that takes place within them. I was also interested in the broader question of how play communities are formed and sustained, and how they change and evolve across virtual play spaces.

The spirit of this project was one of collaboration. From the start, members of The Gathering of Uru (TGU) embraced me as part of their community, and were highly supportive of this research. As the 'semi-official' ethnographer/folklorist of the TGU group, I spent many hours talking, visiting and playing with many of them, both individually and in groups in different contexts, and studied and documented their activities and creative output in detail. Some members of TGU active participated in the research by gathering data, editing interviews, and providing pointers to key threads on the forums, for which I am extremely grateful. They helped shape the development of the methodology in a very active and productive way. Once these findings were complete they were posted to a 'participant blog,' an online web site which group members were invited to annotate.

Additional Notes

Anonymity: in the standard ethical practice of maintaining study subjects' and informants' anonymity, pseudonyms for individuals, groups and locations are used throughout this document.

Spelling and Grammar: While this document is written in British English to conform with the styles of the university, citations and player quotations typically appear in the English variation in which they were originally written; this may include Canadian or American spelling and variations in grammar as appropriate to those cultural contexts, as well as some spelling errors made by participants and repeated in this text for the sake of authenticity (these are marked 'sic' as per

standard usage), or stylistic mannerisms, such as the common use of lower-case text in online conversations and email citations.

1 OVERVIEW: STUDY OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

1.1 Context: Ethnography as 'Design Research'

This study was conducted under the auspices of a PhD in practice-based media arts research. Although qualitative methods from sociology and anthropology were applied, this is not a degree in either of those disciplines. Rather, it is an attempt to appropriate methods from those fields for the purpose of understanding the implications of design on group behaviour in multiplayer games and virtual worlds. As a veteran of interactive game and attraction design, my goal was to conduct an in-depth investigation pertaining to a practice which I have come to describe as 'experience design', or, to borrow from avant-garde performance artist Joseph Beuys, 'social sculpting' (Kuoni, 1990). Some key authors have described game creation as a form of 'second order design' (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). This means that the designer can only create the final desired outcome through indirect means. We do not design the play activity, merely the rules and framework within which play occurs. We can anticipate to a certain extent what that play might look like, however, there are many forms of 'emergent' behaviour that arise out of the players' interactions with the game which cannot be anticipated. While we may never be able to fully predict these behaviours, as designers, we may want to become better informed about their patterns in order to begin treating emergence as one of the creative materials of game design. A definition of emergence is provided in Book I.

1.2 Project Scope

This study concerns members of the 'Uru Diaspora', a group of about 10,000 players who were made refugees when the MMOG *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* closed in February of 2004 after less than four months of public operation. The study was conducted from April of 2004 to September of 2005. The first interviews with TGU members were conducted in mid-March of 2004.

The primary focus of this study was The Gathering of Uru, a group of about 350 players who settled in various virtual worlds after the *Uru* server closure. Based on data gathered throughout the study, from registration on the group's online forum, as well as the web page for its club within *There.com*, the group appeared to vary size in from about 450 members at its peak to about 160 during the latter period of the study. Of these, about 300 players initially settled in the online virtual world *There.com*, where they took advantage of its player creation tools to build a fictive 'ethnic' community that appropriated *Uru* culture and reformulated it in the context of the new environment. Smaller groups of TGU players also inhabited other game worlds, including two that they created themselves. In late summer of 2004, an *Uru* hacker group made special arrangements with the game's developer, Cyan, to enable *Uru* to run on player-run servers. TGU operated one of seven player-administered *Until Uru* 'shards' (individual servers) running the game.

In addition to the TGU study, I collected supplementary data on *Uru* immigrants in *Second Life*. Of about 200 members of the main *Uru* group there (recorded from the group's in-world group page), a subset of some six to nine players used *Second Life*'s versatile in-game modelling tools to build a near-exact replica of sections of the original *Uru*, as well as customised areas inspired by the game. This additional research was conducted with the specific aim of comparing *Uru* cultural artefacts as instantiated in the two different virtual worlds. An in-depth study of the social life and culture of *Second Life* Uruvians was not within the scope of this project.

1.3 Study Subject: The 'Perfect Storm'

The *Uru* story has been described by one of my colleagues at SMARTlab as the 'perfect storm' (Peagler, 2004) for a study of the relationship between emergent behaviour and the design of online games and virtual worlds. There are a few unique features to this particular set of circumstances that are worth enumerating, although they will presently be discussed in greater depth:

- *Uru* is an online game based on a popular franchise, *Myst*, which had been a top-selling CD-ROM title for over a decade, and which has a vibrant, active and creative fan base.
- Because of this history, *Uru* has a demographic that is unusually high in terms of age, and unusually balanced in terms of gender.[i]
- *Uru*'s game genre is completely unique among online games: the vast majority of MMOG research has focused on the medieval fantasy role-playing genre; with a few notable exceptions, the majority of MMOGs are combat-based.
- The original *Uru* player base, estimated to be around 10,000 players, was large enough to constitute an MMOG, but sufficiently small in scale to support a robust and thorough qualitative study.
- The sub-group constituting the primary focus of this study, The Gathering of Uru (TGU), was sufficiently large (ranging in size from 450 to 160 during the period of the study) to present emergent behaviour, but sufficiently small to support a qualitative study by a single researcher.
- The immigration patterns of TGU provide a unique opportunity for comparison of emergent behaviour with the same group across a number of virtual worlds and games. The study spans instantiations of *Uru* immigrant culture in five different game/virtual worlds, including the player-run version of the original *Uru* game.
- For reasons that may stem both from the age demographics and the custom of helping new players, or 'newbies', in *Uru*, players who were approached to participate in this study were on the whole supportive, co-operative and forthcoming. In particular, the group leaders were very highly engaged and active in the research process.

2 KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

2.1 Key Terms

This section outlines some key terms and concepts that will be relevant throughout the remainder of this text. This section shall:

- Provide further discussion of the applications of principles of emergence to this study
- Discuss the distinctions between massively-multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and massively-multiplayer online worlds (MMOWs)
- Attempt to select a viable and useful definition of 'play'
- Define the term 'avatar'
- Discuss key terms 'intersubjective' and 'flow'
- Discuss the relationship between 'real' communities and 'virtual' worlds.

2.2 Emergence

It is significant that one of the characters mentioned in Steven Johnson's 'Emergence' is Will Wright, designer of the games *SimCity* (Wright, 1989), *The Sims* (Wright, 2000) and *The Sims Online* (Wright et al., 2002) (Johnson, 2001). Even in the context of this otherwise 'serious' book, games make regular appearances and are generally categorised among complex systems with properties of emergence. Janet Murray has described one of the properties of digital media, particularly games, as being 'procedural', (Murray, 1997), and Jesper Juul argues that emergence is 'the primordial game structure, where a game is specified as a small number of rules that yield large numbers of game variations, that the players must design strategies for dealing with'. He uses examples of board games, sports, most action games and all strategy games. 'Progression' he describes as 'the historically newer structure' in which we find 'cinematic storytelling ambitions' in this otherwise indigenously emergent medium (Juul, 2002, Juul, 2004). In 'Rules of Play', Salen and Zimmerman look in-depth at notions of games as complex systems and emergence as an outcome of the interaction of rules (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). In 2001, I introduced the concept of 'emergent authorship', describing the ways in which players contribute to developing game narratives (Pearce, 2002a).

In Book I, I described definitions of emergence, and methodological challenges of studying emergent behaviour at different scales, from the individual player, to the group as a whole. Yaneer Bar-Yam, whose definitions of emergence are cited in Book I, also points out that 'One of the problems in thinking about the concepts of complex systems is that we often assign properties to a system that are actually properties of a relationship between the system and its environment'. This is particularly significant to the research described here, where the relationships between players, as well as the players' relationship to the environment of the virtual world, are central:

When parts of a system are related to each other, we talk about them as a network, when a system is related to parts of a larger system, we talk about its ecosystem.

(Bar-Yam, 2000a)

Using this approach to complexity, it is helpful to consider communities as networks, and the virtual worlds or game contexts that they inhabit as 'ecosystems of play'.

Following Bar-Yam, it is thus helpful to think of massively multiplayer player games and networked virtual worlds as 'ecosystems of play' in which 'networks' of players engage in various emergent behaviours. Given the importance of understanding the character and design of these ecosystems, it is important to clarify the distinction between 'games' and 'virtual worlds'.

2.3 MMOGs vs. MMOWs: Ecosystems of Play

It would be possible to generate an entire PhD thesis on the definition of the word 'game'. Many have indeed attempted to define this term in detail, and the existing bodies of scholarship reveal numerous discussions and controversial arguments about just what is, and is not, a 'game'. While these arguments may be interesting, their resolution is not the aim of this project. However, since this study covers virtual worlds that are both games and clearly 'not games' by anyone's definition, it will be helpful to articulate the distinctions and similarities, especially where they relate to emergent processes.

While there are various and conflicting definitions of the term 'game' within the games research community, there are some key characteristics on which both scholars and practitioners seem to agree. Using a hybrid of several definitions, most games researchers would agree that a game is a formal system for structured play governed by a set of rules that prescribe the means for achieving a specified goal (Huizinga, 1950, Caillois, 1961, Sutton-Smith, 1997, Pearce, 1997, Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, Juul, 2004). From this point, debate takes over. Must a game's goal be definitive, that is, must there be a 'state' which represents the completion of the goal? Must the outcome of gameplay produce a 'winner'? Must a game's goal or even its rules be articulated up-front or can they be discovered through the process of gameplay?

These questions become particularly contentious in the context of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), most of whose goals and rules are seldom explicitly stated up front. More often, the over-arching goal is based on the somewhat open-ended objective of 'levelling', that is, increasing the numerical values associated a with player's experience and skills in the game, with no conclusive state of 'winning', or for that matter 'losing'. In fact, winning is anathema to most MMOGs due to the

fact they are subscription-based and rely on an economic formula that precludes the closure that accompanies a 'win'.

MMOGs can also contain individual goals that differ from the main goals, player- or role- or group-specific goals, as well as 'one-off' missions or quests. Players can and often do augment the prescribed goals with meta-goals of their own, such as becoming a successful merchant or creating an über-guild (guilds being formally established groups within the game). These meta-goals can be categorised as forms of emergence.

Most MMOGs take place within what is called a persistent virtual world that I will term an MMOW: a massively multiplayer online world, also called a virtual world or a 'metaverse'. The term 'MMOW' refers to an entirely digital, networked environment that simulates three-dimensional space and has its own set of intrinsic rules, 'natural' and 'man-made' laws, narratives and aesthetic style (also known as 'look and feel'). The term 'persistent' means that players create an identity that remains the same and is cumulative each time they log into the world, and which therefore develops over time. While most MMOGs take place in MMOWs, not all MMOWs are games. The primary distinction is that non-game MMOWs do not present the player with a prescribed overarching goal. Rather, they provide a range of activities and options for social interaction, including games, and sometimes include affordances for players to contribute to building the world itself.

All MMOWs, whether they are games are not, have structures and even rules. 'World rules' take the form of player constraints, as well as the world's properties, its physics, potentially its cosmology or world view, its 'karma system', or cause-and-effect structure, its feedback systems, its communication mechanisms, its economic structure and transaction mechanism and the like. These world rules constrain both the ways in which players can interact and the ways in which they may contribute to constructing the world. In MMOGs, these 'world rules' may or may not be tied to the game's goal. 'World rules' generally manifest as player capabilities within the world, such as transportation modes, for instance, the ability of your avatar to fly unaided, or with the use of an air vehicle, or its ability to fly at all. Can your avatar teleport? Must it walk everywhere? Or can it earn the right to teleport to places it has already visited?

'World rules' can also come in the form of feedback or consequences (can your avatar die or not? If it can, does this mean the loss of inventory?), communication protocols (does the system allow for asynchronous communication such as in-world email or bulletin board systems?), group formation protocols (the number of groups to which a player can belong), and economics (currencies, mechanisms for trading, for example, in-game auction web sites vs. face-to-face trading).

In MMOGs, 'game rules' can overlap with world rules in ways that pertain to the available and acceptable methods for achieving the game's goal. For instance, you 'level' and collect 'loot' (gear you can use or sell for currency) by 'killing enemies'; while attempting to do so, you also run the risk of your avatar being injured or even killed. When a higher-level avatar is killed, it will lose some of its 'inventory', including potentially some of its hard-won and often expensive gear. Most MMOGs have a set of 'world rules' that exist independent of their 'game rules'. It is often within the framework of these world rules that one can begin to observe emergent behaviours.

The distinction between MMOGs and MMOWs is made at the outset for two reasons. One is that the apparent ambiguity and overlap between virtual worlds and online games can create confusion and mire arguments in the question of whether something is or is not a game. Second, as we will see, the relationship between MMOGs and MMOWs is also in the process of shifting due in part to inter-world immigration patterns that cross the game/non-game threshold, such as those explored in this study.[ii]

To avoid the potential stumbling block of this game/not game question, for the purposes of this discussion, all virtual worlds, whether games or not, will be discussed under the larger classification of MMOWs, and those worlds which also fit the definition of games above will be distinguished as such where relevant.

It should be noted that in general, players in this study did not make a distinction between a 'virtual world' and a 'game', and most of the environments were referred to among the study subjects as 'games' regardless if whether they met the qualifications above. Thus the 'existential' question of whether something is or is not a game that pervades among games scholars appears to be more or less irrelevant to the players included in this study.

2.4 Play/Games

The primary function shared by both MMOGs and MMOWs is that of a social play space. In MMOGs, play is more structured and goal-oriented; in non-game MMOWs, it is more social, more open-ended, but still not entirely without rules.

Johan Huizinga, considered the father of 'ludology' (the study of play), says:

> *Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it.* [This point shall be debated later.] *It proceeds within its own proper boundaries*

of time and space according to fixed rules in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.

(Huizinga, 1950, p. 13)

For the purposes of this study, this definition serves our purposes reasonably well, although I shall argue against the point that 'no profit can be gained by it', a point later expanded on by Caillois who argues that 'play is an occasion of pure waste' (Caillois, 1961). Caillois refines Huizinga's points within his own definition and describes play as being:

1) Free (not obligatory), 2) Separate (circumscribed within the limits of time and space), 3) Uncertain (outcomes are not determined in advance), 4) Unproductive [again, a point that shall be argued later], *5) Governed by rules, and 6) Make-believe (a 'second reality' or 'free unreality'.)* (Caillois, 1961, pp.9-10)

While the applicability of these six qualities to all play activity is potentially debatable, they are well suited for a discussion of MMOGs and MMOWs. The two exceptions that shall be explored here are point *2*, which looks at play that moves across boundaries of time and space, and *4*, the assertion that play is inherently unproductive.

Although (as mentioned in Book I) both Huizinga and Caillois are guilty of a complete disregard for female play cultures, Caillois' definition seems to provide us with an a broad and adequate enough starting point from which to analyze both MMOGs and MMOWs as play spaces whose primary concern is to create an engaging context for social play within an imaginary or 'virtual' world.

2.5 Player/Avatar

Avatar, originally a Sanskrit term meaning 'a god's embodiment on Earth', was first coined by Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar, pioneers of the 2D graphical online community Lucasfilm's *Habitat* (an early MMOW), to describe the representation of a player in a multiplayer world (Farmer and Morningstar, 1991). In massively multiplayer online games, the alternative term is 'Player Character' or 'PC'. Non-player, autonomous characters are referred to as 'NPCs'. Some NPCs are enemies (autonomous characters that players do battle with), while others are more helper-characters that send players on quests or serve as merchants selling gear. The term 'avatar', although not originally conceived in the context of a game, is now used more generally to refer to a player's representation in any virtual world, whether a game or otherwise. Although the term can also be used to refer to characters in a text-based MUD or MOO (usually represented only as a text description), it is more

commonly used to describe a graphical representation of the player in a two- or three-dimensional virtual world.[iii]

'Avatar' does not necessarily encompass the player's full in-world persona, although this is often implied. In fact, much like its original meaning, most players in this study perceived the avatar as a medium through which one's inner persona or personality was expressed. As T.L. Taylor points out, people who have avatar personae are not 'disembodied', but have multiple bodies, including their physical corporeal bodies and their virtual avatar bodies (Taylor, 1999).

In this document, the terms avatar and player are used somewhat interchangeably, although avatar is sometimes used to distinguish things happening to the 'body' of the avatar itself. It is important to note that the 'player' is in command of the agency of the 'avatar', meaning that avatars do not make decisions on their own. However, as we shall see, the distinction between the player and his or her avatar is somewhat blurry, and players will speak about their avatars in both the first and third person, even describing their corporeal body in physical space as their 'real-life avatar'. Rather than distinguishing between 'real' and 'virtual', players tended to make a distinction between the 'body', whether it be 'virtual' or 'real', and the person or 'persona' which is channelled through one or the other of those bodies. Most players in this study felt that their avatar was an expression of their 'true' selves as much if not more than their 'real-life' avatars. Also, players who had met each other in real life were able to hold multiple conceptions of each other's identities in their minds, encapsulating the personae as expressed in both the 'real-life avie' as well as the avatar in virtual space. This multiplicity of identities is quite commonplace among people who lead online lifestyles (Taylor, 1999, Turkle, 1984, Turkle, 1995, Markham, 1998b, Dibbell, 1998). In some ways, it can be seen in a similar light to the various personae we 'put on' in our different real-life roles: worker, parent, friend, say. 'Performing' different personae in different contexts should not be viewed as a sign of psychological or personality disorder. In fact, as Goffman has pointed out, it is the *inability* to 'perform' appropriately in social contexts that is often an indicator of such disorders (Goffman, 1963). In MMOWs, what is viewed as 'appropriate' is often significantly different from what might be considered appropriate behaviour within real-life 'occasions'.

One of the challenges in talking about avatars is the misconception that they are not 'real'. Avatars, by definition, are representations of 'real' people; while these people are 'mediated', they are no less 'real', and in fact, no less 'mediated' than people we meet in the 'real world'. Likewise, as we shall see in the next section, the communities that form between them are no less real than communities that form between people in physical proximity to one another.

2.6 Virtual Worlds, Real Communities

The term 'virtual' is highly problematic, contested, and in flux, as illustrated by this 'random' sampling of recent dictionary definitions:

'Virtual'

adj.

1. Being something in effect even if not in reality or not conforming to the generally accepted definition of the term;
2. Used to describe a particle whose existence is suggested to explain observed phenomena but is not proven or directly observable;
3. Simulated by a computer for reasons of economics, convenience, or performance;
4. Used to describe a technique of moving data between storage areas or media to create the impression that a computer has a storage capacity greater than it actually has.

Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999 Microsoft Corporation, by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. (USA)

adj.

1. Existing or resulting in essence or effect though not in actual fact, form, or name: the virtual extinction of the buffalo.
2. Existing in the mind, especially as a product of the imagination. Used in literary criticism of a text.
3. Computer Science. Created, simulated, or carried on by means of a computer or computer network: virtual conversations in a chatroom.

The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition; © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company (USA).

adj.

1. (before noun) Almost a particular thing or quality:

   Ten years of incompetent government had brought about the virtual collapse of the country's economy.

   War in the region now looks like a virtual certainty.
2. Describes something that can be done or seen using a computer and therefore without going anywhere or talking to anyone:

   virtual shopping/banking

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, © Cambridge University Press 2003 (UK).

Needless to say, these widely varying and notably inconsistent definitions do nothing to bring clarity to this discussion. The last definition also highlights the challenges in working with terms whose 'official' usage is still highly contested, if not entirely incorrect.

A clarification of the etymology of the expression is probably the most useful avenue to a more fruitful discussion. The term 'virtual reality' is attributed to computer graphics pioneer Ivan Sutherland, credited with inventing both the term and the technology it describes (Rheingold, 1991). The term 'virtual reality' in its original sense is used to describe high-end real-time 3D environments, generally accessed via sensory immersion techniques, such as head-mounted displays or panoramic screens, usually but not always in single-user applications. These had their earliest applications in the early 1980's in computer-aided design and flight simulation applications. The term 'virtual world' has

come into more recent use to refer to multiplayer, real-time 3D online environments that are accessed via consumer-grade computer hardware over the Internet. I have also introduced the term 'extra-virtual' to describe activities that happen outside the virtual world but index or relate back to it.

The term 'virtual community' has gained popularity in common usage as a way to describe communities whose members interact with each other via a network (Rheingold, 1993). In this thesis, however, the term has been explicitly avoided, because of its implication that mediated communities are in some way 'not' or 'less than' 'real'. In terms of this thesis, I argue that while the online 'worlds' may be virtual in terms of the nature of their presence on screen, the relationships that form within these screen-based worlds reach well beyond the screen and inform direct and mediated social interactions of players, which are no less real than relationships that form in the so-called 'real world'. Therefore, the term 'distributed community' provides a more accurate characterisation of the types of groups with which this study concerns itself. The term 'play community' is also used to describe groups who assemble for the purpose of social play. (DeKoven, 1978)

3 OVERVIEW OF STUDY FINDINGS

3.1 Key Findings

The outcomes of this study were arrived at through systematic analysis of field notes, interview transcriptions/chatlogs, and screenshots. The aim of this analysis was to identify patterns of emergent group behaviour that could be culled from both individual and group data. This analysis led to the identification of six factors that contribute significantly to emergent behaviours relating to design. Because this study was limited to one group within a small cluster of MMOWs, this list of contributing factors is neither exhaustive nor definitive, but they provide a starting point for looking at the material properties of emergence at the intersection of game design and gameplay.

3.2 Play Ecosystems: Fixed Synthetic vs. Co-Created Worlds

This study spans a series of different virtual world types, or 'play ecosystems' that can be defined along a spectrum. At one extreme of this spectrum is the 'fixed synthetic' world. These worlds, while extensible and modifiable, are defined primarily by the world developers, who have absolute control over their narratives, game mechanics, their geographical and architectural design. These worlds cannot be modified by players in any sanctioned way. Regardless of the fixed nature of these worlds, emergence occurs within them nonetheless in forms such as weddings, rich meta-games, economies and civil disobedience to full-on unauthorised code hacking as well as 'extra-virtual' forms of emergence that occur outside of but index (or reference) back to the world. Examples of fixed synthetic worlds include such popular games as *EverQuest* (McQuaid et al., 1999) and *World of Warcraft (Kern et al., 2003)*, as well as the primary subject of this study, *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* (Miller, 2003).

At the opposite end of this spectrum is the 'co-created' world, which includes built-in affordances for players to actually introduce new artefacts and behaviours into the world. At its extreme, virtually all in-world items and activities in co-created worlds are the outcome of emergent behaviours, and players can alter the code itself through controlled and limited authoring capabilities. At a more moderate level, players may be able to introduce new artefacts in a limited way into the environment but not to change features or add behaviours. They may be able to introduce buildings, for instance, but not to alter the terrain. Examples of co-created worlds include text-based LambdaMOO, (Curtis, 1993) *Active Worlds* (an early instance of a co-created 3D world) (Britvich, 1995), and more recently, *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003), and to a more moderate extent, *There.com* (There and Makena Technologies, 2003).

The fact that these worlds have an open architecture, amenable to player contribution, should not mislead one into thinking that they lack rules. Simple 'natural' laws, such as simulated physics, the

mortality of avatars and constraints on transportation modes, are just as prevalent in co-created as in fixed synthetic worlds. Co-created worlds can also have very strict rules as to what players can and cannot contribute to the world, and more importantly, how they are to do so. In some cases, as with *Second Life*, there is very little restriction on what players can create; however, the creation mechanism itself places significant constraints on the types of objects and scripts that can be created and is challenging to learn, thus promoting a system of economic status around certain skill sets. Conversely, in a more controlled co-created world, such as *There.com*, no new player-created item can be introduced without an official approval from the company's management.

In the current landscape of online social worlds, those worlds which fall into the category of 'fixed synthetic' worlds tend to be structured more as 'games' while the more open-ended, 'co-created' worlds tend to fall into the category of 'virtual world' or metaverse.

What is key, as will be described in the pages that follow, is that a) emergence happens, regardless of where the world falls along the 'fixed synthetic'-'co-created' spectrum, and that b) emergence can and does migrate between both types of worlds, outside the virtual world into other forms of online communication, and even into the 'real world'. Each of these worlds can be viewed as its own ecosystem of play with its own unique characteristics. As networks of players move between these ecosystems of play, they both adapt and mutate to accommodate the ecosystem, but more importantly, in the case of co-created worlds, the ecosystem also adapts and mutates to accommodate the play community.

3.3 Communities of Play

While other sorts of distributed communities have been studied extensively, the study of 'communities of play' is a relatively new field. Despite the fact that play has a major role in popular culture and community formation, in the academic study of networked play seems to take a back seat to more 'serious' pursuits such as communities of practice or communities of interest. Even unstructured social interaction, such as text chat, seems to take precedence over distributed play spaces as worthy of serious study (see Literature review in Book I).

Communities of play, or play communities (DeKoven, 1978), are groups that choose to play together in various configurations. Most MMOGs have built-in mechanisms to support and formalise a play community. Terms like 'guild', 'clan', and in the case of *Uru*, 'neighbourhood', define a particular (and often a singular) group to which a player belongs. Individuals are generally drawn to these groups by common friendships, shared play styles and play values, and often create their own web sites or other mechanism for intra-group communication. A play community will often design its own logo or crest, create a mission statement that defines the ethos of the group, and employ a set of meta-

rules that relate to their style of play, social conduct, or desired standing in the community. They will frequently plan large-scale raids and other events together, and display a high level of loyalty to their fellows. Guild members may also protect each other from outside harassment, but guilds can also be a site of intense drama and dispute. It is not at all uncommon to see power struggles occur, members quit in protest, or even factions split off into new guilds. All of these behaviours suggest a level of emotional investment that may be as high or even greater than investments in communities of either practice or interest.

Within non-game MMOWs, it is more common for the social mechanism to support player membership in multiple groups, rather than the singular guild model typical of most MMOGs. While this offers a level of flexibility, it shifts the dynamic significantly. Membership in a guild or its equivalent creates an exclusive emotional bond not unlike that of a real-world clan, tribe or a gang. Taylor and Jakobsson have aptly compared MMOG guilds to membership in a mafia 'family' (Taylor and Jakobsson, 2003). One of the principle reasons for this may be that a guild brings with it not only group allegiance but also a sense of collective identity. Players within a guild-like structure associate their identities with a particular group in a way that members of a 'club' in a non-game world typically do not. The individual identity can in a sense 'morph' across different clubs, which is significantly different than having your identity tied in a persistent way to a single group. It also permits the formation of sub-communities, secondary group affiliations and identities that are related to or subordinate to a primary affiliation.

By investigating one such play community in-depth over a long period of time, the study seeks to identify the sorts of attributes that make such groups unique, to understand the dynamics between individual and group identity, and to understand how these influence emergent group behaviour. By following a single play community across several virtual world 'ecosystems', one can begin to understand the relationship between the essential character of the group's collective behaviour and the specific attributes of the virtual worlds or ecosystems they inhabit.

Comments

'Within non-game MMOWs, it is more common for the social mechanism to support player membership in multiple groups, rather than the singular guild model described above. ..... The individual identity can in a sense 'morph' across different clubs, which is significantly different than having your identity tied in a persistent way to a single group'.

Perhaps this area could be explored further. Does the "morphing" across different clubs provide the distributed community more resilience within a single MMOW? Perhaps ensuring greater longevity over singular guild allegiance? Has this in fact been happening to our group?"

Posted by: Raena | February 05, 2006 at 04:46 PM

3.4 The Social Construction of Avatar Identity

One of the most interesting findings of this study was the observation that the formation of individual and group identity was itself an emergent process. Many earlier readings of the development of avatar identities tended to focus on the individual (Turkle, 1995, Dibbell, 1998), but in the course of the study, it became very clear a) that group and individual identity were inextricably linked, and b) that individual identity evolved out of an emergent process of social feedback. Similar findings, however, can be seen in other studies that look at the relationship of the social to the individual within virtual worlds (Bruckman, 1992, Taylor, 1999).

The concept of the 'social construction of identity' builds on Berger and Luckman's concept of the 'social construction of reality' by suggesting that the individual is as much a social construction as the 'reality' he or she perceives. This is not a particularly new idea, and is even addressed by Berger and Luckman in terms of the construction of identities such as 'Jew' in various cultures (Berger and Luckman, 1966). The individual is always, to a greater or lesser extent, at least in part a product of his or her social milieu. In addition, individual identity is generally woven out of the materials of group identity and vice versa.

In the context of the online virtual world and driven by play as its primary activator, identity appears to emerge through collective feedback rather than individual desire. The assumption that a virtual identity promotes anonymity and therefore, to a certain measure, freedom, may belie a profound misunderstanding of the concept of 'anonymity'. While the person's 'real-life identity' remains anonymous, her in-world identity, because it is persistent, cannot stay that way for long. Over time, others will recognise the traits and talents of the individual, often before she recognises them herself. In this way, players take on a role in the group not by an act of individual will, but in response to feedback and in some cases even demands from the play community. Players often find themselves surprised by their online identities, exhibiting qualities and talents of which they themselves were not aware, including leadership abilities, drawn forth by play and enabled by the group. As one of T.L. Taylor's research subjects put it 'Avatars have a mind of their own, and they grow in unexpected ways (...) you are kidding yourself if you think you will be able to control or even predict what will happen to your avatar' (Taylor 1999, p.6).

3.5 Intersubjective Flow

Intersubjectivity is a term borrowed from sociology and anthropology referring to 'the common-sense, shared meanings constructed by people in their interactions with each other and used as an everyday resource to interpret the meaning of elements of social and cultural life' (Seale, 2004). Intersubjectivity is used largely as a means to look at the world through the lens of social transactions,

rather than individual psychology and motivation (Blumer, 1969). Many aspects of culture, such as language and ritual, are considered intersubjective because they both arise from and become materials for social transactions.

Intersubjectivity is a useful concept when looking at distributed networked environments, which are primarily social in nature. These digital environments, whether virtual worlds, games, forums or chat rooms, are intersubjective artefacts whose sole aim and outcome is the support and creation of shared contexts for social transactions.

'Flow' is what the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi names the feeling of complete and energised focus in an activity, with a high level of enjoyment and fulfillment.

As Csikszentmihalyi sees it, the components of a flow-producing activity are:

- We are up to the activity
- We are able to concentrate on the activity
- The activity has clear goals
- The activity has direct feedback
- We feel that we control over the activity
- Our worries and concerns disappear
- Our subjective experience of time is altered

Many players in this study both reported and exhibited qualities of flow in their play activities (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, pp.71-83). This may explain why many denizens of online games and virtual worlds spend what to the outside observer may appear to be excessive hours in-world. One of the hallmarks of flow is a sense of temporal compression, a perception that 'time flies when you're having fun'. Play researcher Bernie DeKoven adds a social dimension to play, positing that the quality of challenge key to maintaining a sense of flow can be provided by other players (DeKoven, 1992b). This type of enjoyable challenge is what graphical user-interface pioneer Alan Kay referred to as 'hard fun'. In some instances, the presence of other people, particularly people with whom one has an affinity, can serve to augment or strengthen the sense of flow.

Building on Csikszentmihalyi and DeKoven, in the pages that follow, this study will introduce the concept of 'intersubjective flow', a sociological (rather than psychological) reading of flow that conceives of play less as an individual activity than as an intersubjective space for social transaction. Interestingly, intersubjective flow does not necessarily require the presence of people. Players can also become engaged at a high level of flow in solitary activities, such as artefact creation; but at the

heart of the activity is the knowledge that the artefact being created will be meaningful to the play community. Such activity falls under the category of our next topic, 'productive play'.

Comments

Two comments in one post.....

"One of the hallmarks of flow is a sense of temporal compression, a perception that 'time flies when you're having fun'"

I absolutely agree with this. And it happens in a variety of contexts, including WORK as well as play.

"Players can also become engaged at a high level of flow in solitary activities, such as artefact creation; but at the heart of the activity is the knowledge that the artefact being created will be meaningful to the play community."

I have experienced this first hand as a designer in There. I hear the same from other Therian [sic] developers, Uru or not. Developing objects for the online world can be a "game with the game" so to speak. (I hesitate to use the word "game" in the context of the community world environments being discussed in this text, but I trust the readers understand my point.) The community inspires the developers. Developers inspire each other. Seeing people enjoy your works is reward in itself, as any artist knows. Additionally the developers themselves are intrinsically part of an unofficial developer guild, whose membership is defined by the compliments developers give to each other concerning their work.

Posted by: Raena | February 05, 2006 at 04:55 PM

Raena, this is a really good articulation of the feedback process I describe in the Productive Play section. Part of what you are saying, which is integral to this thesis, is that Flow happens through a feedback process.

Posted by: Artemesia | February 05, 2006 at 10:56 PM

3.6 Productive Play

One of the hallmarks of the varying definitions of play is that play activities in general and games in particular are 'unproductive'. However, as Sutton-Smith points out, 'the constant modern tendency to think of play as simply a function of some other more important cultural process (psychological or social) tends to underestimate the autonomy of such play cultures' (Sutton-Smith 1997, p.106). What tends to be overlooked is the level of creative production that can go into play activities. The New Orleans Mardi Gras is perhaps the most noteworthy example of a high level of productivity generated

around a play activity; others include the traditional Renaissance Faire and Star Trek, or 'Trekkie', fan culture. Productive play has been present within online virtual worlds since their earliest inceptions as text-based MUDs and MOOs (Curtis, 1992) and an entire educational theory, constructionist learning, has used such productive play as the underpinning for educational software (Papert and Harel, 1991).

Economist Edward Castronova has countered the argument that 'play is unproductive' by utilising traditional econometrics to determine the 'Gross National Product' of virtual worlds (Castronova, 2001, Castronova, 2002). Since most virtual worlds have currencies, and many of these can now be converted into real-world currencies on the extra-virtual 'black-market', a direct economic benefit can be gained from engagement with some forms of 'productive play'. Virtual world designer Cory Ondrejka has described the ways in which players within a co-created environment exhibit prodigious creativity, especially as they are granted more freedom and the potential for economic gain, be it real or virtual (Ondrejka, 2004). Shannon Appelcline, lead designer at game company Skotos, has written extensively about emergent cultures within the games he designs (Appelcline, 2000-2006).

Productive fan culture, from the Star Trek 'Trekkie' phenomenon (Jenkins, 1992) to new forms of cultural production in games (Poremba, 2003) is well studied. In the case of the Uru Diaspora, emergent behaviour can be looked at as a convergence of fan culture and productive play. The Uru Diaspora at large manifests impulses similar to those of Trekkies, ranging from developing dictionaries of the language of the fictional D'ni people at the heart of the *Myst/Uru* series to making real-world quilts depicting *Uru* themes. However, the social context of online virtual worlds combined with the malleability of digital media create affordances for fan culture to be cultivated within the imaginary world itself, as well as in the extra-virtual forms mentioned above, more typical of traditional fandom. Thus, unlike Trekkie culture, which extends outside of the imaginary world it references, *Uru* and other game-based fan cultures can incubate within and ultimately transform the virtual worlds they inhabit, whether those worlds are of the 'fixed synthetic' or 'co-created' variety.

This study looks in particular at three forms of productive play in the context of inter-world immigration, fan culture and emergent behaviour. The first involves inventing new game activities, social rituals and cultural practices within existing environments, generally by repurposing the game environment and existing artefacts, a kind of 'readymade' approach to play. The second form of productive play involves carrying culture across virtual worlds by creating new artefacts and objects derived from or inspired by other games. The third type of productive play entails the creation of entire game environments, whether derived from other games or original concepts influenced by them. The latter form can take place both within existing worlds, and also using game creation tools, by making entirely new environments.

3.7 Porous Magic Circles and the 'Ludisphere'

As mentioned in Book I, the magic circle has become an important principle in digital Game Studies, especially as the introduction of the computer creates an additional boundary around the game experience that is generally held to be sacrosanct (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Castronova has even argued for a more hermetic enforcement of the magic circle, suggesting that 'real world' concerns, such as politics and popular culture, should not be allowed to leak into virtual worlds to destroy the suspension of disbelief or tamper with the world's integrity (Castronova, 2004-2005). This position has some unintentional clashes with contemporary anthropology, a discipline currently confronting a transition from the traditional paradigm of studying 'primitive' cultures cut off from outside influence to the study of cultures within a mediated, global context (Marcus, 1986). Thus it is unclear if Castronova's call for 'purity' in any world, whether real or virtual, is even attainable.

The findings of this study suggest that, just as contemporary world cultures must be looked at in a global context, online virtual worlds must be looked at in the context of the 'ludisphere', the larger framework of all networked play spaces on the Internet, as well as within the larger context of the 'real world'. In this context, as with real-world culture, it may be more useful see the landscape in terms of a series of overlapping and nested magic circles, the outermost being the 'real world', with transactions taking place through membranes more porous than has previously been suggested.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participant Observation vs. 'Participant Engagement'

The methodology used for this study draws from qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) research techniques from the fields of sociology, anthropology, computer-mediated communications (CMC) and the emerging field of Game Studies, with a special emphasis on the design of mediated social spaces. To summarise from Book I, these methods combine: participant observation (spending time with the study participants and observing them in their native cultural context), individual in-game interviews and group discussions, both formal and informal; study of chatlogs, transcriptions, and web forums; visual anthropology techniques in the form of screen shots and videos taken during the course of these activities and extensive documentation and analysis of player-created artefacts.

Like many other virtual world researchers, I made a specific methodological choice early on in the study to privilege the online persona by only interacting with players through their 'native' mediated contexts (Taylor, 1999). This included both the game worlds they inhabited and asynchronous communication formats such as online forums. To facilitate this, I created an avatar named Artemesia, a character vaguely resembling myself at a younger age. With the exception of an occasional out-of-world text chat, I interacted with players solely through their virtual worlds and forums until the very end of the study, when I met my key informants in-person at the Real Life Gathering of *There.com*.

To support the approach of privileging online life, I created the methodological constraint of avoiding obtaining any personal information about the research participants. This turned out to be a mistake. One of the hallmarks of social cohesion is players' knowledge of each others' personal lives and characteristics, although not in the 'obvious' ways. In online life, while you many not know a close friend's age, line of work, or in some cases, even their gender, you may know that they are disabled, have two children, and recently lost a parent. These personal details can often have relevance to game life, as shall be described in more detail later in this report.

This methodological mis-step came to light as a result of a controversy within the group brought about by an interview I did relating to the research published in the Orange County Register in October of 2004 (Chuang, 2004). A number of issues arose that were discussed in the group's online forum as well as in-game with various members and group leaders. The study participants felt that I was not engaging enough with them. They felt I needed to become a more involved member of the group and play *with* them, rather than sitting on the sidelines and watching. A related issue was the use of speech vs. text, which is described in more detail in Book III.

In the beginning of the study, text chat was the only form of communication available. When voice was introduced, I continued to use chat, in part due to technical problems with *There.com*'s speech system, in part because it enabled me to save chatlogs for my data. Because of my decision not to collect personal data about players, I was unaware that, due to the fact that some members were disabled and had difficulty typing, speech had become the preferred mode of communication for the group. Once I was made aware of this, I immediately switched to speech, and began to transcribe, using text chat in some contexts (such as one-on-one interviews) at the players' discretion. This controversy precipitated a rethinking of the methodology, and though the catalyst for this was challenging, it turned out to be exceptionally productive. I was particularly grateful that players took the time to confront me, providing me with the feedback that enabled me to modify my approach.

I am terming the resultant methodology 'participant engagement'. This method lies midway between participant observation and the more radicalised practice of action research, in which ethnography is seen as a tool for social change. While it is well-known that ethnographers expect their presence to exert some type of influence on the groups they are studying, participant observation has the researcher maintaining a 'low profile' and a sense of anonymity. Action research, on the other hand, has an overt agenda and actively uses ethnography as a means of promoting or provoking social change (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000).

Both of these methods have been criticised for placing the ethnographer in an 'outsider' status (Chambers, 1994) and while participant engagement does not entirely resolve this, it asks the ethnographer to step into the centre of the action and become an active and engaged participant in the cultural practices she is observing. The fact that the researcher presents as an avatar creates the opportunity that does not exist in traditional face-to-face anthropology. The 'otherness' contained within the appearance, dress and status of a researcher observing a culture can be mitigated in part by the fact that the common mechanism of the avatar has a 'levelling' effect between researcher and subjects. Nonetheless, as was the case here, it is easy for the researcher to fall into that 'outsider' role without even being aware of it. In the end, I became an active member regarded by the group as 'one of their own', although in the unique role of 'insider-outsider' afforded by my role as the group's ethnographer. This is in part due to the nature of TGU, who welcome new members, even those who have not previously played *Uru*. One of the turning points of this transition was when TGU member Bette interviewed me for the 'There University' newsletter, effectively turning the tables on the researcher/study participant relationship.

4.2 Participant Feedback

Ethnographers have experimented with the concept of including participant feedback in ethnographic studies in a variety of contexts. Bringing participants into the discourse of their own culture is one

way to break down some of the power structures inherent in a 'researcher-subject' relationship (Behar, 1993, Fisher, 1990). Because of the nature of studying mediated cultures, new mechanisms are now available that can be utilised for bringing study subjects into the dialogue (Helmreich, 1998). These so-called 'polyphonic' approaches can serve to engage study participants in a more active way in the analysis of their own experience. And while this is not always appropriate in every ethnographic situation, given the nature of this group, the fact that the study was done online, and that participants were comfortable and familiar with online communication modes, it seemed appropriate to include them in the process. It should also be added that many TGUers were naturally reflexive, therefore, even in-world conversations conducted during the course of the research itself included a continuing dialogue with players about the significance and meaning of their online experience.

4.3 Virtual Worlds Covered in This Study

This research was conducted primarily in three virtual worlds (MMOWs), one of which is a game and two of which are not. These worlds were traversed via the Artemesia avatar described above, using the conventions of trans-virtual persistent identity utilised by the study participants. These three worlds have a number of common traits, the most obvious of which is that they all entail the use of an avatar. Although players have 'persistent identities', that is, personae that they maintain for long periods of time, they do not have prescribed roles in the manner typical of many online games, such as *EverQuest* or *Star Wars Galaxies*. In all three worlds, players may create their own unique avatar names, which cannot be changed, although their physical appearance can to varying degrees in each world. These avatar names, which appear to all players in-world, become the marker of persistent identity and also serve as a mechanism for transporting identities across worlds.

Uru: Ages Beyond Myst/Until Uru (Cyan Worlds/Ubisoft, 2004)

Uru, which falls on the fixed synthetic end of the spectrum described above, is a puzzle-based MMOG based on the best-selling *Myst* series. In *Uru*, players solve puzzles, most of which are integrated into the designed environment and pertain in some way to the game's overarching story. As will be described later in more detail, *Uru* was originally played in two phases: a single-player phase, *Uru Prime*, and a multiplayer phase, *Uru Live,* also known as *Prologue.* In *Uru Live*, players could solve puzzles together, visit each other's Ages (individual instantiations of each game 'level') or Reltos (each players individual 'home base') and join 'neighbourhoods', or 'hoods' (the *Uru* equivalent of guilds), which also connected them to a central gathering place also called a 'neighbourhood' or 'hood'. Though players were able to join multiple 'hoods' in the original *Uru*, most players tended to have a 'home' favourite. *Uru* avatars are strictly humanoid, and although not explicitly stated, it is implied that players are playing themselves as explorers of the lost underground city of the D'ni people. Players can make minimal changes to their avatars, including selecting from a limited, pre-set wardrobe; they could not change their avatars gender.

Uru has no economy, no currency and no ability to collect inventory *per se*, although players collect 'Linking Books' in their Reltos that allow them to teleport to various Ages. Like other *Myst* games, *Uru* has no point system; rewards consist of Linking Books and features added to the Relto. Players can sometimes move objects around, but other than opening up Ages in prescribed ways, they cannot alter the world in any persistent way. *Uru* also has no age limit.

There.com (There and Makena Technologies, 2003)

There.com (also known simply as 'There') is an example of a moderate 'co-created world' in the spectrum described earlier. Though not a game, *There.com* includes both games and sporting activities. It has a cartoon aesthetic, resembling Walt Disney animated films set in the present day. Players can create humanoid adult avatars within the constraints of this aesthetic; once determined, they cannot change gender, but can make various modifications, such as changes in skin and hair style, and changes of clothing. Players can create new objects which they can sell for game currency on an in-game auction site with the approval of the world's operators, Makena, Inc. Players must pay a developer fee to have their items approved; this is primarily to avoid potential copyright infringement, but also to censor adult content; the latter is especially important since *There.com*, like *Uru*, has no age limit.

Player creation of new items takes place entirely out-of-world, using a 3D modelling tool, or modifying texture templates with Adobe Photoshop. Players create their own spaces by configuring individual items in a PortaZone, or PAZ, which can be popped up anywhere in-world on a squatting basis. Until recently, players could not actually own land in *There.com*, and PAZes are all owned by individuals and cannot be worked on collaboratively. Players could, however, group PAZes together to create larger communities. Newer features allow players to purchase 'neighbourhoods', large tracts of land with collective ownership and building rights. The overall ethos of *There.com* is that of a resort environment, a kind of virtual 'Club Med' with a number of Islands where players can visit and settle. *There.com* has its own currency, Therebucks, with which players can acquire items via an in-game auction page; Therebucks can be bought for real-world currency, but not sold. Player-created items include vehicles, such as Dune Buggies or Hoverboats (air bound vehicles that hold 4-8 avatars), readymade or player-created homes, clothing, furniture, art, and accessories. The world allows for the creation of groups, and avatars may both start and join as many of these as they wish. Players can gain various levels of expertise, such as 'avid', 'expert', 'legendary', in roles such as 'explorer', 'fashionista', or 'events host', sports such as 'hoverboarding', and games such as a digital version of the card game 'Spades'.

Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003)

Falling on the most extreme end of the 'co-created' world is *Second Life*, an open-ended 'metaverse' in which virtually all objects, structures, animations and avatar designs are created by players. Avatar creation is highly flexible, with literally dozens of variables available. While avatars are biped, they can take a variety of forms and sizes, gender can be changed at will, and a single player identity (name) can have an unlimited number of avatar instantiations. Avatars are free to walk or fly around the world or explore via ground or air vehicles. Like *There.com*, *Second Life* also contains a number of games and activities, most of which are player-created. A sophisticated set of in-world building tools using geometric primitives (known by players as 'prims') and textures allows for diverse variations of objects. Players can own and share land and grant permissions to modify land or objects, allowing for extensive in-world collaboration. Players can create, give away or sell their own buildings, furniture, landscaping elements, vehicles, avatar designs, clothing, accessories (including sex toys) and even fully functional scripts, avatar animations and games. *Second Life*'s creator/operators, Linden Lab, do not practice any type of censoring or filtering of player-created objects but enforce a rigorous 'over 18 only' membership policy. Players can also own real estate and create their own public venues, such as malls and shops, discos, casinos, and sex clubs (which abound). More ambitious players can purchase entire Islands on which to create their own environments or games. Players buy and sell objects using Lindens, the in-world currency, which they can also exchange for real-world cash on both authorised and unauthorised Linden Exchange sites. Unlike *There.com*'s auction-based commerce system, any player-created object can be set to a mode that allows other players to purchase or take a free copy of the object in-world; players can also buy and sell land in a similar fashion.

In addition to these three virtual worlds, two other tools are mentioned in this document. The first of these is an online MUD (multi-user domain or dungeon). MUDs are virtual worlds created entirely from text, in which players navigate through written descriptions of environments, and objects they encounter along the way. While still popular, MUDs were more prevalent in the late 1980's and early 1990's, having been supplanted by more graphical virtual worlds, many of which still utilise some of their conventions. The second is Adobe Atmosphere, which is used, along with 3D modelling tools, to build small, customisable virtual worlds, and includes a server back-end for small groups.

5 HISTORY & CONTEXT: *MYST, URU* AND BEYOND

5.1 Laying the Groundwork: Myst Players Come Together

Uru: Ages Beyond Myst was a massively-multiplayer online game (MMOG) based on the *Myst* game series by Cyan Worlds (2003). *Myst,* first published for the Macintosh in 1993, held the ranking of top PC game of all time for eight years in a row until it was surpassed by *The Sims* in 2001(Wright, 2000). *Myst* was heralded as the first CD-ROM game to garner a significant audience of adult women. One of the first computer games to be considered a work of art, *Myst* was often referenced as an indication that computer games had 'come of age' (Carroll, 1994, Ashe, 2003, Tiscali, 2005) Some early computer business analysts posited that the bundling of *Myst* with PCs sold in the mid-1990s was instrumental in establishing a market for PCs in the home.[iv]

Myst is described in the following article in the online game 'zine Game Revolution:

> *There are only a few truly monumental moments in video game history, a small number of games that have fundamentally changed the cultural landscape. However, it is clearly the case that Myst was one of those games, and its heyday was one of those moments. When Myst became the best-selling PC game of all time (a title it held for eight years), video games were no longer just for kids. Gaming had suddenly risen to a new level, a respectable and artistic level, and it was no longer possible to simply dismiss it as childish entertainment.*
>
> *In the original Myst, players slowly wandered around beautiful, fantastical environments composed of pre-rendered, two-dimensional stills. To progress, you had to solve mind-bending puzzles designed to challenge Mensa veterans in an effort to slowly unravel the story of two deranged brothers, Sirrus and Achenar, and the strange book-worlds their father created, which eventually became their prisons*
>
> (Duke, 2005).



Figure 5.1: *Myst*'s compelling environments and complex puzzles made it the top-selling PC game for eight years running.

Key to *Myst*'s incredible success was its groundbreaking use of high quality graphics, audio production and storyline. (Figure 5.1) Many computer games up until this point had devoted the limited processing power of PCs to pixellated animation, poorly compressed video and the classic electronic, low resolution audio associated with early arcade games. The conventional wisdom was that action was essential, and high quality visuals and audio were of secondary concern. *Myst* inverted this equation and sacrificed speed and action for the highest possible visual and audio quality. With a very small team and a 'garage band' ethos, the Miller brothers' technique involved using 3D software tools to create vividly rendered still images of a complex imaginary world. Technically, the game was deceptively simple—it was merely a branching matrix of still images, augmented by a moody, ambient musical score. The interface was elegant and minimal. Players navigated the eerily abandoned game world in a first-person perspective. There were no controls on the screen. Instead, as you dragged your cursor around, it would change shape to indicate that a choice was available; most of these choices were directional in nature, but could also involve opening drawers or books to obtain clues and information. There were very few occasions when one saw any characters in the game, and these generally appeared in the form of rough video clips seen in the pages of books. Simple puzzles integrated into the world caused unusual large-scale transformations to the environment. The images were so breathtaking, so elaborately thought-out and intricately rendered, that players almost relished in the slow pace of the gameplay. Like other popular imaginary worlds, *Myst* had an entire culture, history and language, symbols and technologies, and a sustainable mythology that spawned a perennially popular multi-game franchise.[v]

5.2 Understanding *Uru* Players

The decade-long history of *Myst* fandom is key to understanding the *Uru* phenomenon in general and the TGU community in particular. In-game interviews and surveys of the online forums revealed the following:

- Most TGU members had been *Myst* fans prior to joining *Uru*, many since the game's inception.
- Because of the diverse and perennial appeal of the *Myst* franchise, TGU members range in age from mid-teens to mid-seventies, with the majority being in their forties and fifties. This remains a surprisingly diverse figure relative to other MMOGs, and represents an unusually high age range.
- The gender mix, which is consistent with the *Myst* demographic overall, is exactly equal, a statistical anomaly where PC games, and especially MMOGs, are concerned.
- Many players did not like or play any other games; most had never played an online game prior to playing *Uru*.
- Players' longtime immersion in the *Myst* world made them both facile at its unique style of puzzle-solving and experts in the game's narrative, history and culture.
- Players had been inhabiting the *Myst* world for a decade by themselves, although a small handful communicated through a rich fan culture infrastructure; *Myst Uru* was the first opportunity they had to actually *play* with other *Myst* aficionados within this well-loved world.
- Because the game is intellectual in nature, players tended to value intelligence and problem-solving; most players expressed an aversion to games with killing and violence.

These qualities are important because they serve to reinforce an observation that was echoed in player interviews. At the core of a play community's character is the sort of people the game attracts. This blend of people with these characteristics were drawn to this particular game for a particular reason. They arrived on the scene with a certain set of values and a predisposition toward certain emergent social behaviours. They brought with them a long-term devotion to and deep knowledge of a 'classic' game, combined with an aversion to many of the play mechanics that are presumed 'fun' in the contemporary commercial game landscape. These are all prerequisites to understanding the ways in which The Gathering of Uru formed and developed over time.

It would appear that, to a certain extent, the game's own values and ideologies predispose it to attract a certain type of player, even before the game is actually played. Once those players come together, their community forms and develops around these shared values, which also intersect with the values embedded in the game itself. In many game communities, players may not even be aware of the

values and ideologies that attract them to a game in the first place, let alone the ways in which they influence play and social interaction. This remarkably self-reflective group, however, was well aware that part of their uniqueness originated from their connection with the *Myst* series, its narratives, play patterns, individual and group identities, and values.

Comments

"At the core of a play community's character is the sort of people the game attracts."

Does this observation illuminate the root of Uru's failure? Has the gamer world changed? Much has been written about first person shooter and "EverQuest" type games and certainly they are very popular, particularly with the most recent generation (or two) of gamers. Is World of Warcraft the "Myst" of the current gamer generation?

This raises a question in my mind. What sorts of people are attracted to the Uru game? Is the Uru community you have studied an anachronism?

Posted by: Raena | February 05, 2006 at 05:04 PM

5.3 *Myst Uru*: Story, World, Game

The narrative and rules of the *Myst* world are rich and complex. They have evolved and expanded for over a decade, while remaining internally consistent. The original *Myst* designers, minister's sons Rand and Robyn Miller, embedded implicit Christian spiritual themes in the game and its narrative, although this was executed in a subtle way that has often escaped the awareness of even long-term players. This may be comparable to the way Christian themes appear allegorically in the fiction C.S. Lewis. The game was intended for a secular audience and, although the designers spoke openly in interviews of its Christian subtext, there were no direct references to Christianity, nor was there any evidence that the game had an evangelical agenda.

The overarching mythology of the *Myst* series revolves around the epic tale of the D'ni people, a human-like race that had the power to call into being entire worlds (game levels), called Ages, through writing. Special 'Linking Books' serve as transport mechanisms between these Ages, prompting some game scholars to interpret this as a metaphor for computer programming. The basic premise of world-creation through writing serves as a mechanism for extensibility, allowing for the easy addition of new Ages. The proliferation of books is key to the *Myst* mythology, and books are a recurring motif shared in different instantiations of *Myst/Uru* culture across all the virtual worlds it occupies. The notion of who can and should create Ages became a topic of deep philosophical debate as *Uru* players began to move into other worlds and create their own instantiations of *Uru* culture. In spite of the popularity of and scholarly interest in *Myst*, I found no other scholars writing about *Uru* itself. In fact, most game scholars I spoke with were not even aware of the game's existence.

5.4 The *Uru* Experience

The first thing players are asked to do when launching the game is to design their avatar. Avatar features are limited and aesthetic rather than skills- or statistics-based. The avatar choices offered are male or female human, with a limited choice of hairstyles and outfits, and an unlimited colour palette, as well as the ability to make the avatar look older, add wrinkles and graying hair, or even present male pattern baldness.

With their immersive first-person perspectives all the prior *Myst* games placed the player in the game narrative with an ambiguous identity. You never knew exactly who you were, although in the first *Myst* game it was implied that you were Catherine, wife of Atrus and mother of their two sons, the focus of the game. Giving the player a unique, customisable identity was a first for the *Myst* franchise.

Once they enter the *Uru* world, players find themselves called to a mysterious cleft in the middle of an unnamed desert, presumably New Mexico, or possibly somewhere in the Middle East (given the mythology of the world, potentially both). Descending into this underground cave, they eventually discover the ruin of an abandoned city. Dispersed throughout the city are numerous clues, as well as Linking Books to various Ages, each one of which has a *Myst*-style puzzle integrated into its environs. Along the way, players also locate 'journey cloths', left behind by Yeesha (the main character in the story, and daughter to Atrus and Catherine). At the core of *Uru* is the controversial restoration of the lost world of the D'ni people, a culture which one player described as created by 'taking a tribe of New Mexico Indians and adding water'. This player went on to point out the resemblance between the artwork and iconography in the *Myst* games *Riven, Uru* and *Myst Exile*, to caves built by Native Americans in New Mexico, where the Miller brothers once lived (Carroll, 1994). According to players, the D'ni culture bears many resemblances to these Native cultures, down to the architecture built into rockwork, although some also hypothesise that it is the mysterious Bahro 'beast people' who most closely resemble these cultures. Unlike the settlements of New Mexico's indigenous people, in D'ni Ae'gura, as in most Myst worlds, water is plentiful.

In D'ni Ae'gura, players take the roles of explorers to solve various puzzles that are integral to both the environment of each Age and the storyline. (Figure 5.2) Solving each puzzle results in the resumption of some feature or service of the world, the activation of a technology or mechanism, and/ or the opening of access to new zones. Most of these puzzles are spatial in nature, requiring a level of spatial literacy and cryptography. Puzzles are embedded seamlessly into the environment and their solution transforms the space itself. Turning on a power supply with the correct combination of moves, for instance, activates a rotating room or a lift system that allows access to another part of the Age. Closing the correct combination of steam vents allows the player to ride a puff of steam over a rock formation into a secret area containing additional clues and more 'journey cloths'. Indeed, the

narrative is so deeply embedded in the space that the two are indistinguishable from one another. In order to solve both the game and the narrative, players must become expert at reading the space. As with all Myst games there are no explicit instructions given as to the game mechanics or rules.

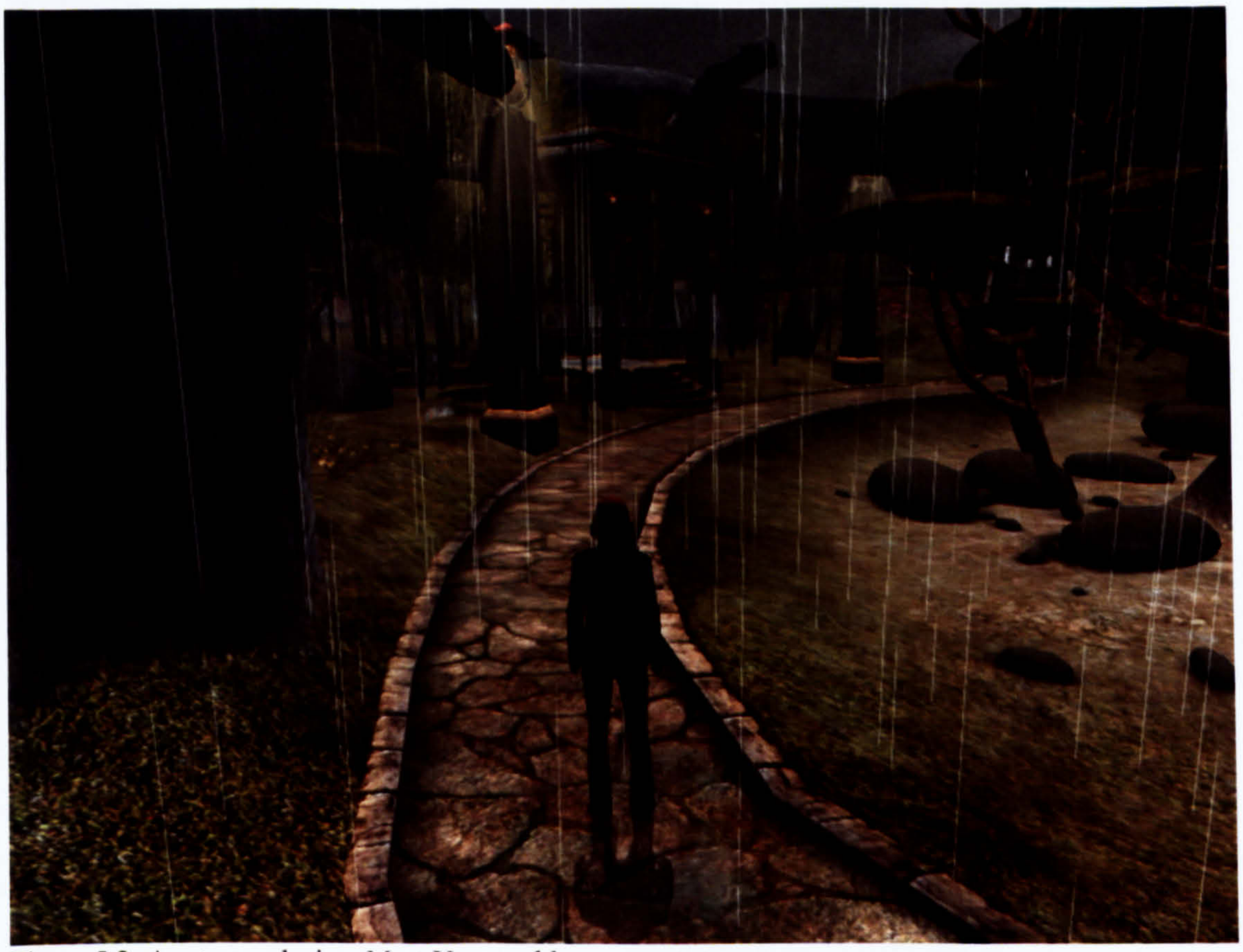


Figure 5.2: Avatar exploring *Myst Uru* world.

Uru was unusual in that it could be played as a single-player game (known as *Uru Prime*) or a multiplayer game. Players who were so inclined could request an invitation to the multiplayer server-based version, known as *Uru Live*; they would then be put on a waiting list until the next round of invitations was issued. *Uru Live* was entered via a neighbourhood, or 'hood', to which all new players were randomly assigned. These 'newbies' began in one of the generic D'ni Restoration Council (DNC) hoods, but they later had the option of joining a player-created hood or starting one of their own. Though there was no direct competition in the game, there were apparently several 'factions' that were fomented by Cyan through the use of paid actors. Cyan's attempt to perpetuate drama in the game met with mixed responses from players.

There are six key 'geographical' components to *Uru*, which will become relevant in the discussion of player-created artefacts:

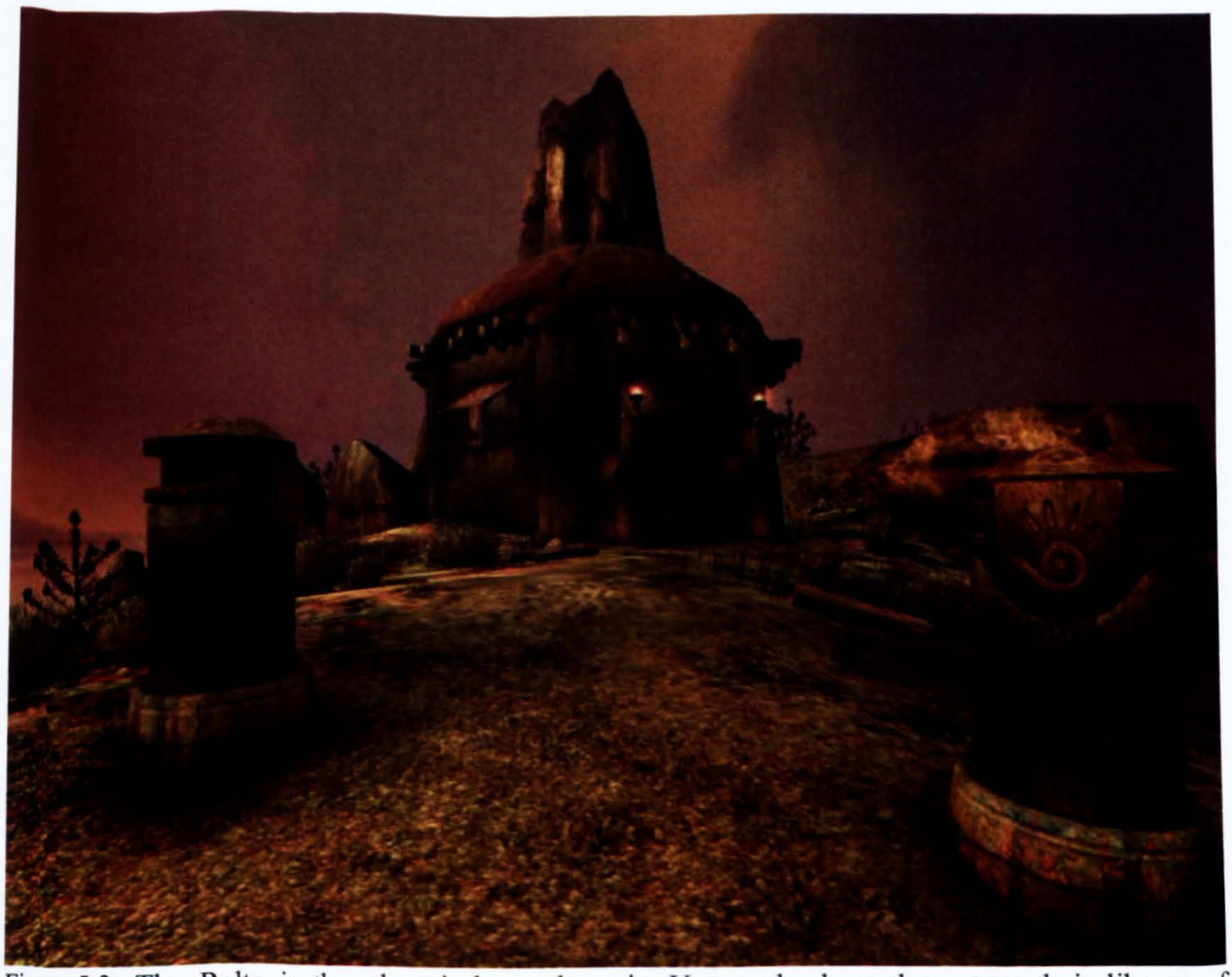


Figure 5.3: The Relto is the player's home base in *Uru*, and where they store their library of personal Linking Books.

Relto: The Relto is the individual player's 'home base', a small adobe cottage on an island in the clouds. (Figure 5.3) As a player progresses in the game, her Relto changes. As each Age is solved, new features are added, such as weather, landscaping (waterfall, volcano, rocks, trees, for example), and Linking Books to allow access to parts of the world the player has thus far discovered. Players can access these Linking Books, located in a small built-in bookcase inside the Relto, or within special columns in front of the building. Players travel from Age to Age via these books, one of which leads to the Nexus, a sort of mechanical dispenser of Linking Books. Linking Books can only be obtained after finding them in-world. They therefore function as a reward for exploration and accumulate in the bookshelves and columns in the Relto as the player progresses through the game.

Ages: Each player has unique instantiations of each of the Ages. Ages almost always combine both fantastical 'man-made' and natural features, a large part of the series' appeal. (Figures 5.4 & 5.5) Ages generally include elaborate puzzles involving manipulating contraptions, matching patterns, starting up machinery, opening portals, etc. In *Uru*, the Ages have persistence, meaning that they will remember whatever state of solution the Age is in. Players can invite other people into their own Ages, allowing for group puzzle-solving and exploring. Some Age puzzles are nearly impossible to solve by oneself, thus encouraging social interaction. Players also use Ages for formal and informal social gatherings, and to play other sorts of made-up games.



Figure 5.4: A typical *Uru* Age contains mysterious puzzles and machines.



Figure 5.5: Eder Kemo, the Garden Age.

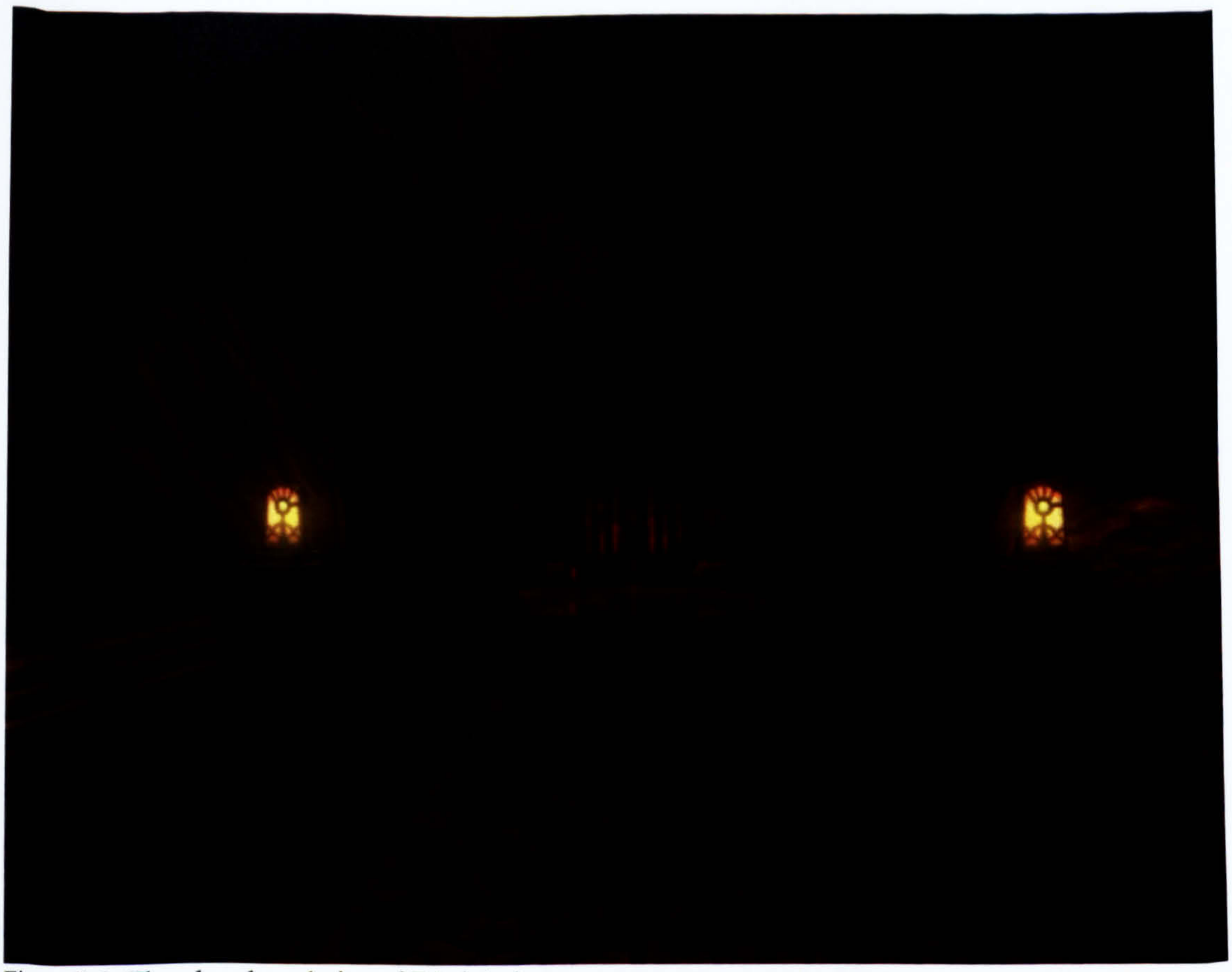


Figure 5.6: The abandoned city of D'ni Ae'gura.

The City (D'ni Ae'gura)

This is a shared space, a large ancient city apparently abandoned and uninhabited by its creators and in various states of disrepair, and now occupied only by explorers (other players). (Figure 5.6) The City contains an inoperative ferry terminal, a library, classrooms, and a number of Linking Books. Large chunks of walls are missing in places, and the streets are adorned with barriers, and orange traffic cones placed there by the D'ni Restoration Council. Players can explore the city, search the rubble and debris, and attempt to gain access to locked or seemingly inaccessible areas. Central to the city is a large tree, known as Terokh Jeruth, the Great Tree of Possibility. One of the Cyan-created mythical controversies revolved around whether or not the city should be restored. Some players preferred the city to remain a ruin, as it was more fun to explore. There were also implications that there was a darker side to the D'ni, which might be brought to light as a result of restoration.



Figure 5.7: The 'hood' was both the group and its gathering place in *Uru*.

The Neighbourhood

In Uru Live, there were many identical instantiations (shards) of the 'hood', each of which was home to a particular group, also called a hood. (Figure 5.7) The hood contains a number of features, the most notable of which is a central fountain. There is also an archaic device called an Imager, on which players can post text or images within the hood, an auditorium with a lectern and a library with Linking Books to the Nexus and other Ages and areas in the game. The hood is also the site of the 'Egg Room', a mysterious chamber that houses a floating, ornately decorated egg, the meaning of which is an enigma. Players can visit other hoods besides their own but the hood of their group is their social home base.

The Nexus

A small chamber that contains a mechanised library of Linking Books. Players can access the Nexus via Linking Books in the City or in their Reltos, allowing access to the hoods, their own and other players' Ages in the game.

The Bahro Caves

The act of collecting all of the journey cloths left behind by Yeesha provides access to a network of hidden caves formerly inhabited by the Bahro 'beast people', referred to by Yeesha as 'The Least'. The D'ni's relationship to the Bahro, who appear to have been enslaved and possibly even tortured,

suggests a darker side to the D'ni culture. The Bahro Caves hint that these beings, who may or may not have been 'human', were marginalised and persecuted by the D'ni, a potential deterrent to wishing to restore the D'ni culture.

Each player also carries two personal devices on her avatar:

Relto Book: a small Linking notebook enabling players to transport themselves back to their Reltos.

Ki: a small PDA-like device that facilitates remote communication and the location of other players, as well as the ability to capture and store in-game screenshots, which can be shown to other players or posted on the Imager in the hood.

5.5 The Gathering of Uru: Birth of a Hood

The Gathering of Uru (TGU) was one of the larger and more influential hoods within the *Uru* community. It was formed unofficially prior to the so-called public release of the game during the beta-test period, but officially began accepting members in November 17, 2003. In an in-game interview in *There.com*, Leesa, the founder and Mayor of TGU, described its creation as follows[vi]:

> *...I was a beta tester for Uru Live and created The Gathering neighbourhood but to start with it was private and I was the only member. I had never been in a multiplayer game or chatted on the net - was quite a loner. Then as part of the beta I had to make my hood public and see how it worked with visitors and other members so that also meant I was going to have to speak with people...which terrified me. One night I was walking by a new beta tester and he asked if I would help him. I couldn't be rude so I started my first chat. He became my first member. Got a few more members. To my surprise people started asking to join. They would ask me what I wanted the hood to be and I guess they liked my answer. Then so many started joining I realised I would have to become organised and set some ground rules. And it grew from that.*
>
> *In the first hood there were 138. Then a second shard was opened and I started another TG on it. It grew to 157. Then a third shard opened for the last few weeks of Uru Live and I got 49 members. When we came here* [*There.com*] *I said I'd start TG up again but other Uru and Myst people wanted to join so I renamed it here to The Gathering of Uru.*
>
> *...I was very flattered because people were coming in the last night of Uru Live and asking to join before they pulled the plug.*

Once the plug was pulled, they were, in Leesa's words, 'bound and determined to stay together in any way we could'. They were prepared to apply a great amount of time, effort, creativity and resourcefulness to this end.

5.6 The Rise and Fall of *Uru*/Becoming Refugees

Uru went on sale to the public in November of 2003, after having undergone a private beta since January of that year. Although the game itself was officially released, the online version was never actually launched in commercial form. Instead, Cyan and Ubisoft launched a 'public beta'. Like Leesa, a number of the members of The Gathering were part of the original beta test and thus were already established in the *Uru Live* community prior to the public beta opening. Many of these beta testers (including Leesa) were also part of the Welcomers' League, a hood devoted to helping new players.

As mentioned earlier, *Uru Live* had a somewhat unconventional structure: it could be played as a single-player game, *Uru Prime*, or players could apply to be in the multiplayer version, known as *Uru Live*, or *Prologue*. Once they had submitted their applications, they were put on a waiting list until the next slot opened up. This was a way to 'gate' the world and control throughput, possibly to avoid potential server problems. Players who were not yet enrolled in *Uru Live* could learn about the game through the *Uru* forums. One player told me she was afraid to play the online version because she had read on the forums that there were actors playing game characters whose job it was to foment conflict and pit players against each other in different factions.

Players were apparently admitted to *Uru Live* in batches of about 500 people at a time. However, in the last two months of the game's life, two mass-invitations occurred that allowed the majority of eligible players into the game. The first of two so-called 'clerical errors' by Cyan, often couched in historical terms, occurred in late December or early January, inadvertently generating invitations to all eligible players. Accounts of what caused this error remain vague and unclear, but the game was again closed to new players and the queue resumed until the end of January when, again, the entire list of qualified players received invitations. Many *Uru* refugees now believe that the second so-called error was deliberate—for *Uru Live* was to close down only a few weeks later. Events occurred very quickly from this point forward. Many key members of The Gathering hood were not admitted into *Uru Live* until this second mass invite. They therefore only played the online game for about two weeks before the servers were shut down. Other players arrived on the heels of the announcement, posted by Cyan on November 4, of the game's imminent closure.

As is the case with almost all online games, the actual facts behind the closure have never been completely revealed by either developer Cyan or publisher Ubisoft. Differing accounts can be found on forums and blogs on the Internet, but according to Ubisoft's *Uru* Community manager[vii], a total of 40,000 people ended up receiving invitations to *Uru Live*, of which only 10,000 actually signed up. Ubi was both surprised and disappointed by what they perceived as low turn-out, although it should be noted that at this point, there was no subscription charge levied to players. A much more challenging problem stemmed from the instability of the client-server architecture, also related to the gated entry. Because of the way the client (player's software) processed incoming data from the server, the more players who were playing together, the more unstable the client would become; this caused both excessive lag and frequent client crashes. As mentioned earlier, Leesa actually had to have three TGU shards to accommodate the 350 plus members; but even groups as small as 30 concurrent players could cause lag and crashes. So in fact, had the game been as popular as Cyan and Ubi had hoped, it still might not have survived due to challenges with the client/server architecture. The instability of this architecture became much more apparent to players later when they began to use the server software on their own player-run *Until Uru* servers.

When weighed against this evidence, Ubisoft's claim that the game's closure was due to insufficient players does not ring true with many members of the Uru Diaspora. Rather than admit that the game's failure was the result of poor marketing (a common complaint of players, reinforced by the fact that the game is virtually unknown in game research circles), or a faulty technology, it was much more convenient for Ubi and Cyan to blame the 'market' for its demise.

Comments

Well I have really enjoyed reading this and can see how much work and thought has been given.

When I first heard of this, I was a bit skeptical (as you know), but having read this and thoroughly enjoyed it. It's been a pleasure.

As the author has taken a long look/time to be part of our TMP community, by joining us 'in-Game', she has produced a wonderful piece of writing, and after many interviews with various members, I think she has done a brill job. [sic]

Thank you for doing this, its great to be seen as a community, and to be expressed in this way. Good luck with the project and it's been good to get to know you as well.

Posted by: Tristan | April 03, 2006 at 04:17 AM

I find it interesting that the creators of MMOs, whose survival depends upon the communities which arise from them, have so little understanding of those communities and make little

effort to learn. When things go wrong they blame finances, low membership, software, hardware, etc. but never look to their own ignorance of the community as a major cause.

Posted by: Leesa | April 10, 2006 at 01:23 PM

5.7 The Onset of Grieving in Cyberspace

The *Uru Live* server shutdown is the key historical event for the Uru Diaspora. In my interviews with Uru refugees across several MMOWs it was referred to variously as 'Black Monday' and 'Black Tuesday', and I was told that it took place on February 9th or February 10th. I later learned that in fact, both dates were correct. The server closed at midnight Pacific Standard Time on the evening of February 9th, and concurrently, for players in European time zones, at 8:00 AM the morning of February 10th. (Because so many MMOW/G servers are based in California, Pacific Standard Time has become the GMT of cyberspace).

This crucial date is extensively documented in a number of locations, and has become a kind of 'national' holiday for members of the Uru Diaspora throughout the ludisphere. In anticipation of the imminent server closure, The Gathering's Deputy Mayor Lynn and hood member Henry set up Koalanet, a forum to enable hood members to stay in communication with each other after their world was destroyed. The forum included a mechanism for asynchronous discussion via topical threads, as well as a live text chat environment. Koalanet quickly became the community hub, as well as a conduit for intense expressions of grieving both before and after *Uru*'s closure. The forum also became essential as a transitional space, in the planning and ongoing maintenance of the TGU community, and ultimately enabled the group to support its inter-game diasporic community. (It should also be added that this archive proved a valuable research tool; as all participants were asked to register and enter details such as their membership date, birthday and gender, demographic data was culled primarily from this source).

Players were made aware by Cyan and Ubisoft of the imminent server shutdown about five days prior to the event, although staff and community managers were aware of it earlier than this (a source of great anguish to *Uru* staff)[viii]. The announcement was made jointly by Cyan and Ubisoft via a personal letter from developer Rand Miller. In the weeks following the news, over 2,000 players petitioned, offering to pay subscription fees for an entire year in advance, in order to keep the game running.



Figure 5.8: TGU members embrace during the final hours of *Uru*. (Image by Leesa)

The last day of *Uru*, many players assembled in-world, gathering in hoods, or visiting each other's Ages. (Figure 5.8) Due to varied time zones, not all players were able to be online at the strike of midnight PST, the scheduled shutdown time. A core group of TGU members gathered in the garden of Lynn's Eder Kemo Age, talked, told each other stories, and played hide-and-seek. As the time approached, they moved into a circular configuration close enough so that their avatars would appear to be holding hands. Several players recall the clocks in their 'rl' (real-life) homes striking midnight, the screen freezing, and a system alert message appearing on the screen: 'There is something wrong with your Internet connection', followed by a dialogue box saying 'OK'. As one player recalled: 'I couldn't bring myself to press that OK button because for me it was NOT OK.' (Figure 5.9)

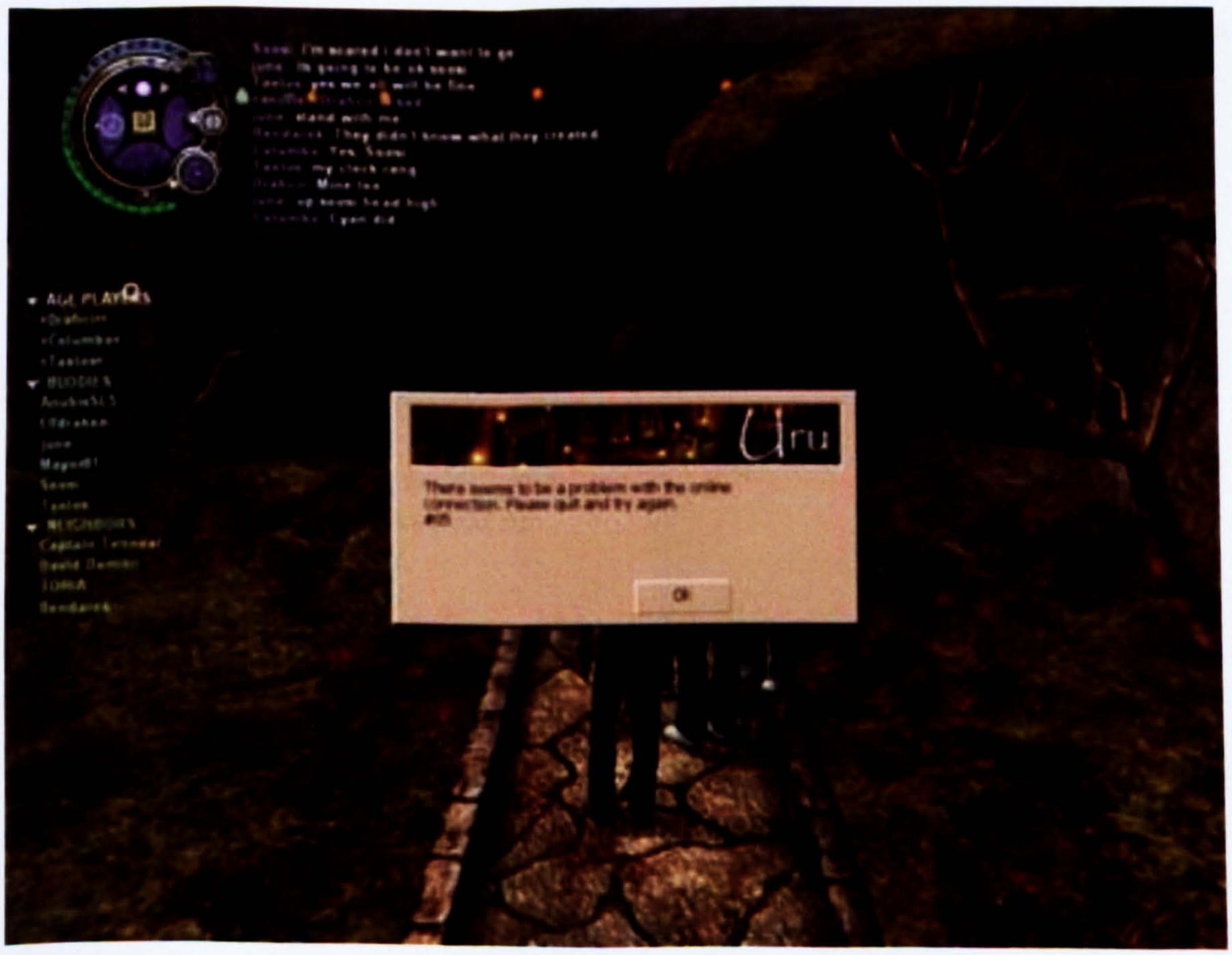


Figure 5.9: The last thing *Uru* players saw was a screen saying they were getting an Internet error. (Image by Raena)

In the minutes and hours immediately following the shutdown, a number of TGU members regrouped in the chat area of the Koalanet Forum. This was not pre-arranged, but occurred spontaneously. Players experienced a kind of 'shock and catharsis' and many described symptoms of post-traumatic stress. This collective trauma, and the ability to share its aftermath together via their own self-created chat and forum, was absolutely critical in cementing the bond that carried the group forward to its eventual immigration and ongoing survival. At this point, the players had been made refugees, and the impact of this shared trauma on long-term community building cannot be understated. It is difficult to determine what would have happened to the group had the game stayed open indefinitely, but many continue to cite this shared trauma as a factor in their deep emotional connection to one another. In fact, all former *Uru* players, even those previously unknown to each other, seem share this common bond when meeting in other virtual worlds. Added to this were additional personal revelations, such as the fact that some of the members were disabled, which seemed, on an individual level, to literally add insult to injury. In some sense, the turning point for players was when they realised that it was 'all about the people, and not the place'. Koalanet quickly became a daily shared ritual where players could check in with each other, as well as expressing their feelings about their collective experience.

The examples below of writings created by TGU members in the days immediately following the close of *Uru Live* are an indication of player's reactions to what for many turned out to be a harrowing experience:

To all who are grieving our loss.
February 12, 2004, 01:52:48 am

The tears the tears why can't I stop the tears
It was only supposed to be a game, no violence, no fears
A neighborhood? A community?
It was just a game to me
but the more that I played the more I could see
this was becoming so much more for me
I have a family, I have friends,
my busy schedule it never ends
Out to a meeting, out to lunch,
Can't wait to get home to spend time with this bunch
Then as I played day after day
my opinion, it began to sway
This is no longer a game to me
These people are part of my family

—Aria of Katran

I walk in Uru
A Poem by ScarletMoon

Yesterday I walked in Uru
A gathering as it were
A meeting of friends
In ages unknown
Today I walked in Uru
Soaking up tears of those I know
Their eyes a color of red
Crying till we go
Tomorrow I walk in Uru
The time I know not when
Yet I know my friends will wait
For the gathering to begin again

Posted on: February 20, 2004, 10:40:16

When darkness falls.....

Open spaces, fallen graces, bring eyes that look anew,
Heart felt moments in dim lit places, remind me of Uru
Ancients' relics, tumbled and derelict on mountains in dark hue,
solemn traces of forgotten races, remind me of Uru.
Friendly chatter, a distant clatter of machines that we pursue
a book of pages, to the ages, reminds me of Uru.
A final bow, to what is now, in a garden of eternal dew,
one more rainstorm, one more feeling, reminds me of Uru.

—Tristan

6 THE URU DIASPORA/IMMIGRATION TO NEW WORLDS

6.1 The Loss of the Homeland

My Homeland Uru

From my beautiful homeland
From my beloved homeland
I hear the Bahro cry
and Kadish's wife sing her song of despair

And a refrain is sung by a sister who lives far from her homeland
And the memories make her cry
The song that she sings springs from her pain and her own tears
And we can hear her cry

Your homeland strikes your soul when you are gone
Your homeland sighs when you are not there
The memories live and flow through my blood
I carry her inside me, yes its true

The refrains continue, as does the melancholy
And the song that keeps repeating,
Flows in my blood, ever stronger
On its way to my heart

I sing of my homeland, beautiful and loved
I suffer the pain that is in her soul
Although I am far away, I can feel her
And one day I'll return

I know it

-Raena

This poem, posted May 13, 2004, about three months after the server shutdown by TGU member Raena, expresses this sense of losing ones homeland, a sentiment that many TGUers shared. To an unknowing reader, it would be hard to recognise that its writer was talking about a virtual world. In reality of course, she knows it is a virtual world, but her deep attachment to *Uru* as 'homeland', and the implied ethnic identity that goes with that, is clearly expressed in this text.

In discussing the *Uru* group at-large and the TGU group in particular, I adopted the terms 'refugee' and 'diaspora'. The former term I adopted directly from the *Uru* community, who regularly refer to themselves as refugees. Diaspora is my own term for the dispersion of *Uru* players that now inhabit other games and virtual worlds. According to *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (2000, Houghton Mifflin Company) a diaspora is defined as: 'A dispersion of a people from their original homeland'. Refugees are persons who have left their homeland due to

persecution. It may be more proper to call the Uru Diaspora exiles, but the term 'exile' implies individual rather than group expulsion. (Ironically, one of the games in the series is entitled *Myst Exile*). 'Refugees' also implies a wandering from place to place, which was precisely what occurred. In addition to TGU, there are a number of other communities of the Uru Diaspora in a number of MMOW/Gs; the Welcomers' League for instance (of which Leesa is also a member) has chapters within *There.com, Star Wars: Galaxies* and *The Matrix Online*, extending its original mission to welcome and help newbies in *Uru* to other games. Especially in the beginning, as TGU members and other *Uru* players searched for a new homeland, there persisted a hope that they might someday return to *Uru*.

6.2 Immigration: The Quest for a New Home

With Koalanet as their main convening site, the TGU group began to gather there, either using the online chat or contributing to the asynchronous discussion forum. Koalanet provided a communication hub for the group, but it was clear that they missed sharing the avatar experience within the *Uru* milieu. Certainly they could talk to each other, but they needed to *play* together and 'see' each other. It was also clear in talking to players that the spatial environment of *Uru* was part of what they missed; they often spoke in interviews of the visual beauty of the game. Even before the server shutdown, they began to investigate alternatives. Most players did not perceive this as having happened in an organised fashion; rather different players began to take it upon themselves to explore options and share their findings with the group.

Two branches of research emerged. One was geared towards re-creating *Uru* using some kind of virtual world authoring tool. Players investigated a range of options, including sophisticated game development packages such as 'Virtools', to online 3D technologies such as VRML. They also looked at virtual environments that had affordances for player-made worlds, among them *Active Worlds* (Britvich, 1995), a ten-year-old player-built virtual world. The second branch was more interested in a 'ready-to-play' solution that did not require any technical skills and to which the group could immigrate as soon as possible in order to maintain some momentum.

A debate surfaced at this time and one of the outcomes was that different activities could go on concurrently.

As an interim solution, two members, Basil and D'evon (who later served as TGU's shard administrator for *Until Uru*), created a text-based MUD (multi-user domain) of the hood. It provided a context for chatting, and employed skillful writing and humour, but many players had difficulty navigating the interface. Players seemed to long for the visual experience of the *Uru* world, for their own and each other's avatars.

Meanwhile, the 'ready-to-play' camp was considering a number of potential candidates for migration. Self-appointed scouts began to investigate other possible virtual venues. *Ryzom* (Nevrax, 2003) and *EverQuest* were two games under early consideration, but most players found them too violent and competitive for their liking. The two primary candidates that came to the forefront were *Second Life* and *There.com*, both online virtual worlds that were less games and more virtual recreation zones; each of these worlds also had mechanisms for players to create their own digital artefacts. Another group of about 200 *Uru* players had settled in *Second Life*. Of these, a small handful, varying in size from 6-9 players, began to construct Shorah Island, the heart of which was a facsimile of areas of the *Uru* game, taking advantage of *Second Life*'s flexible in-game modelling and scripting capability. A resourceful and dedicated group, they managed to re-create several key areas of *Uru*, complete with scripted Linking Books that, if clicked on, would take players to another zone within their *Uru*-themed area in *Second Life*. They also created a Nexus with links to a series of Reltos and private group member homes. This group was a secondary part of the study, and more will be said about them in the section about artefact creation. In the summer of 2005, another group consisting of former *Myst* and *Uru* players built an entirely new *Myst*-style game in *Second Life*.

Uru's community managers, concerned for the well-being of their players, tried to support the newly formed diaspora in whatever way they could. When they became aware that *Uru* players sought to migrate into other virtual worlds, they alerted a number of operators, including *There.com* and *Second Life*, in hopes of securing them a new home. This top-down approach did not result in any formal relocation program, but did serve to alert community managers to the incoming refugees.

The way in which the search for a new home took place also seems to have the classic hallmarks of emergence. Rather than a centralised, top-down effort, players dispersed and explored different worlds, bringing back travelogues. Self-appointed scouts Katsushiro, Felion, Raena and a few others reported back with screenshots of activities from *There.com* (Figure 6.1), while Ezra brought back a report on *Second Life*. Erik, whose primary interest was in making a new hood from scratch, continued to report on the various tools he was investigating that might be suitable for this task.



Figure 6.1: TGU scouts posted screenshots of their adventures in *There.com* (Image by Raena)

This discussion of where to migrate to was one of the few instances in the Koalanet forum where there were obvious disagreements among TGU members. Players had strong feelings pro and con as to the various options presented—although all agreed that any substitute for *Uru* would pale by comparison. This debate, primarily comparing *Second Life* and *There.com*, revolved around two areas of world design: avatar expressiveness and navigation. More details on this will be covered in the section on avatars to follow; however, because the avatar served as the representation of player identity in-world, players had very strong feelings about its expressive features in each of the worlds being considered. The other issue of paramount concern was navigation. As explorers, players felt that ease of navigation was critical, and *Second Life* was deemed weak in this regard. In addition to more refined navigation, *There.com* also offered a method of loading graphics to the client that allowed for more scenic vistas whereas *Second Life*'s loading schema did not load objects in the distance, thus making scenic vistas impossible.

Although these differences of opinion appeared to present a major rift, the group finally arrived at a compromise in their approach to the problem of where to settle. This key moment in their development could easily have torn the group apart, but it seems that TGU's main priority was to stay together, and they were willing to find a way to overcome their differences in order to assure their long-term sustainability.

Ezra, who Leesa later appointed Deputy Mayor of TGU in *Second Life*, brought this to light in a March 5 post on the Koalanet forum:

> *I was thinking about this more last night and realised the reason I was feeling upset was because my worst fear when the cancellation of Live was first announced was that the Uru community would fracture and fall apart. I had met so many wonderful people in Uru and didn't want to lose that connection. Thinking of TGU fracturing into different sites/chat rooms/games/etc. that I couldn't/wouldn't participate in was very distressing.*
>
> *But then I had a thought! Why* can't *we 'fracture' into different places? What's wrong with that? If various groups of people hang out in various places online, it will be no different than real life. We should have a Meeting Place presence everywhere -- in any area people want to hang out. Heck, if some TGU folk want to hang out in EverQuest or The Sims Online, more power to them!*

The very process of this debate made it clear to TGU members that the Koalanet forum itself had become their primary communication hub, a 'home base' that transcended whatever virtual world they ultimately chose to inhabit. This was articulated a few hours after Ezra's post by TGU founder Leesa, who demonstrated her role as 'thought leader' by explicitly giving members permission to settle wherever they wished:

> *First, there is no competition between 'There' and 'Second Life' or any other place. We go where we want. And like Petrova said, we had three shards in Uru. I had to spend time on all three, obviously, but most people seemed to settle into one shard they liked the best.*
>
> *Secondly, this forum and chat are our home not 'There' or 'Second Life' or anywhere else. Those places are for us to interact and play. So no matter where you are: There, Second Life, Ryzom, somewhere else or nowhere else, you are a TGUer and this forum is where you come home to (and when Erik is done we'll probably all stop going to those other places anyway).*

The outcome of this dispute was that ultimately *There.com* was to become the main settlement for a majority of TGU members, although there was no official decree to that effect. Rather it was a spontaneous chain of events coaxed along by a few members. Raena, concerned that if they didn't find a new home quickly the group would fall apart, acted as an informal ambassador and made contact with her appointed *There.com* mentor, Alice, telling her their plight. She also managed to convince Lynn and Leesa to try it. Even though no formal dictate was given, once the two group leaders decided they would settle in *There.com*, it was only a matter of a few weeks before the bulk of

remaining TGUers followed suit. Alice, an established Thereian, offered the refugees some space near her community, Emerald City, as a settlement.

A small number of original TGUers chose not to make *There.com* their home. Some visited occasionally; others did not go at all. Concurrently, TGU continued to maintain a small contingent in *Second Life*. Ezra, who was one of the strongest *Second Life* proponents, eventually retired as Deputy Mayor (primarily due to real-life priorities); Katsushiro, one of the original *There.com* scouts, eventually moved to *Second Life* but visited *There.com* on occasion. A few players, who will be discussed later, took central roles in creating and/or maintaining other TGU zones.

Initially, The Gathering of Uru, one of about a half a dozen *Uru* Refugee clubs in *There.com*, had about 300 members. Most of these were members of the original TGU group in *Uru*. During the first six months, the group actually grew; new members formerly of *Uru* but not from TGU joined, as well as Thereians who hung around the TGU group and enjoyed their culture. At the midway point of this study, The Gathering of Uru in *There.com* had around 450 members. At the end of the 18-month study, this number had waned to about 160, although most of the key members of the community remained active.

For a small and growing virtual society like *There.com*, the sudden onslaught of a large group of players *en masse* placed a significant burden on the system. Once again, the clients and servers were overworked. The TGU community that had settled near Alice's Emerald City grew to about sixty people in a matter four weeks, creating huge problems with lag and 'blockheads' (avatars reducing to low-polygon representations). There were also festering resentments among the 'indigenous' Thereians and Emerald City residents, a number of whom moved out. TGU then moved to an adjacent lot to create more space between the two communities. Emerald City then moved, in part to get away from the server congestion caused by the growing immigrant group; however, TGU followed as a gesture of support for Alice, allowing still more space between the settlements to mitigate the lag. Nonetheless, the TGU group continued to grow steadily, and eventually was forced to move away from Emerald City entirely. In each case, the move was brought on either by a battle for processing resources, or 'griefing' (harassment) from other players.

The primary form of griefing entailed players running over avatars with dune buggies. While the avatar suffers no long-term damage, the impact is very disruptive to whatever the avatar might be doing at the time. Another form of griefing was what one TGUer described as 'sign wars'. Because players in *There.com* could not 'own' land per se, settlement was done on more or less of a squatting basis. Thus any unclaimed land near or around the physical structures placed by the group was 'up for grabs'. Whenever the TGUers would create a new settlement, they would plant a sign identifying it as

their area. Griefers would then place another sign in front of theirs, such as a billboard advertising cybersex.

A significant faction of existing Thereians were suspicious and fearful of this sudden inrush of 'outsiders'. Many were afraid that, by sheer numbers, the Uruvians would take over *There.com* entirely, turning it into *Uru*. Some *There.com* denizens thought the 'Uru people' a bit odd. They were clearly a very close-knit group, and often greeted each other in a foreign language with words like 'Shorah!' (D'ni for 'peace'). They were intelligent, resourceful, and some felt, potentially dangerous. Some Thereians even took up the matter with *There.com* management, complaining about the refugees. As a result, TGUers became very protective of one another, and the persecution from Thereians only served to further strengthen their bond.

There.com management had the opposite response to the new arrivals as the other citizens of their world: they were conciliatory and accommodating. After all, the *Uru* immigrants represented an instant market. There, Inc. (the world's owner at the time) was more than happy to nurture this growing population and the subscription fees it brought. In the long run, Uruvians would go on to spend quite a bit of money in *There.com*, paying many additional fees related to keeping PAZes up, buying and selling numerous items in auction (for which players are charged a transaction fee). Because they were older and more committed than the average online game player, they were willing and able to spend money. The combination of their economic sway, their maturity, and their experience of suffering at the hands of an MMOG company contributed to their forthright and demanding manner with *There.com* management. The perception, not entirely unfounded, that the *Uru* people had undue influence with the 'powers that be' only served to exacerbate the tensions between the new immigrants and native Thereians.

Between February and April, TGU moved no less than five times to avoid harassment before settling its sixth and finale locale. Finally, *There.com* management was able to secure an available Island for the group, although some Thereians believed its occupant had been pushed out to accommodate the immigrants. This became their permanent settlement in *There.com*.

The TGU Community Centre, which followed the group around from place to place, was originally created by Ember using a Moroccan kit available from *There.com*. (Figure 6.2) Although there were other kits that were stylistically better suited to *Uru*, the Moroccan was selected for the simple reason that it had a fountain. With each move, the Community Centre had been carried along with the group and re-positioned at each new location. This structure became the focal point of the new Island, initially called Leesa Island, and later changed to Yeesha Island. (Figure 6.3) Eventually, the Community Centre was rebuilt using *Uru*-style architectural components designed by Damanji, who

emerged as one of TGU's leading artisans. The centrepiece of the Community Centre was his replica of the *Uru* hood fountain. (Figure 6.4)



Figure 6.2: Uruvian immigrants romping in the Moroccan fountain in the first TGU Centre in *There.com*. (Image by Raena)

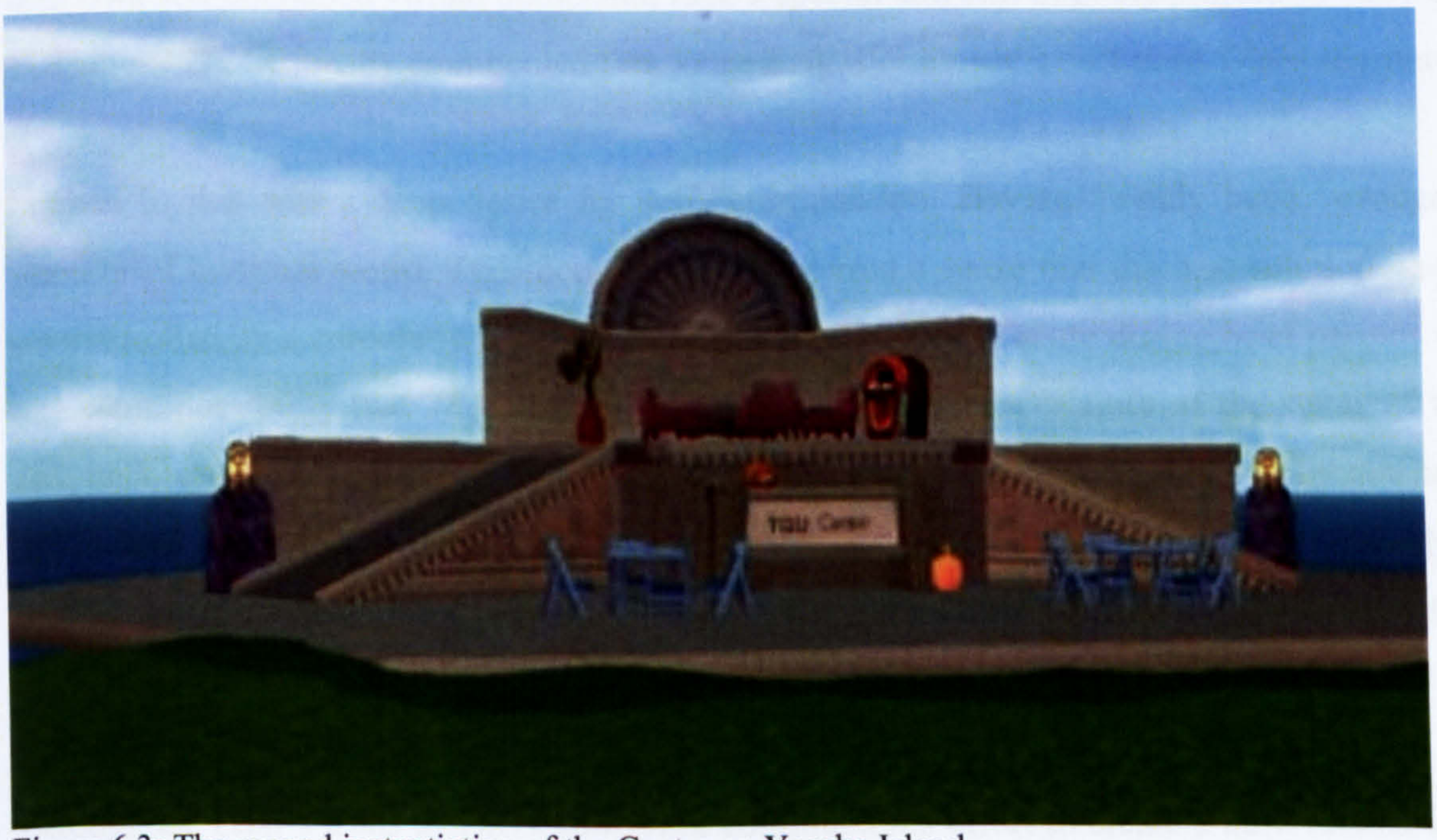


Figure 6.3: The second instantiation of the Centre on Yeesha Island.



6.4: The final iteration of the TGU Centre in *There.com* complete with *Uru* hood fountain and *Uru*-style architectural components.

Throughout the period that TGU was in a state of flux in *There.com*, and even after settlement on the Island, many group members had a sense that this was a temporary arrangement until they could build their own self-contained virtual homeland, Erik's special and still ongoing project. In early interviews, TGU members frequently commented that 'once Erik is done, we won't need *There* anymore'.

Implied in this was a deep desire for self-determination. Having already been 'wronged' by the operator of a virtual world, TGU consistently harboured a sense that the best solution would be one not controlled by a corporation. This desire became particularly acute during brief periods when there was some possibility that *There.com* would be closing. The uncertainty of the status of their world was, understandably, unsettling to the displaced Uruvians. Perhaps fuelled in part by this anxiety, two key group members, D'evon and Erik, never visited *There.com* for the duration of this study, although Erik eventually did set up his first *There.com* account after meeting other TGUers in real life.

6.3 A Home of Their Own

Throughout TGU's trials in *There.com*, Erik continued his effort to create a new version of *Uru* with the Atmosphere 3D world-authoring environment, a technology he had never before used. Erik described his motivation as follows:

this may sound a little silly, but it was because of a promise I made to leesa on black tuesday...she was utterly devastated...she didn't make it to the hood where the rest of us were and just sent messages to us. and i was pretty upset over uru closing as well.

anyway, i promised leesa that i would rebuild the hood – for her, for me, and for the rest of us. got a bit carried away here, i think it is safe to say. especially since i didn't know anything about 3d environments...or 3d at all really.

Erik was so motivated that he was willing to learn an entirely new set of skills in order to create something that would serve as a home for his community. His goal was to create a self-contained re-creation of the hood, rather than attempt to create something in another 3D world. 'To me, Uru wasn't only about the people – it was the people AND the place...the mood, atmosphere, ambience'.

Erik did not like the atmosphere or ambience presented by the alternatives. He felt *There.com* was too cartoonish and he did not care for the aesthetics of *Second Life*; nor did he care for the cultures of either world. Working entirely on his own, he taught himself Caligari TrueSpace, an easy-to-use, less-expensive alternative to more high-end programs such as 3D Studio Max, to create the models, and used Adobe Photoshop, with which he was already familiar, to create textures. Erik also created replicas of his friends' avatars for use in this new hood. He created the textures by hand, rather than appropriating them from the *Uru* game software, because he did not want to infringe on any of Cyan or Ubi's copyrights. For the same reason, he also alerted Cyan and a representative of the company came and viewed the Atmosphere hood, but did not contact him further. Erik took this as an indication that it was safe to proceed.

In an interview, Erik cited his favorite aspect of *Uru*: 'the water...that was the genius of the hood—as well as other places (in *Uru*). Placing a fountain in the hood meant that people would gather there...because people are drawn to water -- esp running water' [sic]. As a practitioner, I knew that architects and urban planners are well aware that water, whether as a natural feature or a man-made element, is a major attractor in public space. As Erik put it, 'look at any piazza in any italian [sic] city. or the water cooler at the office for that matter. water is life, therefore people seek water'. Erik began his re-creation of the hood with the fountain, 'the centrepiece of anything Uru'. Indeed the importance of the fountain can clearly be seen, as it is a recurring artefact that appears in many different player-created instantiations of *Uru*. (Figure 6.5)

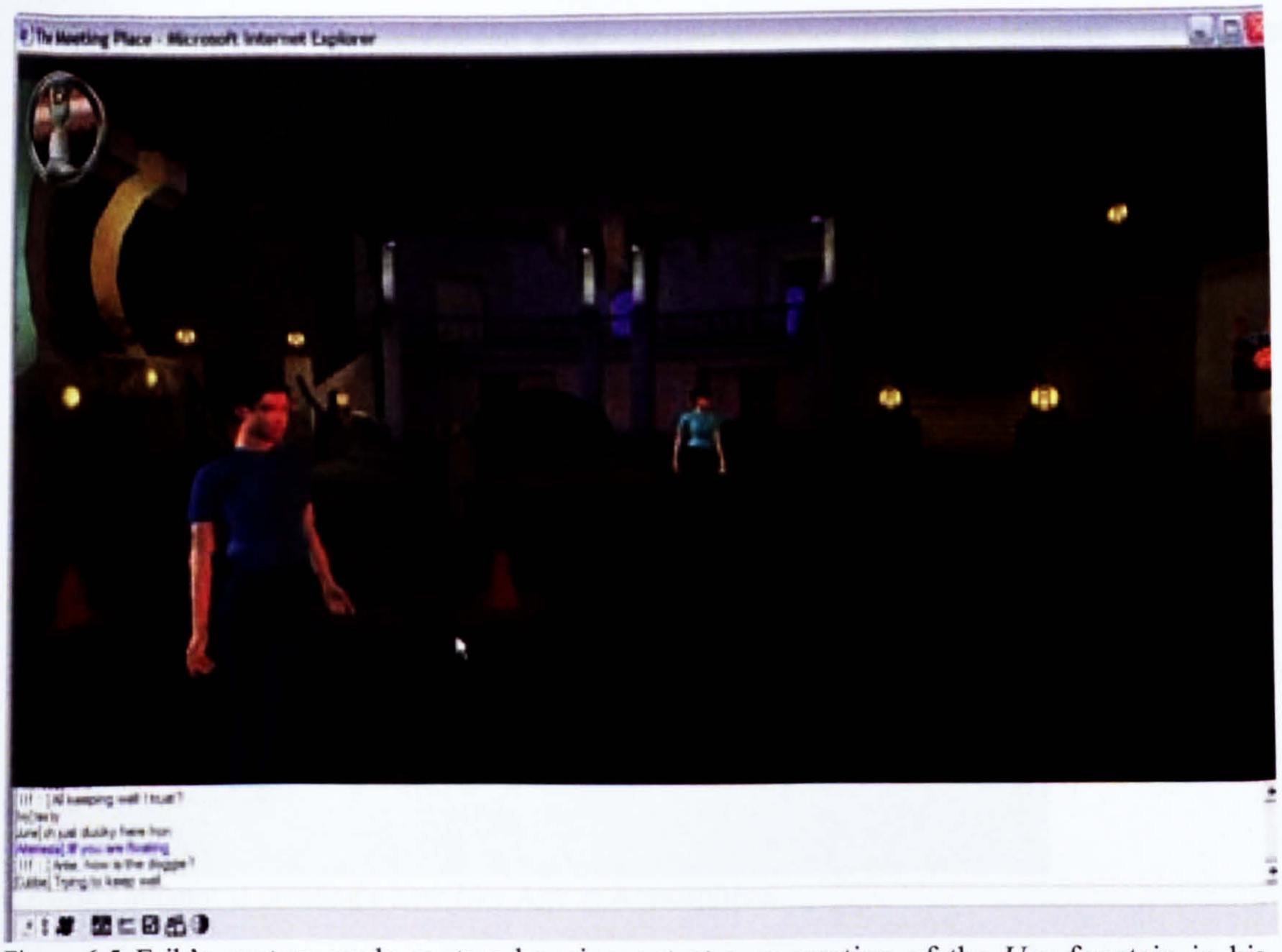


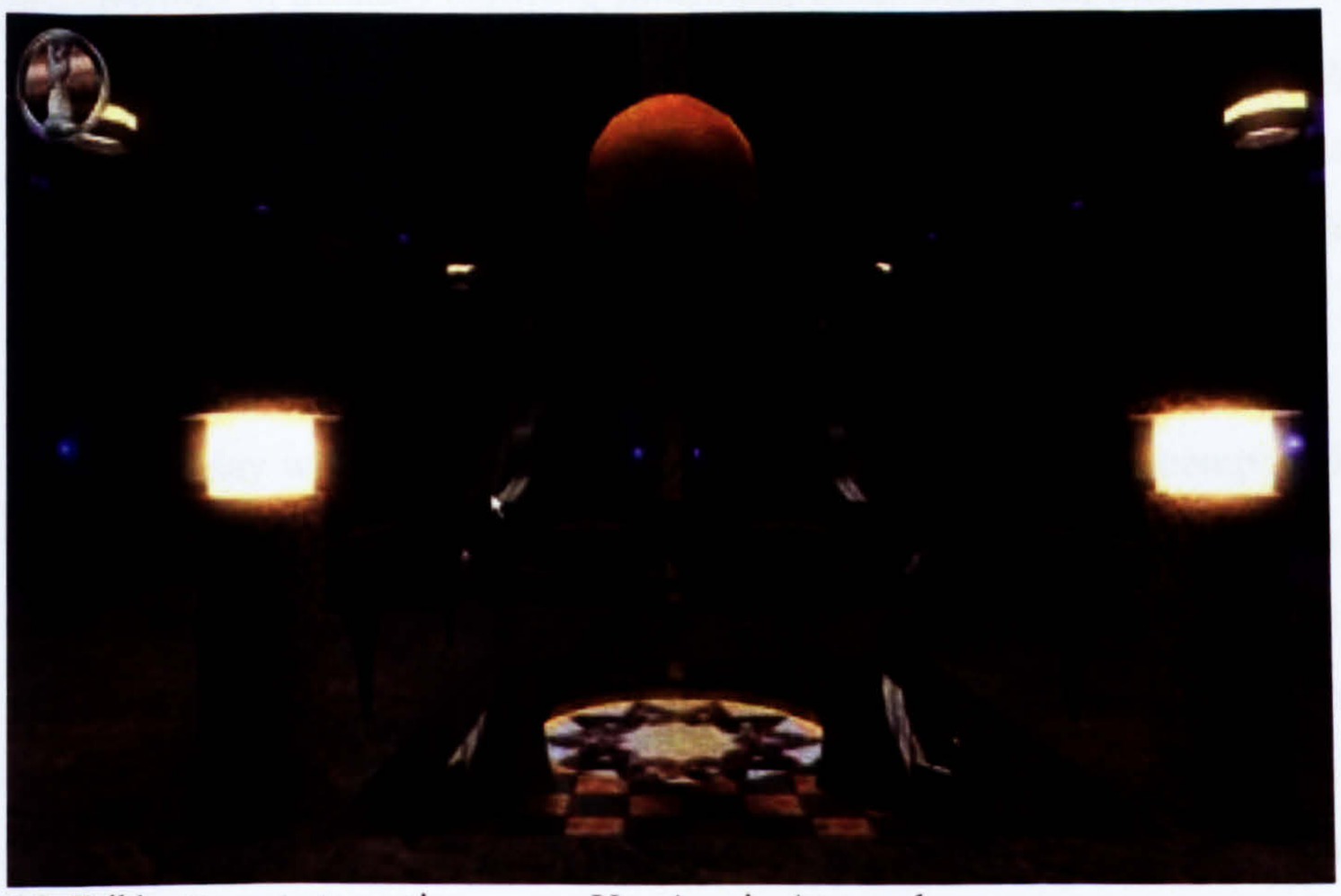
Figure 6.5 Erik's custom-made avatars hanging out at a re-creation of the *Uru* fountain in his Atmosphere Hood.



Figure 6.6: Detail of Erik's Atmosphere Hood.

Initially, Erik released the fountain courtyard area of the hood, and then later added some other rooms of his own invention. (Figure 6.7) Using their custom-made avatars, players began to meet in the 'Atmos Hood' as players came to call it, typically 10-12 concurrently, at a fixed weekly time. A regular meeting time for the MUD (multi-user domain/dungeon) of Saturday noon (to accommodate European players) was supplanted by Lynn to encourage people to gather in Erik's Atmosphere Hood on a regular basis. This scheduling activity on Lynn's part exemplifies the ways in which TGU members worked to support each other's efforts to keep the community together. It is also interesting

to note that while Erik was considered a very active member of the community, the only instantiation of *Uru* immigrant culture in which he actively participated was the Atmosphere Hood.



6.7: Erik's attempt at creating a new *Uru* Age in Atmosphere.

6.4 Assimilation/Transculturation

In the context of immigration, the term 'assimilation' generally implies an immigrant group assimilating to its new locale. In the case of TGU, it is clear that, over time, a process of mutual assimilation occurred between TGUers and Thereians. This might equate to what Fernando Ortiz calls 'transculturation' (Ortiz, 1947), in which a cultural context adapts to new arrivals as much as the immigrant group adapts to its new milieu. Over time, TGU players made major contributions to the *There.com* community, and eventually became fully integrated, while still maintaining their group identity. The University of There, for instance, founded by TGU member Wingman, was composed primarily of Damanji's *Uru*-inspired 'Cone Houses'. Damanji became not only TGU's lead artisan, and also one of the top developers in *There.com*. Other TGU members took leadership roles in fashion design, art creation and curating, sporting events, event hosting, performance, and building, as well as *There.com*'s Member Advisory Board. Through the social mediation of the world, *Uru* immigrants have become 'Uruvian-Thereians', in the same way that Italian immigrants to the U.S. became 'Italian Americans'. As a result, Uruvians have become an integral part of *There.com*'s culture, economy and political structure.

TGU member Cola, in an essay entitled *A Thereian makes peace with the Urufugee within*, making several word plays based on *Myst* content (including the last line, which is quoted *Uru*) voiced it this way:

The merging of the soul of the Urufugee into the citizen of There is happening. It wasn't without its tantrums of not wanting to merge, not wanting to believe Uru was gone and the guilty feelings of actually enjoying something other than Uru. But time does tell and there will always be the memories of D'ni and having been together there. Perhaps we could have a dual citizenship; Uruvian and Thereian. I have ***Myst*** *being in D'ni, my soul, heart and being were* ***Riven*** *from D'ni, I am an* ***Exile*** *from the place where I want to be yet* ***Uru*** *has been put to bed. But perhaps the ending has not yet been written.*

It is hard to say what percentage of the *There.com* population is comprised of Uruvian immigrants, as *There.com* management will not release subscriber numbers. However, of the estimated 10,000 players who played *Uru Live*, TGU appears to be the largest single group of *Uru* refugees, and is considered by many in the *Uru* community at-large to be the strongest in terms of group cohesion.

The trajectory of the TGU experience in *There.com* demonstrates the power of play communities to remain together even in the face of adversity. The profound and deep connection formed by 'partners in play' suggests that play activity has unique social qualities to form sustainable long-term affiliations. With the help of online communications tools, these can be sustained well beyond the term of the original play context in which they were formed. The unique style and personality of the group can also be transplanted into another play context or 'ecosystem' where it will adapt to new conditions, while maintaining its essential attributes and group cohesion.

6.5 *Uru* Reclaimed

Concurrently with both Erik's 'Atmos Hood' and the TGU migration into *There.com* and other virtual worlds, and the *Second Life* re-creation of *Uru*, a group of *Uru* fan/ hackers who were actively working on restoring the original game succeeded in reverse-engineering the server software. Because of their loyalty toward Cyan, however, they approached the developer with a proposal: grant special permission to players to run Cyan's *Uru* server software on their own servers. This arrangement came to fruition in summer of 2004 under the auspices of *Until Uru*, and the TGU shard became active in August of 2004, with D'evon acting as Deputy Mary and main shard administrator, with co-administartors at various times. The *Until Uru* game was, as one player put it, 'exactly as we left it', in other words, there were no new Ages or new gameplay. The hacker group also continued to conduct experiments with their reverse-engineered server infrastructure, including attempting to create new Ages.

The origins of the creation of *Until Uru* seem deeply embedded in the gameplay. As Xploros, *Uru*'s community manager, who held that title until the summer of 2005, described it:

There had always been a segment of the community that 'hacked' and reverse engineered the Uru software...The Myst world is very dedicated to puzzle solving, and self-reliance, and that the experience of the participant could be immersive in many ways. And when Uru was hacked, it was found that there was additional material that made it clear that some expectation of such hacking was built into the game...which had no internal game function, but were enjoyed immensely by those who discovered this hidden material.

After that, and especially after the closure of Uru, the community (congregating mostly on one of the fan sites...) began reverse engineering the Uru Live servers, and quickly gaining enough success to be able to predict a public run server to be released at some point. At this time they began talking to Cyan so as to secure permission for this effort.

Based on prior posts and conversations, one would have assumed that players would return to *Until Uru* and abandon their settlements in other virtual worlds. However, this was not the case. *Uru* refugees had already, to a certain extent, assimilated to their new environs. Rather than the anticipated return to their homeland, *Until Uru* was lauded as something special. TGU members began meeting there regularly at noon on Sundays, a date and time that allowed for all of the international members to participate. Players also conducted special events in the *Until Uru* shards, such as a St. Patrick's Day Parade and the D'ni Olympics, originally founded by TGU member Maesi. A number of TGU members remained disinclined to visit *Until Uru*; they saw it as a symbol of the past, and preferred, in their words, 'to move forward'.

The introduction of *Until Uru* also provided the opportunity for newer members of TGU who had never played *Uru* before (including the author of this study) to experience the game firsthand. My own experience of *Until Uru* came in the Fall of 2004, shortly after the TGU shard was opened. Having heard about and seen Uru through the eyes of players, via their homages and simulations, for about six months, entering the world about which I knew so much but had never before visited brought another dimension of insight to the research.

I was already familiar with both the places and artefacts of *Uru* through both player-created instantiations and descriptions of them. TGU members were very excited to take me through the different Ages of *Uru*, help me with the puzzles, and show me the different areas of their beloved home world. They knew the nooks, crannies and nuances of the game in detail, and one of their greatest pleasures continued to be showing the original *Uru* game to the uninitiated. Furthermore, almost everything in *Uru* has special meaning, which players relish sharing. For those who knew TGU members in other games, venturing into *Until Uru* explained a great deal about the group and its unique characteristics. Visiting *Uru* exposed one to the source of key symbols, images and artefacts

that are referred to repeatedly by *Uru* groups in other virtual worlds. Understanding the importance of those artefacts to Uruvians was key to understanding the group and its particular personality, which will be described in more detail in the sections on Communities of Play and TGU Play Styles.

Although *Until Uru* did not include any new Ages, Cyan did release extension packs for the game after the server closure, and the hacker group behind *Until Uru* also created some new add-on packs. Players invented, both using these new capabilities, and by exploiting design features or bugs, a plethora of new gameplay activities within the *Uru* world.

Comments

"Based on prior posts and conversations, one would have assumed that players would return to Until Uru and abandon their settlements in other virtual worlds. However, this was not the case. Uru refugees had already, to a certain extent, assimilated to their new environs...."

Perhaps this group would have returned in a more substantial way to Until Uru if there was the promise of more content. The community has now settled in a variety of worlds which are being maintained and are moving forward with new content and new members. I believe there would be greater numbers returning to the cavern if there was the ability for members to create new content as they have become accustomed to in THERE, Second Life and other places.

Posted by: Raena | February 05, 2006 at 05:13 PM

6.6 Self-Determination

Because of the trauma they had been dealt at the hands of Cyan and Ubisoft, *Uru* players felt particularly sensitive about the their relationships with the corporations that governed them. This trauma reared its ugly head once again on 'Black Friday', May 21, 2004, when only a few months after TGU's arrival, *There.com* threatened to close. Players petitioned and the company agreed not to close the game if current players could find a way to increase subscriptions. In very short order, subscription rates were brought up and *There.com* was saved. It is likely that this experience of feeling as though they were at the wrath of corporations is also what fueled TGU's ongoing involvement in *There.com*'s Member Advisory Board. They did not want a repeat of the *Uru* eviction.

Technical savvy is one means of empowerment against the tyranny of corporate governance. Erik was motivated to learn two entirely new software packages in order to assure total control of his instantiation of *Uru*. And the *Until Uru* hacker group used their ability to hack the server as a means of leveraging in negotiations with the game's developers. They astutely understood that the demonstration of power was better than its use. Cyan, well aware that *Uru* players were part of the core fan base for all their games, supported the hacker group's efforts. Conversely, although Ubi and

Cyan are aware of the various *Uru*-derived projects taking place throughout the 'ludisphere', they have never attempted to intervene or interfere with any *Uru* player initiatives.

For TGU members, Koalanet became their safe haven of self-determination. It was the clearing house for all things TGU, and spanned across all of the TGU settlements across multiple MMOWs. Through it, TGUers could safely traverse the ludisphere and still maintain control over the collective identity and destiny.

Over time, *Uru* players, both TGUers and others, have slowly taken over ownership of the *Myst* brand. While many players began by simulating artefacts from the original *Uru* games, eventually they began to create their own Uruesque objects. *Uru* fans like 'collie' who, at a recent Mysterium fan convention presented her *Uru*-themed quilts, are even taking the *Uru* culture out into the real world. Players who may ultimately know more than developers about the worlds they create feel both inspired and empowered to add their own creative contributions to the 'database' of the game's narrative and culture. This type of emergent fan culture can clearly be seen in cases such as Star Trek's 'Trekkie' phenomenon (Jenkins, 1992); thus we find such player creations as 'Pocket D'ni Dictionary' among the new 'extra-virtual' artefacts that players create. In the summer of 2005, *Myst* and *Uru* fans in *Second Life* even created Inara, a completely new game designed in the *Myst/Uru* tradition.

A year and a half after *Uru Live* was put to bed, players still entertained hopes that the game would some day reopen, with all the planned Ages added. These hopes were put to rest when Cyan announced in September of 2005 that they were retiring the *Myst* legacy. While this news saddened fans, they themselves were already taking the initiative to transition the *Myst* world into a fan-owned and operated phenomenon. Uruvian-Thereians and successfully deployed their 'emergent Age' strategy; *Second Life* players had already created an entirely original Age; and the hacker group that had instigated *Until Uru*, which had been in negotiation with Cyan to release their Age-building tools, released a beta of the first player-made *Uru* Age in November of 2005.

These trends in productive play suggest that *Uru* and *Myst* players have already taken on the task of keeping *Uru* and *Myst* alive by preserving the game's culture in other virtual worlds, and by expanding and extending the *Myst/Uru* world through the creative application of their own skills and imaginations.

7 THE INNER LIVES OF AVATARS

7.1 Avatar Representation

The avatar is the essential 'unit' within the 'network' of the play community, and is the means whereby the individual player interacts with both other players and the 'ecosystem' of the play environment.

While the avatar is the primary form of expression provided to players in an MMOW, it is as much if not more the expression of the world's designers as it is that of the players. Designers determine what modes of representation, and thus what forms of expression, are available to players. 'In doing so', points out the media artist and theorist Allucquére Rosanne Stone, 'they are articulating their own assumptions about bodies and sociality and projecting them onto the codes that define cyberspace systems' (Stone, 1991). T. L. Taylor echoes these thoughts in terms of the intentions (or lack thereof) of the game designers when they articulate the qualities that player characters in games are to have (Taylor, 2003a). These sometimes unconscious assumptions and intentions permeate every aspect of every virtual world, from the design of individual avatars, to the world's narrative and values, to its 'karma systems' of cause and effect. Player rewards naturally influence behaviour, and as discussed earlier, players with certain sets of values tend to gravitate towards certain types of games and virtual worlds.

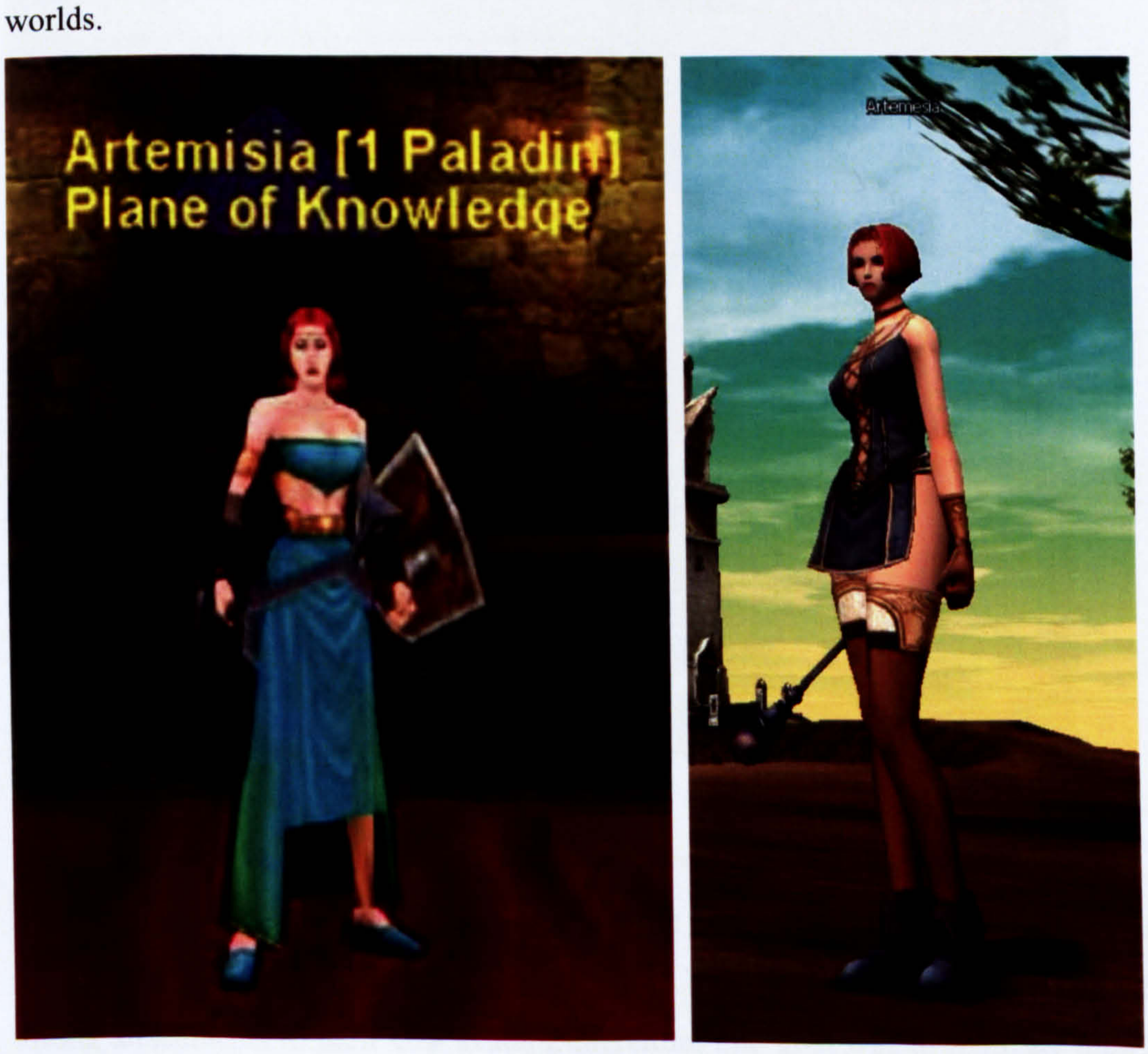


Figure 7.1: The author's avatars from *EverQuest* (left) and *Lineage 2* (right).

If the avatar is framed as a form of personal expression, as performance medium, it is not hard to see the ways in which the components of the 'avatar kit' dictate the forms of expression that occur. In most MMOGs, avatar creation involves an elaborate system of races, classes and skills statistics that are deeply tied to game mechanics; body types tend to be hyper-sexualised, and wardrobe options are tied to the statistical value of the gear in combat. (Figure 7.1) In *Uru* and the other virtual worlds described here, avatar creation is primarily aesthetic, the choices limited but straightforward. (Figure 7.2) Since *Uru* has no points, avatar design is not tied in any way to point values or game mechanics. Avatars are clearly human, with reasonably natural proportions, and for each gender, players can pick from a menu of hair styles, facial features, unusually modest clothing items (for an MMOG), and colour palettes for skin, hair and clothing, including the ability to show thinning or graying hair. This was an astute design choice, possibly made in anticipation of the game's demographics, and building off the *Myst* games' known fan base. It is interesting that the designers chose not to follow the conventions of a traditional 'role-playing' game, which would have put players in the roles of D'ni or Bahro. Rather, they invited players to become explorers in the *Myst* world, giving them the implied option to do so as themselves.

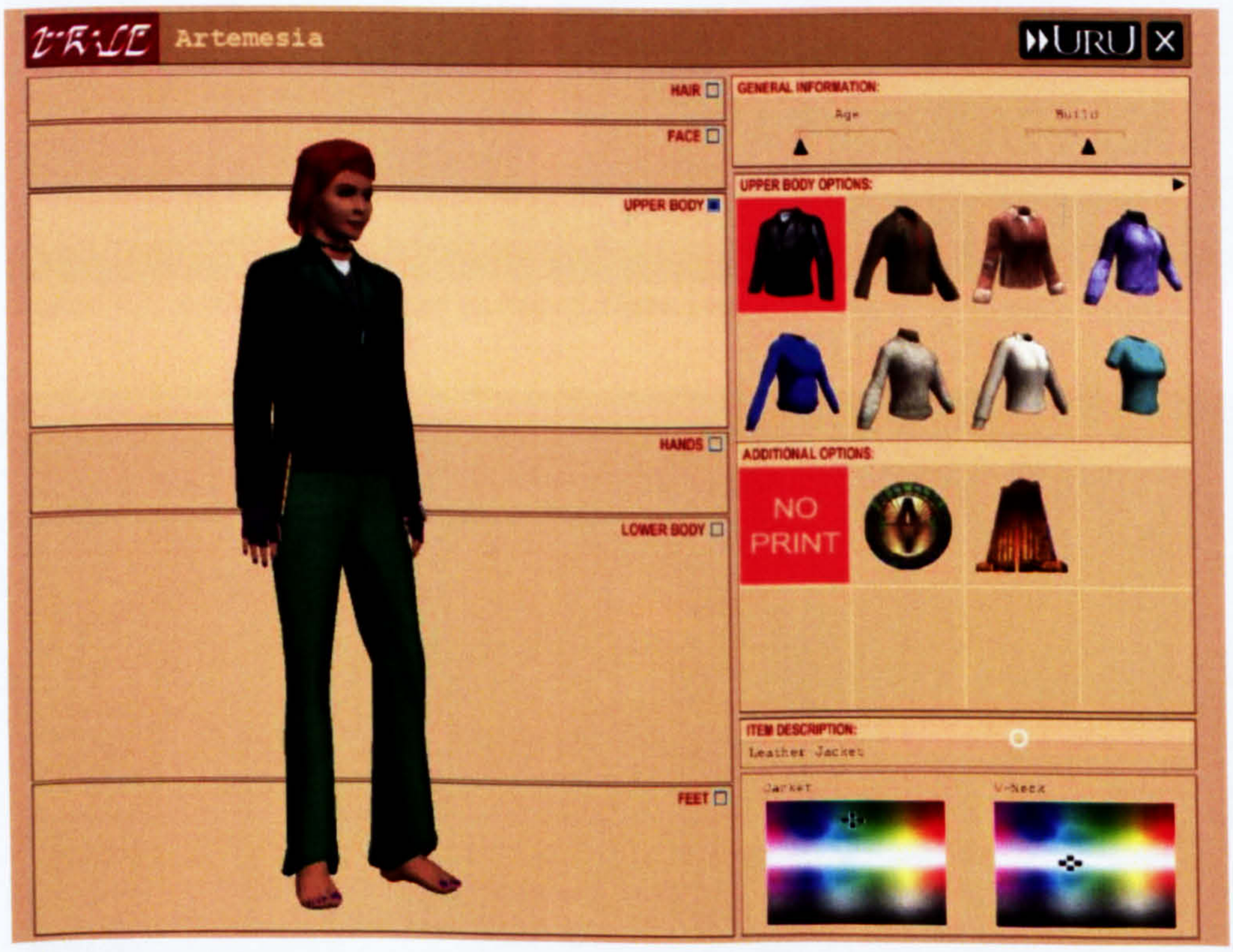


Figure 7.2: *Uru* avatar creation.

Uru players' inter-world migration presented the need to compare aspects of avatar expressiveness in different virtual worlds. When TGUers began to look at alternatives to *Uru*, they had already formed strong attachments to their *Uru* avatars; therefore, one goal was to replicate their *Uru* 'avies' within the constraints of the new game's avatar creation system. For some, the cartoony avatars of *There.com*

looked too much like Mattel's Barbie and Ken dolls of the 1960s, and forced players to present as 22 year-olds. Avatars tended to be shapely, although there was some leeway to create more plump physiques. Some players actually liked the Disney-esque aesthetic, and one player posited the theory that this style might also have resonated culturally with the generation represented by many members of the group, the majority of whom who were in their forties and fifties. They also argued that *There.com* avatars were more expressive in terms of animation and gesture. 'Here', TGU Mayor Leesa pointed out with reference to *There.com*, 'our avatars breathe'. (Figure 7.3)

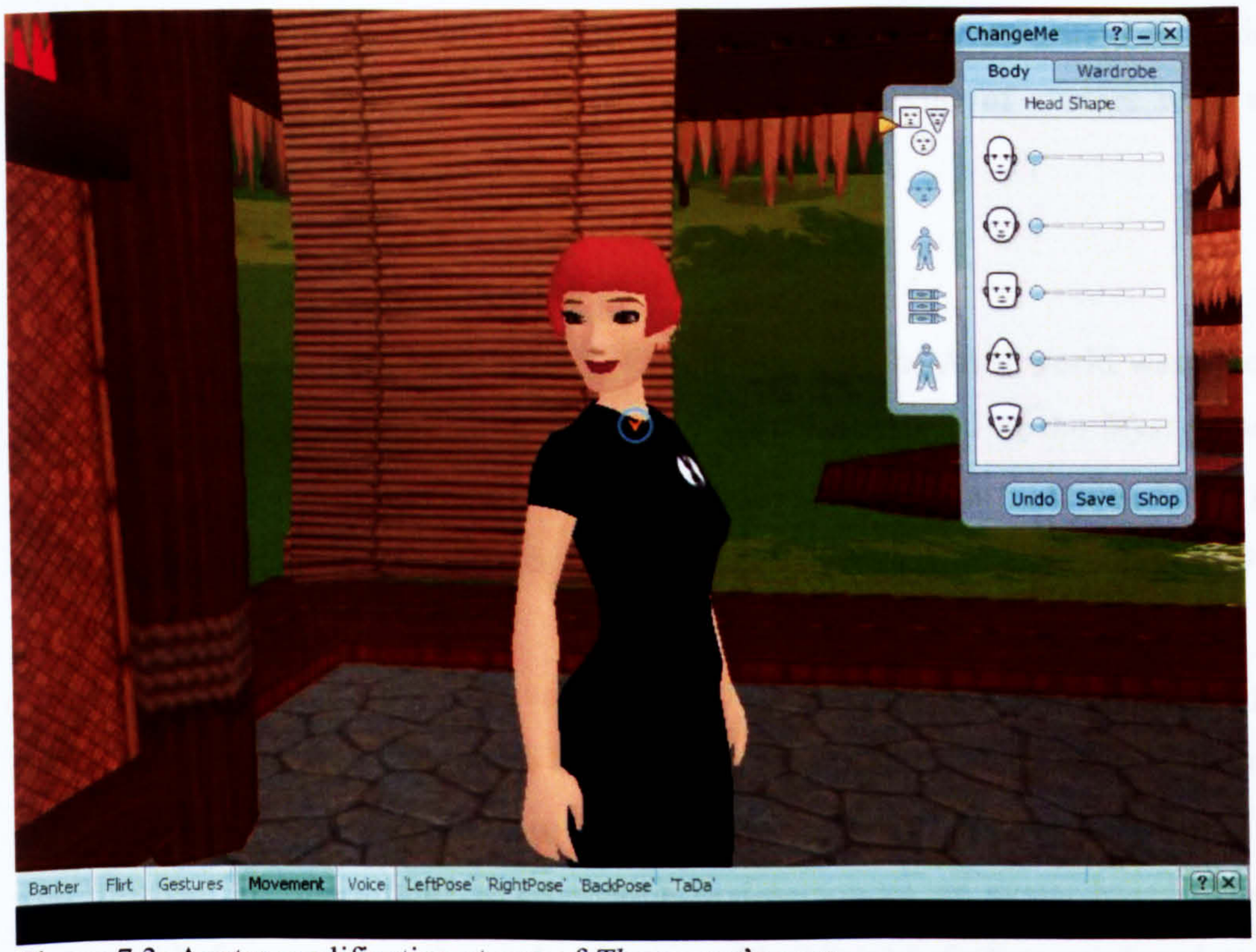


Figure 7.3: Avatar modification at one of *There.com*'s spas.



Figure 7.4: Avatar modification in *Second Life* (bottom)

Those in favour of *Second Life* argued that the avatars were more realistic and allowed for more customisation, making it easier to re-create their *Uru* avatars; however, some found *Second Life*'s avatar animations to be stiff and unnatural. (Figure 7.4)

All of these nuanced arguments evince the importance of players' feelings about their avatars in both their sense of identity and their comfort within the virtual world. These arguments also highlight the fact that the avatar, at least in the case of these players, was viewed more as a form of expression than a symbol or measure of skills and status. Because these were persistent identities, for most players, the appearance and expressive qualities (such as animation) of avatars were a key factor in their migration preferences.

7.2 Becoming and Losing an Avatar

As mentioned earlier, the introduction of the avatar into the *Myst* world was a new feature to the *Uru* game, the importance of which cannot be overemphasised. All of the *Myst* games that preceded *Uru* put the player in the first-person perspective with an ambiguous identity. These games were effective at simulating immersion, the panacea to virtual reality at that time (Rheingold, 1991).

As enjoyable as they were, however, *Myst* and its derivatives were very lonely games in which most of the world appeared abandoned. Few characters appeared during gameplay, and the player was not embodied in any way. From a Game Studies perspective, I am not aware of any other game franchise that provides the opportunity to compare a first-person vs. an avatar-based experience, but it is clear that even before entering the multiplayer world, this new feature produced a paradigm shift in the affect of the player experience.

Having an avatar—that is, a representation of yourself—is a prerequisite to being in a multiplayer world. However, even before players encountered other avatars in the multiplayer *Uru Live*, they had already had the experience of avatar embodiment through *Uru Prime*. Because *Uru*'s avatar creation left open the option to play themselves in game (as opposed to a fantasy role) many players created modified versions of themselves to inhabit the game. Compared to other games, there were remarkably few instances of trans-gender avatar creation. In the case of TGU, of 450 people at is maximum group size, only three known cases of trans-gendered play occurred, whereas in typical MMOGs as many as half the female avatars in-world may actually be played by male players. As Wingman put it: 'I suggest their avatars resemble the way they want to think of themselves'.

All of the TGU players interviewed also described feeling that their avatars were 'the same person' across all the virtual worlds they inhabited. One recurring theme among the TGU players I spoke to was that the avatar was a window into the soul through which you could see the real person. This

seemed to be the case regardless of whether avatar representation was fixed (as in *Uru*), somewhat flexible (as in There.com) or entirely malleable (as in *Second Life*). Thus persistent identity seemed more relevant than consistent representation, although the visual recognition of the identity is clearly also a factor, especially in the development of long-term relationships.[ix]

Raena, a long-standing TGU member and the group's cartographer, described it this way: 'Uru was the first game I ever played where I was an actual avatar...I discovered after spending all those hours...I kind of felt that I was living vicariously through the avie who was exploring the game...it was nice to see yourself, or think of yourself as a person within the game'. She equated it with the real-life phenomenon of 'proprioception', that is, the perception of where our bodies are in space, and this added another dimension to the game. Part of what Raena enjoyed were the ways in which embodiment afforded new forms of play within the world she knew and loved so well. She cites jumping as one of the fun things she could do with her new avatar. A sense of embodiment gave new and perhaps more resonant meaning to the virtual space she was inhabiting. She also found that over time she identified more and more with her 'avie' and also with those of other people. 'I found in Uru', she says, 'I was kind of "feeling" the avie'.

Lynn, the Deputy Mayor of both the TGU group en masse and its settlement within There.com, enjoyed the avatar instantiation for other reasons. Due to a spinal condition, the once-active Lynn was confined to wheelchair. The avie had two significances for her:

> *I...didn't even know what an avatar was until Uru. And all of a sudden I would be able to run and jump and walk and not have to worry about a damn (wheel) chair...or if a curb got in the way...it was to me a total sense of freedom to be the type of person that I was before. I was a very active person. And when I lost that I had no idea this opportunity existed...It just gave me such a great feeling. And I think that's why I asked when (Uru) closed if we could come to a place that would also have avatars...because we have a chat program on Koalanet that would hold up to 600 (people). In avie you get to still play and run.*

Thus for Lynn, the avatar became a kind of social augmentation. The 'level playing field' enabled by the avatar liberated her from her bodily constraints. It also availed her community of her energetic play style and considerable leadership skills. Lynn's case contrasts sharply with arguments that online life is 'disembodied'. On the contrary, in Lynn's case the avatar experience has been a case of re-embodiment. Being able to help people brought her out of a deep depression she suffered as a result of her physical condition. '...I volunteered all of my adult life. This situation that we're in with avatars allows me to continue to feel like I'm a productive citizen, a helpful person, where I can still be useful'. (Figure 7.5)



Figure 7.5: TGU Deputy Mayor Lynn exploring *Until Uru.*

Seeing oneself inside the *Myst* world had a profound effect not only on Lynn but also on all the TGU members. Indeed, part of the anguish of the initial loss of the *Uru* server stemmed from this deep connection that players had formed to their avatars. Once again, Raena gives expression to this experience:

February 13, 2004, 02:31:48 pm

Inspired by Scarlet and Aria I have written a few awkward words about our avatars and our relationship with them. For through our avatars in D'ni we made relationships with each other.

Avi in D'ni

by Raena of Katran

It began as a request: 'Create Player'
and you were led to the wardrobe to make choices.
To pick hair, color and cloths.
To be old or be young, or maybe rotund,
you could even change the length of your nose.
Those choices you made created an avatar that day,
your new life as Avi in D'ni.

Remember when you first felt scared,
of thunder or strange looking creature?
Did your heart skip a beat when you fell off a cliff?
Did you feel better when you wound up in Relto?
That moment was when you and Avi became one,
your true innerself.
Your soul free from the physical world
to be the person inside.
So precious!

In Uru your Avi found a level playing field.
Free from cultural pressures and bias.
Free to express emotion, say how you feel.
You could walk, run and dance,
see and be seen,
love and be loved.
We were family as Avi in D'ni.

Now our avatars are gone,
our souls are stripped bare.
We cry tears for our loved and lost Avi.
And here we will stay, as we wait for the day,
when we're once again Avi in D'ni.

—Raena

The way Raena's poem builds on others that preceded it highlights the role of social feedback, helping to generate a discourse by building on a shared experience. The ability to safely express feelings that might otherwise be frowned upon is a significant characteristic of this group. Safety begets safety, and

as each player came forth with his or her deepest feelings, others followed in kind with their own expressions.

This poem also gives us additional insight into what the loss of the server meant; one lost ones friends and one's virtual self. As Raena explained, it was a kind of death. This is quite distinct from the kind of death avatars in games like EverQuest experience—these are frequent and temporary deaths, similar to restarting a level in a game. You are revived, re-spawned, perhaps penalised by a loss of gear or experience points, but your avatar identity lives on. This was a permanent death, not of the people, but of their avatar personae in the virtual world.

What this suggests is that the avatar is neither entirely 'me', nor entirely 'not me', but a *version* of me that only exists in a particular mediated context. When that context, and with it the avatar, ceases to be, that part of the self dies as well. That part of the self, expressed and projected through the avatar in a shared virtual world, is as much a creation of the group as the group is a creation of the individuals within it. This echoes the 'me/not me' paradox of Winnecott and Schechner described in Book I. (Winnecott, 1971, Schechner, 1988b)

Comments

Looking back I find my fondest memories of this time frame are the poems we read and the poems we wrote. Safety among friends? Perhaps. For me at least it felt like we all were of one mind, writing with one hand and one heart.

Posted by: Raena | April 07, 2006 at 01:58 PM

7.3 The Social Construction of Identity

Rather than being a matter of individual agency, these findings suggest that avatar identity evolves through a process of interaction with others. Thus, the avatar identity is what sociologists would call an 'intersubjective accomplishment', the product of an ongoing and dynamic set of social transactions and feedback—in other words, emergence.

The oft-forgotten node in these transactions is the game designer. The game itself, the play ecosystem, is the medium through which these transactions occur, and the mediation is of their making. Thus the intersubjective achievement is really a three-way collaboration between the individual player, the community and the designers of the world, who present not as avatars but as the game and its 'ecosystem'.

Perhaps the best illustration of the process of emergent identity formation is the way in which Leesa became the reluctant leader of a group of over 450 people. Ordinarily, one might think of 'leadership' as anathema to emergence, which is by definition a bottom-up process. However, Leesa did not really set out with the objective of being a leader. Rather, she grew into the role through a process of social feedback—as more and more players joined the group, she developed a sense of leadership and responsibility towards them, as indicated by her making a point to spend equal time in each of the three TGU shards in the original *Uru*. Even the fact that she did not post her 'rules' until *after* the group had begun to grow supports this bottom-up theory of leadership. Later, when she moved into *There.com*, most TGU members followed her, although she made a point to avoid making any official decree on the subject. In fact, shortly after the migration, Leesa made an attempt to abandon the group entirely, due to stress and real-life health problems. But TGUers begged her back and she returned to the fray. One tactic she used to mitigate the pressure that came with leadership was to create the TGU Council; this created a way to distribute both responsibility and power. Throughout this process, Leesa had a growing awareness of her importance to the group, and this awareness of who her avatar was becoming also had an impact on the person *behind* the avatar.

This pattern of social identity construction appears again in the case of artisans. The more positive feedback they received, whether social or economic, the more motivated they were to create. Damanji, who made architectural elements, vehicles, and clothing, Maesi, who made clothing, Shaylah and Raena, who created virtual paintings, are just a few examples within the *Uru* group. Within *There.com*, player designers become minor celebrities, known for their aesthetic style and productivity. Furthermore, the more positive feedback players get, the more they tend to experiment. Thus even personal, individual style appears to evolve through a process of social feedback.

One of the most interesting cases of the social construction of identity arises around gender. As mentioned, earlier, trans-gender play is a common practice in online games, although in general, it does not seem to equate with real-life trans-gender behaviour. Designers of *Ultima Online* (Garriott, 1996), for instance, were surprised to discover that while 50% of the avatar characters in-game were female, only 20% of the actual players were, suggesting that a little less than half the female avatars were being played by men (Koster, 2001). A small amount of gender switching did occur within the TGU group. In each case, the player eventually revealed his true gender (all three cases were of men playing women), and in each case, the outcome of how this should be dealt with was largely decided by the group. One TGUer played a female consistently and effectively, even with the introduction of voice, for eighteen months before revealing the gender of her 'real-life avie'. When the decision as to whether or not to continue playing the female avatar was vetted with the group, it became clear that, although they supported the player's personal choice, the majority of TGUers had become attached to the female character. After a brief period of adjustment, including attempts by the player to use a male

avatar, eventually, by something of an unspoken consensus, he returned to the female avatar as his primary in-game character. He continued to use the female voice in-world, even though other players were now aware he was male.

In some respects, it is difficult to tell where group identity ends and individual identity begins. While Western Culture tends to reify individual identity and agency, this apparent ambiguity between group and individual identity may be more reflective of non-Western cultures, which view the individual on more of a continuum with the group as a whole (Jackson, 1998). In the case of TGU, self-identifying as *Uru* refugees meant that the individual avatar identity was inextricably tied to the group identity. This collective identity both compelled and enabled the migration of individual identity to other virtual worlds.

In interviews, players would often speak in the collective we, identifying qualities and values of the group. The majority of these group indicators were couched in terms of play styles, e.g., 'We are explorers; we are puzzle solvers; we do not like violence', suggesting that a large factor in group identity had to do with their signature play style and values. Other qualities were tied to social interaction styles. 'We are tolerant and respectful of others; we do not join factions; we avoid drama'.

Many of the play styles cited are directly tied to the play patterns of *Uru*, but the group style of TGU is distinctive, even within the *Uru* community, for its particular social values, epitomised by 'Leesa's Rules'. On the other hand, most TGU players asserted that those social values also arise out of the type of person that is attracted to a game like *Uru*. In interviews with key TGU leaders, all agreed that most in the group would never have gravitated towards a first-person-shooter or medieval role-playing game. Thus, even social values are intermingled with the game insomuch as they may be an attractor to certain player types.

An interesting linguistic idiosyncrasy highlights the relationship between the individual and the social. According to some TGU members, the word 'Uru' means 'you are you' in the D'ni language, a fitting name for a game involving avatars. However, both the official game web site and fan created D'ni dictionaries give the meaning of Uru as 'a community or large gathering'. This contradiction provides a clue to the core quality of TGU: that the individual and group identities are integrally related to one another.

One of the most surprising outcomes of the study was the extent to which my own role as ethnographer became socially constructed through interaction with the group. I was conscious of the fact that my presence was going to have some kind of impact on the group, but even from the beginning was surprised by how this played out. When I first began interviewing TGU members, it

was clear that my presence in their midst was having a therapeutic effect. Clearly they needed to talk about their experiences, and they appreciated having a willing ear. Far from meeting resistance, players were more than happy to talk to me, often for hours, about what they had been through. I was amazed at how forthcoming they were, and over time I began to develop an integral role for the group.

Over time, however, this role developed and transformed. In the fall of 2004, a crisis precipitated by a magazine interview, and described briefly in the methodology section, caused me to rethink some of my methodological assumptions, but also shifted the dynamics of my relationships with the participants. It was at this point that I began to develop personal friendships with individual TGU members. Two members, Bette and Wingman, conspired to 'turn the tables' on me by requesting an interview for the There University newsletter. This created a further shift in the dynamics with the group. By the time I attended the There Real Life Gathering, I had become a fully matriculated member of TGU, and it became clear that the group had had much more impact on me than I had on the group.

7.4 Avatar Presence and Intersubjectivity

Based on interviews with TGU members, it appears that over the long term, players form strong emotional bonds with their avatars, as do members of their social circle. This may explain why a) losing the avatar can be so traumatic, b) switching to a different avatar identity can often be a difficult transition, not only for the player but for other members of the play community. Players also reported missing their own avatars, as well as the avatars of players who had switched characters, even if the players themselves were still present in the game using a different avatar.

Avatar experiences described by players contrast sharply with earlier theories about presence handed down to us from high-end virtual reality research of the 1990's (Rheingold, 1991). This branch of research has held the long-standing belief that first-person experiences create the greatest degree of presence, i.e., a sense of 'being there', within a virtual world. Enhancing and perfecting sensory inputs and so-called 'embodied' interaction was seen as the primary means of increasing this quality of presence. However, this and other avatar research suggests a different conclusion: that having a representation of the self visible inside the world may actually enhance the sense of presence, as well as the sense of embodiment.

Based on the outcomes of this research, this seems to stem from four contributing factors, each of which has to do with intersubjectivity. First, seeing a representation of oneself projected into the virtual world appears to enhance ones ability to emotionally project into the world, whether it be single- or multiplayer. Second, the sense of proprioception (the awareness of where our bodies are in

space) produced by the avatar may create a more direct relationship with the 3D world, particularly through play, running, jumping, etc. Third, the emotional attachment to the player's character seems to create a deep connection both to other avatars and to the virtual world they share. Finally, it may be that one of the key aspects of experiencing presence in an online virtual world is the quality of being perceived within a play context, or, as MacKinnon put it, in cyberspace 'I am perceived, therefore I am' (MacKinnon, 1995). I would take this one step further and argue that the ability to be perceived through one's play identity creates a unique mode of being perceived that may not be shared in other modes of computer-mediated communication.

Thus it may be that a sense of social presence within the play space is more emotionally compelling to some players than a sense of physical presence. Part of the reason for this may be the relationship between social presence and flow, which will be covered in more depth in the subsequent section.

Comments

Perhaps "immersion" technology is not sufficient to allow one to look down and see one's avatar hands and feet, or look into a mirror, or gain an adequate feel one's presence spatially. THERE offers a first person mode, which is rarely used. Uru has a first person mode as well but was only useful to get a close up look at some clue or other object intrinsic to gameplay. As in THERE, first person in Uru is rarely used for person-to-person interaction.

The ability to see your avatar on the screen defines where you are in-world in relation to the others. Called 'third person mode' my mind quickly adapted to this and as they say in sports 'be the ball'. In "third person" mode you "be the avi". I have observed people in the Uru group excusing themselves when violating each other's space. A good example is in Uru where it is possible to pass through each other when moving. It is common to hear someone say 'sorry', or 'I felt that'.

Posted by: Raena | February 05, 2006 at 05:20 PM

It is interesting the number of people who dream about their online worlds on a regular basis and who are their avie in the dreams, not their "real life" self.

Posted by: Leesa | April 10, 2006 at 01:28 PM

8 COMMUNITIES & CULTURES OF PLAY

8.1 The Power of Play

There is an implicit assumption in Western culture, as well as an explicit assertion in Game Studies, that play is a waste of time. As mentioned previously, early game scholars (Huizinga, 1950, Caillois, 1961) whose work set the limits of the field in 'canonical' terms, while stressing the importance of play, have also asserted this point about the lack of productivity of play time. These same kinds of assumptions have been carried forth by more contemporary writers examining more immediate forms of game play (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, Juul, 2004). This thesis argues, to the contrary, that the time spent on game play is not only 'not wasted' but is in fact highly functional in terms of its applications 'through the screen' in the social constructions common to contemporary life. It can also be argued that play is, in fact, an act of cultural production, as players engage in the dynamic creation of entertainment experiences, as well as the practical addition of artefacts into the play environment.

Conversely, anthropologists such as Victor Turner have argued for some time that play is crucial to human culture and development and manifests in more 'serious' forms such as ritual (Turner, 1982). Play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith has also suggested that play should be viewed as important in its own right, and not simply a mechanism for accomplishing more 'serious' ends such as education (Sutton-Smith, 1997). In terms of society at-large, particularly in the United States (although this is less the case in other countries, such as Japan[x]), adult play is considered somehow trivial and in some cases even immoral. While video games have been the subject of intense scrutiny in recent years, games in general are part of a larger tradition of the suppression of entertainment throughout history, ranging from theatre in Shakespeare's day to film during the McCarthy Era. Even a game as seemingly innocuous as chess was repeatedly banned throughout history because it was presumed to promote decadence, gambling, violence, and immoral sexual behaviour (Yalom, 2004).

Even among TGUers, the common remark that 'it's not just a game' reveals the depth of this cultural bias that somehow a 'game' is an inferior form of human social experience. Although one could argue that *There.com* is more of a 'metaverse' than a 'game', players also made the same comment of *Uru*. In both cases, players saw that these play spaces had profound implications in their lives. The TGU experience suggests a repositioning of adult play space from its presently marginalised status to acknowledging its central role in developing unique and enduring friendships. The TGU data presents a compelling argument that games can be not only a context for personal transformation, but also a catalyst for strong and powerful social bonds. For many TGU players, playing within the social context of their group is a sublime and even a spiritual experience, a revelation that surprised most members. As suggested earlier, at least a part of this spiritual aspect of game-playing is derived from

the content of the *Myst* series itself, but this was amplified and in some ways transformed by the additional social dimension of play in *Uru*.

The power of this social dimension was perhaps the biggest surprise for players. Very few TGU players entered *Uru* with the intention of forming social bonds. Most informants were somewhat dismayed at their intense emotional reaction to the closure of the game, as well as their ongoing commitment to the group. Furthermore, many were surprised by the transformative power that play had had on them as individuals. All agreed that their experience with *Uru* TGU had changed them in one way or another.

Comments

As a Biological Anthropologist/Primatologist, I am not surprised at the power of play. It is an extremely important learning and socializing tool in the animal kingdom. Animals kept from play (usually due to human interference in the name of science and research) almost always demonstrate some degree of developmental, psychological and/or social problems.

Posted by: Leesa | April 10, 2006 at 01:35 PM

8.2 A Community of Loners

As discussed earlier, *Uru* marked the transition of the *Myst* world from a solitary experience to a context for social interaction. Like Leesa, TGU's founder, the vast majority of players interviewed for this study self-identified as 'loners' or 'shy'. Some suffer from fairly extreme cases of shyness, such as a variation of agoraphobia, some are hindered in social and public activities by physical disabilities, and some live in remote regions.

For many players, the experience of *Myst* had meant a decade of solitary exploring and puzzle solving. Given this, it is not surprising that only a quarter of eligible players ever actually signed up for *Uru Live*. Some who eventually did join *Uru Live* reported being hesitant. And even once inside the multiplayer world, many engaged with other players with trepidation.

One experience conveyed by some players was the feeling of finding other people in this formerly lonely world they knew and loved. With *Uru Live*, it was as if a portal opened up in which people who had been playing alone in the same beloved imaginary world for many years could share this experience with others.

This transition from lone player to community player is expressed a few days after the server closure in this poem by Teddy:

(I was working in my garden yesterday when this came to me....)

An Avatar's Lament

I am but a figment, the imagination of my creator.

I was created for one purpose: to explore.

I was sent on a journey, to learn things my creator already knew.

I discovered great monuments and beautiful gardens and a cavern beyond belief.

A world was created for me and it was my duty to learn its ways.

One day, I met others like me. Explorers, figments, dreams.

Though we didn't share creators, we shared a common goal.

With them, I changed. I was no longer just an explorer. I was more.

I was now a friend, confidant, buddy and playmate.

I grew beyond my purpose, I became more real.

And with my friends, we began to touch our creators, and they grew, too.

Our play was their play.

We became.

That day came that our world was shattered.

Our Lives were coming to an end.

A new twist to my being, I had emotions and I didn't want to lose my friends.

But we consoled each other, we played as much as we could.

We climbed the walls, and hid and danced,

And together, we passed beyond.

I am but a shade now, roaming a shadow realm.

A place where once was life, is quiet as a tomb.

D'ni sleeps and a cherub guards its gates.

Our creators dream.

We were not made in our creators' likenesses,

but in some way, there is more of them in us than they expected.

Our connection is lost, but we still touch our creators' hearts.

And I hope that someday they will touch their creator, as I have mine.

This poem captures the transition from 'just an explorer' to 'a friend, confidant, buddy and playmate'. Like many *Uru* players, Teddy had never played an online game and mainly joined *Uru Live* because the marketing implied a much more expansive *Myst*-based world with new Ages being added on a regular basis. He 'really wasn't expecting to have so much fun just talking to strangers who I only saw as pixels on a monitor'.

Nonetheless, like many other lone explorers of the *Myst* worlds, Teddy soon found himself developing emotional attachments to the other players. Over time, the experience became more about the people than the game.

Furthermore, Teddy's poem points out an experience shared by every other player interviewed for this study: being the avatar changes the real person. As one player pointed out, 'We create our avatars, and our avatars create us', echoing Canadian media historian Marshall McLuhan's classic insight into media and culture: 'We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us' (McLuhan, 1964). Players, like Lynn, who were previously depressed, or like Leesa, who was shy, were palpably altered by the experience of being an avatar in a supportive play community.

Comments

Seeing people who share in the love of Myst was more like the intersection of parallel universes. Uru became a place where all these players living in solitary universes were brought together all at once. The feeling was more like "Wow, there are others like me....."

Posted by: Raena | February 05, 2006 at 05:26 PM

8.3 Communities of Play

A key emergent phenomenon observed with TGU was a shift from playing for the game to playing for the people. Initially, players logged on to *Uru* to experience more of the game, but over a period of time, and often much to their surprise, the focus began to shift to the social; this shift began to occur even before the migration into the non-game social world of *There.com*. Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest this may be a pattern in online games and virtual worlds in general, regardless of the game/world distinction, suggesting a further study across several games and play communities to verify if this might be a generalisable pattern of emergence. It also seems to be the case that once this social motivation emerges, these bonds form relatively quickly, perhaps more so than they might in a 'real-life' setting. A comparable 'real world' environment where such bonds might form relatively quickly is summer camp, another discrete play space in which participants inhabit a similar sort of magic circle to the one that bounds games from the real world[xi] (Himmel, 1998). This suggests that play itself may have the property of accelerating the process of social bonding.

In the case of the *Uru* players, it would also seem that the imminent server shutdown also served as a catalyst to further accelerate and cement the social bonds that were already rapidly forming, although there is no way to empirically prove this. One key indication that a social bonding process is underway is the disclosure of personal information. When I asked players what they did in *Uru* in the final weeks, most said they spent the majority of time simply talking, often for hours, including telling each other stories, sometimes in a campfire-tale type setting, or discussing personal issues. They also explored, played in each other's Ages and invented new games to play in the *Uru* world, such as hide-and-seek. Even though they inhabited an imaginary world, the friendships that formed there were very real.

This study supports the legitimisation of the study of 'communities of play', focussing on the organisational and sociological aspects of group play and the ways in which communities use digital and networked media to support play activities. While computer-mediated communications have nominally embraced this topic, it has never been defined as a distinctly separate form of social interaction and mediation. The majority of studies have focused on text-based chats, and little attention has been paid to the design of the mediated space and its impact on social interaction. Nonetheless, as this study shows, communities of play have characteristics distinct from other types of communities and ought to be studied in their own right. Furthermore, mediated spaces designed for play are distinct from those designed for other purposes and thus can also be viewed from the perspective of human-computer interface design as their own unique class of research and design problem.

The concept of 'community of play' I am proposing builds on the work of Bernie DeKoven, who describes a 'play community' as a group that 'embraces the players more than it directs us toward any particular game'. While the game is often the starting point, over time the group may tire of that particular game but still wish to play together. Members of such a community are ready and willing to adapt game rules and to change or even invent new games to create a supportive environment with their playmates. DeKoven also identifies the point of transition observed earlier at which the play community shifts from a game focus to a social one. Such a community will not only respect the rights of individuals to stop playing for any reason, but will also actively seek out new games for the mutual enjoyment and challenge of all members (DeKoven, 1978). While DeKoven's work predates the advent of digital games, his principles can be readily applied to networked play communities.

The Gathering of Uru is just such a play community, both created and facilitated in the context of the network. TGU was born of network media and has leveraged network media to sustain its own unique and distinct play community. While it was the gameplay of *Uru* that initially drew the community together, it was the ultimate destruction of *Uru Live* that cemented its bonds. Their migration into

other games, and the dialogue that ensued around this, suggests that they had reached that moment, described by DeKoven, where playing together became the main priority, with the game itself being a secondary concern. Furthermore, TGU exhibits a high tolerance for individual play preferences, even within this framework of group cohesion.

In keeping with DeKoven's model of the play community, TGU has gone to great lengths to stay together, moving across different game worlds, and constantly adapting, modifying and even creating new games, artefacts and environments, as well as forming sub-groups of shared interest within the larger community. Over time TGU has absorbed other non-*Uru* players, brought them into its 'way of play' and embraced the contribution of both long-standing and new members. Throughout TGU's life there has been an intense and concerted effort to keep the community vibrant and active, the responsibility for which has shifted but has primarily fallen to a small leadership community-within-the-community. This leadership group has managed to maintain TGU well beyond the duration of the game in which it originated, to the point where it has taken on a life of its own. In the process, it has also, along with other members of the Uru Diaspora, 'taken over', or perhaps 'taken back' the lost world of *Uru*.

Comments

"In the process, it has also, along with other members of the Uru Diaspora, 'taken over', or perhaps 'taken back' the lost world of Uru"

Perhaps with the closing of the game, the diaspora had BECOME Uru.

Posted by: Raena | February 05, 2006 at 05:29 PM

8.4 Intersubjective Flow

Building on the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) DeKoven has also proposed the notion of 'CoLiberation' (DeKoven, 1992b). As defined by DeKoven, this phenomenon suggests a psychosocial dimension to Csikszentmihalyi's 'optimal experience' that can be observed in a number of group contexts, such as sports, group improvisation and networked play environments. Playtesting consultant Nicole Lazzaro has observed that 'people are addictive' (Lazzaro, 2004-2005), an insight that may be key to understanding the relationship of flow to mediated social interaction.

Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as a psychological state in which the individual loses track of time and becomes completely absorbed in the activity at hand. The dynamics of flow have to do with maintaining a state where the level of challenge is maintained in balance with the level of skills applied to it. As illustrated by the simplified diagram below, when the challenge is too high, anxiety

ensues; when the skill level exceeds the challenge, boredom is the result; apathy is the outcome of both low challenge and low skill. (Figure 8.1)

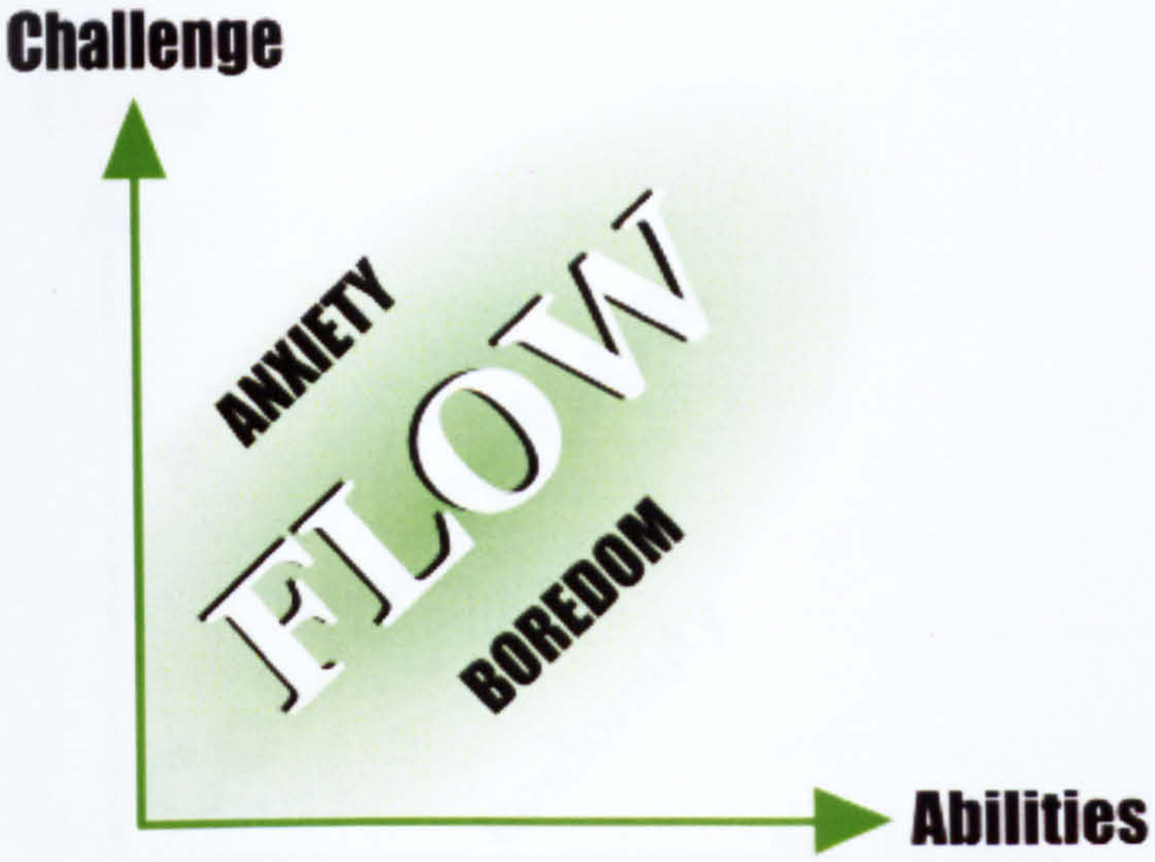


Figure 8.1: Simplified diagram of Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow' (Graphics by Steve Childs; used with permission)

For obvious reasons, flow has been a 'hot topic' in Game Studies for some time, and gamers and researchers alike have long been aware that there is something particular about computer games that produces this effect. Because of the dynamic nature of the medium, digital games have always included responsive features that raise the challenges in real time to meet the player's skill level. This has been characterised as 'hard fun', a term coined by user interface pioneer Alan Kay, which describes experiences that are both challenging and enjoyable, such as mastering the violin and playing games.

While Csikszentmihalyi's conception is primarily psychological, DeKoven extends a psycho-sociological interpretation to flow by observing the way in which group interaction can influence the sense of flow in play and other group activities, such as musical improvisation. This is achieved when individuals in the group provide each other with the appropriate balance of challenge and skills to enable flow.

DeKoven's modified CoLiberation diagram, below, illustrates this social dimension to flow. (Figure 8.2) Part of what creates this sense of social flow in the context of a play community is the balance between the individual identity and group connectedness. If the player is too aware of herself, she becomes self-conscious, isolated and alienated. If she is too immersed in the group, she runs the risk of conformity. Furthermore, using the principles above, players spontaneously adjust their behaviour to challenge one another, creating the optimal state of flow for each individual participant. Thus, players are always pushing each other to a higher state of balance between challenge and skill level,

and therefore, flow. In such a state, players feel at once a positive sense of their own individuality, while still feeling connected to the group.

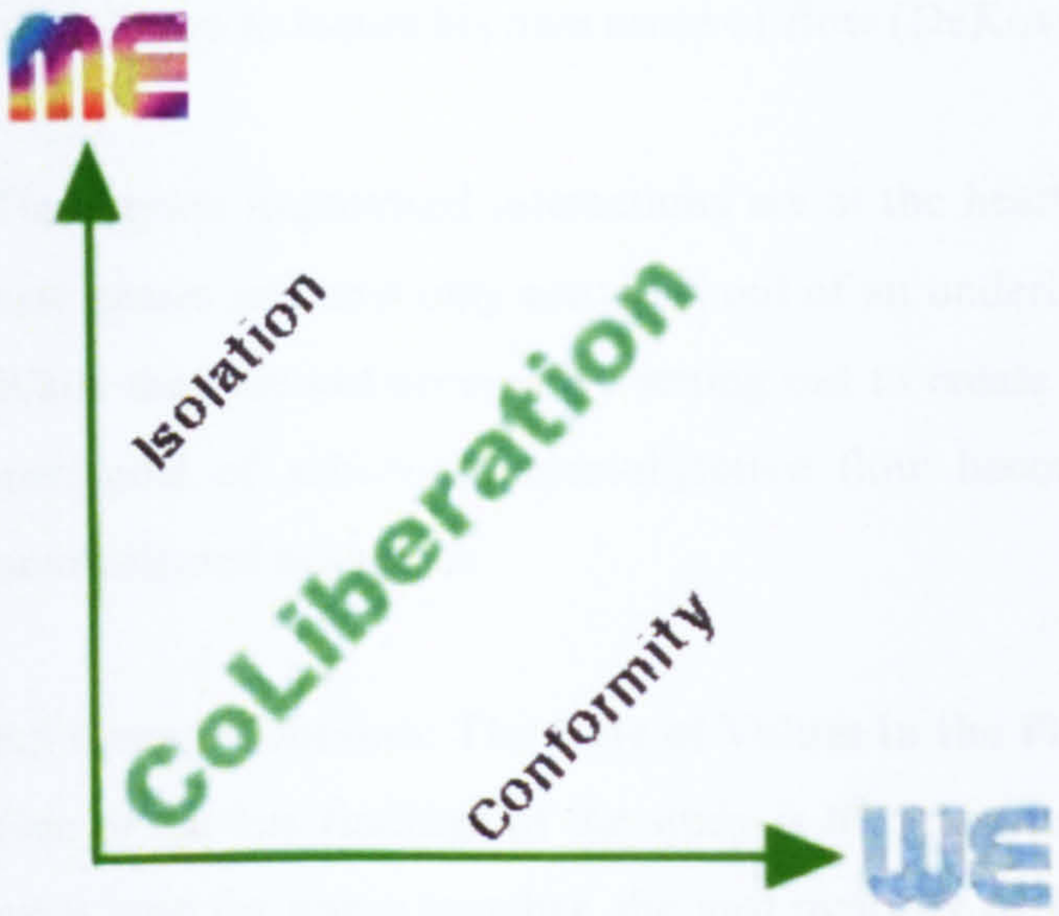


Figure 8.2: Diagram illustrating DeKoven's CoLiberation concept. (Graphics by Bernie DeKoven; used with permission)

The concept I am proposing, 'intersubjective flow', takes this a step further and situates the flow state *between* people rather than within the individual. In this case, flow moves from the realm of the psychological to the realm of the social. 'Intersubjective flow' serves to accelerate a form of intimacy that is unique to play. In this context, a group of complete strangers can form a sense of group cohesion in a relatively short period of time. This is played out in simple street game contexts, such as a pick-up game of basketball. Over time and prolonged exposure, this intimacy can strengthen, as may be the case with a professional basketball team or an amateur baseball league. This is also exemplified by the concept of 'swing', the experience that oarsman describe when they are in sync, as if a single person is rowing (Halberstam, 1996).

TGU clearly exemplifies this concept. As we've seen, the relationship between the group identity and the individual identity formed a balance between the individual and the group. Far from being subsumed in the group identity (conformity), individuals flourished as unique while still being 'a part of' the group. This in turn creates form of intimacy, a sense of acceptance and belonging, particular to the play community.[xii]

Feedback is an essential component to the propagation of intersubjective flow. DeKoven describes a Ping-Pong game in which a skilled player comes up with a series of techniques to meet the skill level of a less skilled player. The first of these include asking the new player to hold his racket still while the skilled player tries to hit it. In the process, the new player begins reflexively to move the racket in

an attempt to meet the incoming ball. The skilled player then switches hands, giving himself a handicap in the game. By using this method of adjusting skill level to optimise flow, the skilled player helps push the unskilled player at an appropriate skill level while still maintaining the requisite level of challenge to assure his own sense of flow (DeKoven, 1978).

These types improvised interactions are at the heart of play-based emergence. Players are inventing new games and new play activities out of an underlying instinct to optimise for intersubjective flow. While they are not necessarily setting out to create new games or game mechanics, the unconscious meta-goal of achieving intersubjective flow becomes the driver for emergent, spontaneous, and unanticipated behaviour.

8.5 Group Cohesion: The Role of Values in the Play Community

One of the key findings of the study is the important role of values in group cohesion. When asked what held the group together, the vast majority of TGU members said 'shared values'. As mentioned earlier, players often expressed these values in terms of group identity, as defined by both play styles and social styles, and were remarkably consistent in enumerating these values. In terms of play styles, TGUers explained 'We are puzzle-solvers; we are explorers; we value intellectual challenges; we are non-violent'. Social values included mutual respect and tolerance, avoiding factions and drama, and a desire to help others, especially new players, or newbies.

This latter quality arises in part out of a sense of responsibility towards the community; in both *Uru* and *There.com*, TGU members felt responsible for protecting their members, especially new members, from harassment, or 'griefers' they encountered in the early days of their settlement in *There.com*. This behaviour monitoring was probably inherited at least in part from the Welcomers' League in *Uru*, a hood to which TGU founder Leesa also belonged. Leesa also founded 'The Free Welcomers' League' in *There.com*. The name derived from the fact that newbie greeters in *There.com* were originally paid, and she wanted to distinguish her group as greeting newbies on a volunteer basis. TGU members in *There.com* are also known for their friendliness and generosity to *There.com* newcomers, even outside of their own group; this urge to protect newcomers may also be related to the harassment they encountered when first arriving in *There.com*. (Figure 8.3)



Figure 8.3: Visitors to Yeesha Island in *There.com* are greeted by the player-designed banners of The Gathering of Uru (left) and the Free Welcomers' League (right).

While some of these shared values are implicit, many players cited their source as founder Leesa's 'three simple rules', also known as 'the rules'. These were created for the original TGU hood in *Uru* and maintained throughout the process of identifying and settling in a new virtual world. They are not so much game rules as meta-rules for social conduct. Such meta-rules are common to guilds in online games and represent a form of emergent behaviour.

On the TGU Koalanet forum, the 'rules' are explicitly described as follows:

> *I created The Gathering of Uru neighbourhoods for everyone and anyone to enjoy themselves in an atmosphere where they feel free, relaxed, safe and happy. The hood's ideals are based on compassion, tolerance, non-violence and peace and its 'rules' are:*
>
> 1. *Free discussion is welcome on any subject so long as it does not cause anyone offence, harm or embarrassment.*
>
> 2. *TGU is neutral and does not support or represent any person or faction but this does not mean that individual members cannot have an opinion or back a person or faction. However, recruitment, rallies, canvassing, etc. is not allowed in the hood.*
>
> 3. *Members are not allowed to alter, in any way, the name or description of the hood or change it from public to private (or vice versa). Furthermore, any changes need to be discussed and voted on by the members before they can be done.*
>
> *Any member or visitor who does not follow the rules or causes problems for other members will be asked to leave the hood. If they continue their behaviour and/or refuse to leave a formal complaint will be filed with CCR which may result in them being barred from Uru.*

As the Mayor, I will have the final say or the tie-breaking vote in all matters. I will be appointing a Deputy Mayor and Councilors who will help look after the hood and act for me in my absence. I will announce the Council once all of the nominees have accepted their positions. Please remember, this is all very laid back – the Mayor and Council are just there to make sure everyone is happy and everything runs smoothly.

If there's anyone you'd like to nominate, just let me know.

REMEMBER: Our prime directive is to have fun!

This last point is important because implicit in this statement is a particular notion of 'fun'. TGU members have a very specific idea of what is fun, which is quite distinct from players of many other MMOGs, derived in part from a ten-year legacy of playing *Myst* games, including *Uru*, as well as from their own unique group character.

Another interesting point that requires some interpretation concerns Rule Number 2. While at first glance, this rule may seem to refer to the general intent of avoiding conflict, its meaning is actually much more specific to *Uru*. As mentioned earlier, Cyan had created different factions in the game, and hired actors to foment conflict and try to recruit players to join these factions. Rule Number 2 is an explicit policy respecting this aspect of the game, and implicitly, it also represents a departure from the game designers' intentions for the game. Interestingly, it may also be one reason for the popularity of TGU. As indicated in the game wide forums, many *Uru* players were uncomfortable with the artificial drama and the factions it created. Leesa's taking a stand on this issue was another key influence on the sorts of people who joined TGU.

9 PATTERNS OF EMERGENCE

9.1 Play Styles as an Engine for Emergence

As we've begun to see, emergent play patterns develop from players enacting simple rules, and then, over time, and generally through feedback, modifying or expanding the game or world beyond the designers' initial intentions. Where play styles come in is that they are the 'engine' for this emergence. If we return to our terminology of 'network' and 'ecosystem', we can look at the network of players in terms of a particular set of meta-rules that propel their play patterns as they come into contact with the ecosystem of the world's features. An earlier example given of emergent systems was an ant colony. While a human network of players is of course much more sophisticated than an ant colony, they may have certain relatively simple behaviours or orientations that lead to more complex behaviours. This section describes these play styles and look at some concrete examples of how they influence emergent behaviour.

Before citing specific examples, it may also be useful to reflect upon the origin of play styles. Many of the signature play styles which were linked to TGU identity were honed in *Myst* games, such as solving the so-called 'Mensa' level puzzles for which *Myst* games are famous. (Figures 9.1 & 9.2) The fact that most TGU players had spent ten years developing mastery in these play styles is key to understanding how they engaged with each other in *Uru Live*, and then transposed these play styles into other virtual worlds.

Much of this study was spent watching TGUers play and playing with them. The latter is key because I found throughout the study that simply observing was not sufficient. It became critical to actually play with them, and learn their play styles from a subjective perspective, even if only in a rudimentary way. It was clear from the opening of *Until Uru* that I would never be able to catch up with the decade of practice most of them had had at puzzle-solving. However, they were more than happy to take me through the puzzles, giving me hints along the way. This experience helped me piece together both what sorts of play activities TGU members valued, and also to observe the social behaviour of the hint-giving process. In fact, this exercise provided much insight into the way TGUers *viewed the world.* Much of the TGU play style revolves around the experience of discovery in different forms—whether uncovering a clue, discovering a new place, finding a new meaning to a previously mysterious symbol, revealing plot points, etc. One of the interesting techniques that TGU players developed within *Uru* was the art of giving hints without revealing 'spoilers', allowing the player being coached to make the discovery for herself. Since many of the *Uru* puzzles are spatial in nature, they can really only be appreciated through direct experience.



Figures 9.1 & 9.2: Typical *Uru* puzzles: Top, close a certain number of steam vents to get the optimal pressure to ride a gust of steam into a secret area. Bottom, turn circular rings to match pattern seen in another room.

It is important to point out that my initial experience of observing TGUers play was within *There.com*. When I first encountered the group, the player-run *Until Uru* servers had not yet opened

and the Atmosphere Hood was not yet complete. Both in talking with them and observing their play behaviours in *There.com*, it was clear that the group had a particular style of play, but I did not fully understand its origins until visiting them in *Until Uru*. Exploring the environs, being guided through puzzles and taken to secret locales and playing improvised games made the significance of behaviours I had encountered in *There.com* much more evident. Other non-*Uru* players who joined TGU and later played *Until Uru* have also observed that it added a dimension of understanding to the group's unique character.

9.2 The Gathering of Uru Signature Play Styles

The following section is a brief summary TGU play styles, each of which had an emergent patterns across virtual worlds. These play styles were distilled from both interviews with players, participant observation and participant engagement:

Spatial Literacy

The ability to 'read' and interpret embedded meanings in space, find hidden clues and locations, 'unlock' secret places. (Figure 9.3) The satisfaction of spatial literacy is the sense of discovery that often results from finding and understanding the meaning of something. Spatial storytelling is one of the hallmarks of the *Myst* series, so these longtime *Myst* players were considerably skilled in this area.



Figure 9.3: *Myst* and *Uru* players must learn how to 'read' space to solve clues.

Exploration

TGUers often identified themselves as explorers, a play style related to spatial literacy. TGUers are naturally inquisitive and love to explore, usually in groups, and particularly appreciate of scenic beauty and vistas. (Figure 9.4) Exploration is a way to relate to the virtual space, as well as another means of making new discoveries. This fits nicely with Bartle's explorer type, who is interested

primarily in interacting with and being surprised by the world (Bartle, 1996). One of the best examples of the relationship between exploration and emergence is in the description given earlier of the post-closure scouting process. Because they were already skilled explorers, TGUers had both the instinct and the facility to disperse into the ludisphere in search of new play space.



Figure 9.4: Group exploring is one of the hallmark play styles of *Uru*.

Puzzle-Solving: TGUers repeatedly identified themselves in interviews as 'puzzle-solvers'. This is clearly a hallmark of *Uru* and *Myst* games and also lead to some of the *Uru*-wide game hacking described earlier. In some way, their dislocation from *Uru* became a puzzle to be solved, just as reverse-engineering the *Uru* servers became a puzzle for the *Uru* hacker group that launched *Until Uru*. Puzzle-solving hones a certain level of skill, patience and determination at solving challenging problems that extends beyond intentional components of the game.

Cleverness and Creativity

Cleverness and creativity, in a broad sense, are highly valued qualities and manifest through everything from inventing a new event or game to finding a clever hiding place in hide-and-seek and new ways to play with found objects. The social feedback that results is particularly critical to emergence. The social reward for cleverness and creativity serves to propagate more of the same. Cleverness does not necessary manifest in intellectual form – it can also emerge spontaneously through improvised play activity. (Figure 9.5)

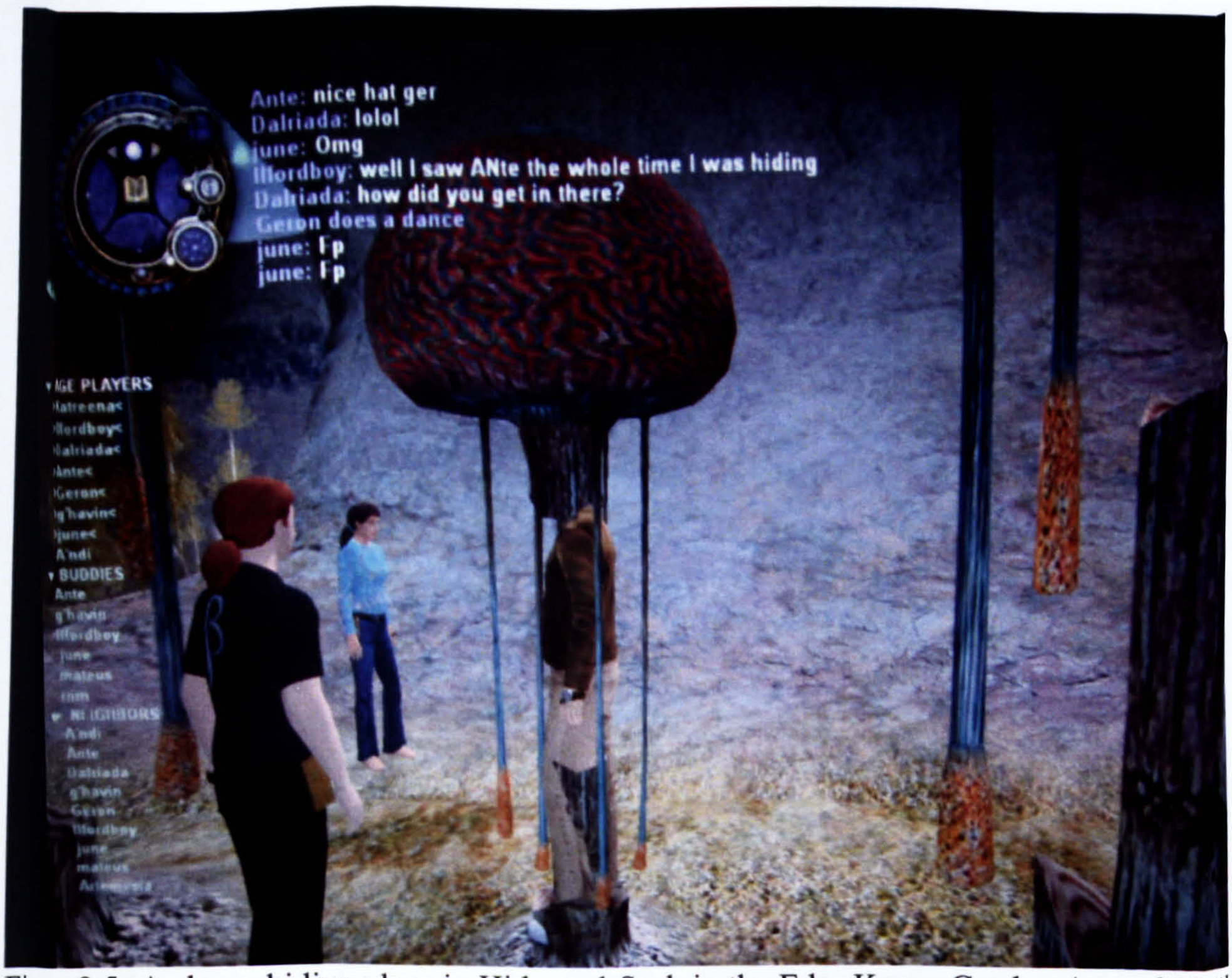


Figure 9.5: A clever hiding place in Hide-and-Seek in the Eder Kemo Garden Age of *Until Uru*.

Mastery

Mastery of specific skills is highly valued, and examples abound of new activities being invented with mastery in mind. Perhaps the best example is the D'ni Olympics, founded by Maesi. (Figure 9.6) This *Uru*-wide event, inspired by the active play of a disabled member of the group, involved developing mastery at a variety of events, such as balancing on an upended pylon (traffic cone) or tightrope-walking up a tent rope, that subverted objects and environments in unusual ways. Another example of mastery is the Hairier Legion Flight Team, founded by Shaylah, with Wingman and Maesi. (Figure 9.7) Combining mastery and exploration, the Hairier Legion performs elaborate synchronised air acrobatics using *There.com*'s numerous company- and player-made air vehicles. In both examples, mastery also takes the form of performance as players exhibit their skills to each other. Both of these events are major spectator draws, and the Hairier Legion in particular made Yeesha Island a focal point of activity for the broader *There.com* community.



Figure 9.6: Uru players exhibit mastery at the D'ni Olympics tent-climbing event in *Until Uru*.



Figure 9.7: The Hairer Legion Flight Team in *There.com* prepares to take off from one of Damanji's temples.

Games-within-Games: A notion inherited at least in part form *Uru* is the notion of the game-within-a-game. In *Uru*, the game was Heek, a five-player 'rock, paper scissors' style in which players seated around a table throw up symbols in a holographic display (Figure 9.8), also replicated by players in *Second Life* (Figure 9.9). In *There.com*, Spades, based on the popular card game, has taken the place

of Heek, (Figure 9.10) but Uruvians also enjoy inventing their own games and sports, such as Buggy Polo, a football-type game invented by Wingman and played with Dune Buggies and a large translucent orb driven by an avatar. An example of the impact of game design on this type of emergent behaviour is that TGUers were not able to play hide-and-seek in either *There.com* or *Second Life* due to the fact that players cannot turn off their own name tags, which float over avatars' heads. In *Uru*, names only appear when the cursor is rolled over the avatar, and only when it is unobstructed by another object. Thus, hide-and-seek is an invented game that players can only enjoy in *Uru*.



Figure 9.8: Heek, a popular game in *Uru*, is rock-paper-scissors D'ni-style.

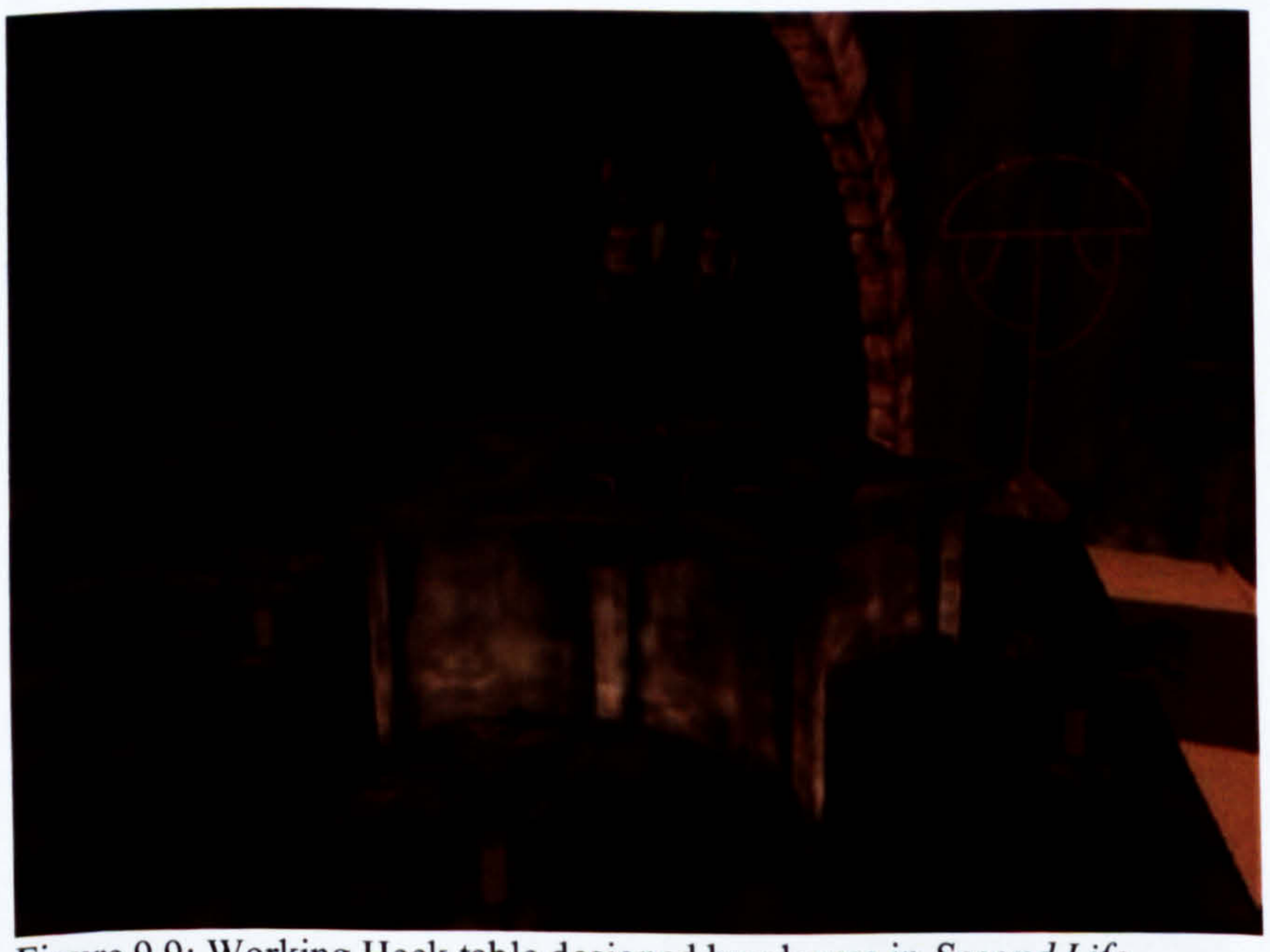


Figure 9.9: Working Heek table designed by players in *Second Life*.

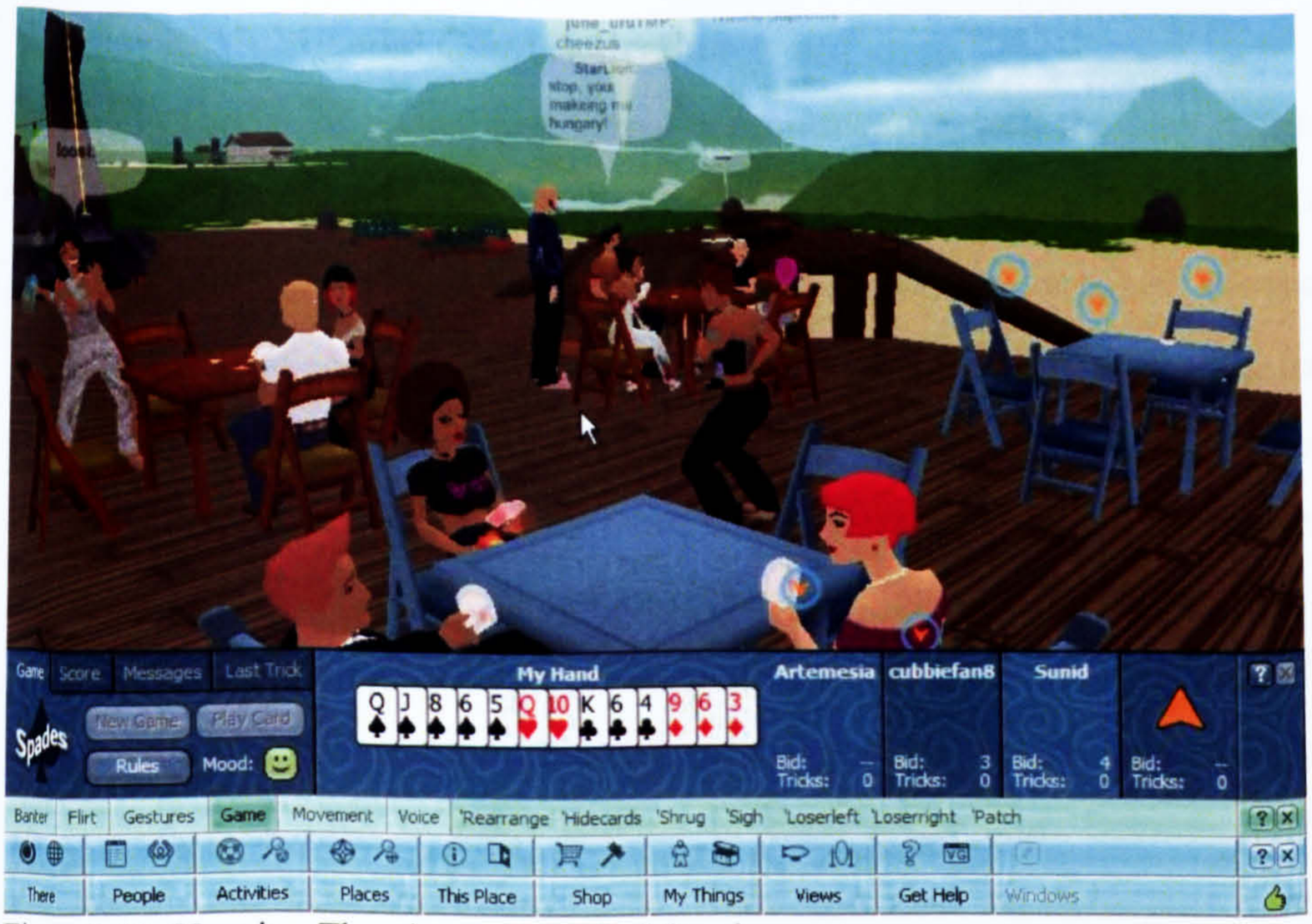


Figure 9.10: Uruvian-Thereians at a typical Spades party.

Togetherness

TGUers tend to seek out and create opportunities for togetherness, often combining these with other play styles. This can also be challenging as gatherings of large groups can tax the servers. Togetherness can be achieved by planning events, a formal feature of *There.com*, as well as inventing new games. Togetherness is also a means of countering the dispersion often brought on by the Exploration style described above. Exploration tends to scatter players throughout the virtual world, and togetherness events tend to be focused around bringing them back together, particularly in the group's home areas, such as Yeesha Island.


Figure 9.11: TGUers exhibit togetherness by packing themselves into the tiny Egg Room in *Until Uru*. (The translucent figure at right is the holograph of Yeesha.)

Wordplay & Multimodal Communication

The various modes of textual and verbal communication and the play patterns that arise out of these could comprise an entire thesis in and of themselves. In *Uru*, the primary communication was text chat. In Until *Uru*, players augmented this with voice over IP programs such as Skype and Teamspeak. *There.com* introduced voice shortly after TGUers arrived, a feature that was welcomed by some disabled members of the group who had trouble typing. Wordplay in both text and voice formats abounds, and in *There.com* there is also the added feature of the group instant-message box, often used during hoverboat jaunts or Hairier Legion events. Multimodal communication can also lead to some interesting breaches in the magic circle. The real-life milieu of players using hands-free voice systems can sometimes bleed into the virtual world, and the group can overhear phone conversations, children or dogs barking in the background. Because of the use of voice over IP programs to augment communications; there can also be occasions where a group of players in different virtual worlds on the same Skype call might be taking part in a trans-virtual conversation.

Horseplay

Horseplay, a kind of highly physical, highly spontaneous rough-and tumble is probably closest to what Caillois would characterise as 'ilinx', or vertigo (Caillois, 1961). Dancing in the fountain in the original *Uru* is an early manifestation of horseplay. However, horseplay in *Uru* was somewhat limited due to the game's constraints, and this play style expanded significantly in *There.com* where immortal avatars can jump off tall buildings, flip buggies or crash hoverboats into the sides of buildings unharmed. The Buggy Polo game described earlier is an excellent example of horseplay (Figure 9.12), as are elaborate driving courses that allow for vehicle stunts. *There.com* players also brought this expanded tendency towards horseplay back into *Uru* by inventing Avie Bowling; this was the effect of a collision flaw in the world that allowed players to sink their avatar bodies into the floor in a certain area of the hood. They would then run quickly across the floor, using their protruding heads as bowling balls and the numerous orange traffic cones in the world as bowling pins. This also demonstrates the way emergent behaviour can arise out of flaws in the system, or through repurposing of found objects.

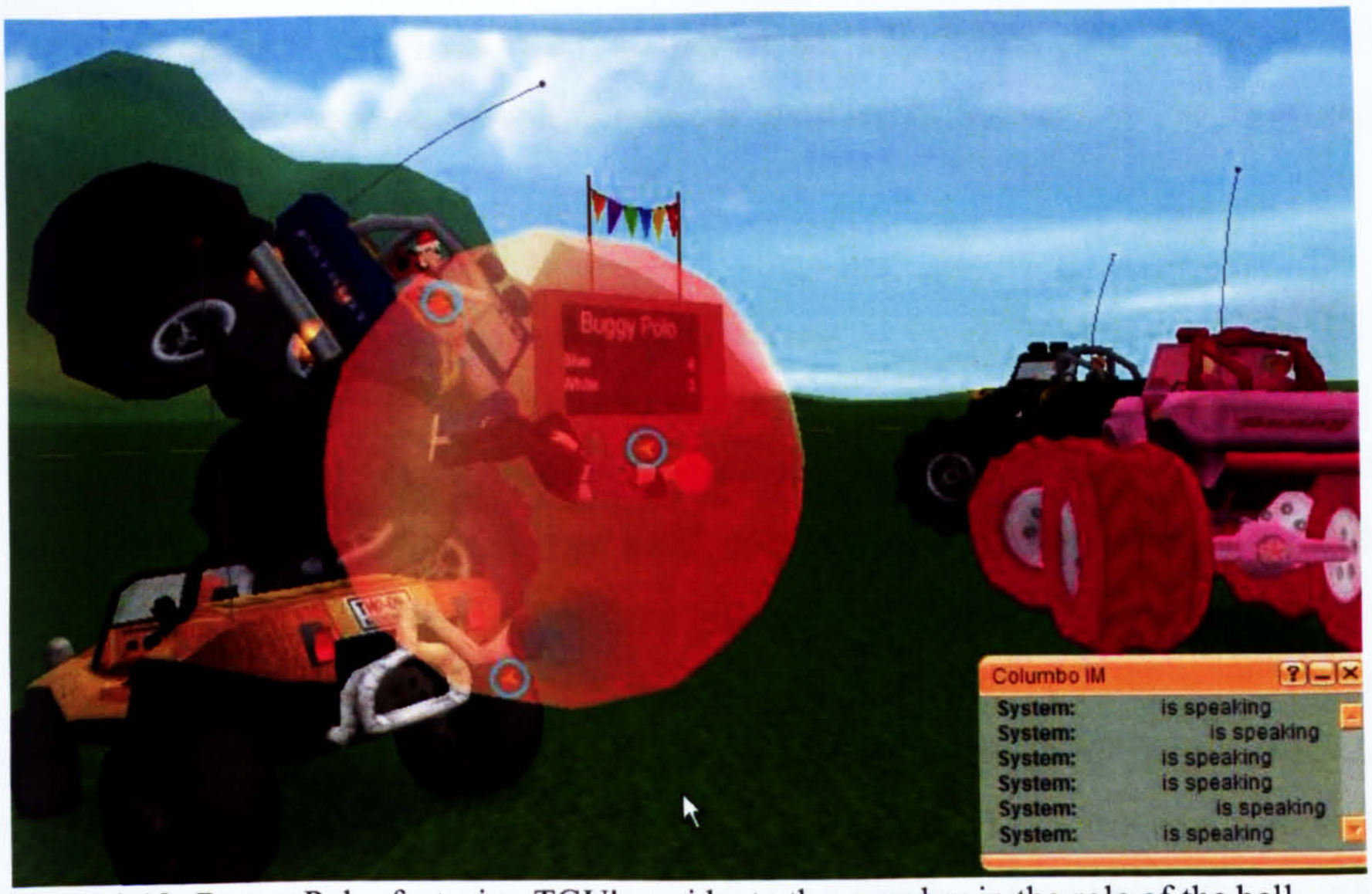


Figure 9.12: Buggy Polo, featuring TGU's resident ethnographer in the role of the ball.

The question of 'physical' play in an avatar-based world warrants a brief discussion. Game designer Chris Crawford has described 'safety' as one of the key characteristics of games (Crawford, 1984). Among theme park design practitioners this is referred to as 'safe danger'. Because avatars cannot die or be injured in any of the MMOWs described here, players have the opportunity to play in an extremely physical fashion without any of the consequences associated with this behaviour in the 'real' world or even typical MMOGs. Furthermore, as the vast majority of TGUers were adults (with the exception of a handful of teens), this type of play would be less likely to occur in the 'real' world, except under the auspices of so-called 'extreme sports'. Rough-and-tumble play also has an added dimension of appeal for players with physical disabilities, who might not be able to participate in physical sports at all with their 'real life' avatars.

Dancing/Acrobatics

Dancing is an activity that seems to have made its way into virtually every MMOW and MMOG. Even classical medieval role-playing games usually have dance steps built in. All three of the MMOWs covered in this study included affordances for dancing. *Uru* provided limited dance steps, and a few more were included in add packs released by the *Uru* hacker group. New dance moves have also been invented by combining sideways steps, turning, spinning, etc. Depressing the *Uru* voice activation button (players avoided actually using voice as it crashed the servers) caused the avatar to launch into an elaborate set of hand gestures, which were combined with other steps to create dance routines. Players also tried to create co-ordinated dance manoeuvres using a combination of existing and invented dance steps. TGUers were particularly enamoured of dancing in unusual places, such as the *Uru* fountain and its derivatives in *There.com* and *Second Life*, on top of columns, on spades tables, etc. *Second Life* has perhaps the broadest array of dance steps, mostly player-created, which is

one of the features that gives it the quality of an 'after hours club' for some TGUers. For disabled players in particular, an occasional 'night out' dancing in *Second Life* can be an enjoyable diversion.

Bottom-Up Leadership

The notion of 'bottom-up leadership' may appear to be an oxymoron; however, as we've seen, the leadership structure of TGU operates in a highly emergent fashion, both in the way decisions are made, and in the identity development of the leaders themselves. Nonetheless, bottom-up management requires a great deal of work, possibly more than top-down management. The reason for this is that leaders who work in this fashion must pay more attention and spend more time with the individuals in the group. They tend lead in a more responsive fashion, intervening on an as-needed basis to avert a crisis or promote some community-oriented initiative. Many of TGU's decisions happened in what may seem to be a backward fashion. For instance, TGU was started somewhat reluctantly and the mission statement was not written by Leesa until after people had already joined the hood. The migration took place through the initiative of individual scouts through a loosely negotiated research process rather than as a top-down dictate from leadership.

The Inventive Urge

An overarching engine for emergence is what one might call the 'inventive urge'. Play is by nature experimental, and experimentation can often lead to new play mechanics. In every MMOW, it appears that players invent new modes of play, new game mechanics, and new ways of interacting with the virtual world. In *Uru*, as well as the other game worlds described here, players were constantly subverting environmental components to create their own new forms of gameplay. This suggests that a high level of agency may result in a shift from player to designer. As with the real-life playground, players work within and sometimes against the spatial and mechanical constraints presented to them to develop new play forms indigenous to the spatial context (Opie and Opie, 1969). As a result, they adapt to the play ecosystem by both mutating existing game cultures and inventing entirely new ones, always working with and against the features of the play space.

Productive Play

Perhaps the most complex and unexpected outcome of the study was the emergence of 'productive play', that is, creativity around play. Because this is a major component of the study, chapter 10 is devoted entirely to this topic.

10 CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND ARTEFACT CREATION: MEANING, MEDIATION AND SOCIAL AGENCY

10.1 Productive Play

Productive play, as mentioned earlier, goes directly against the grain of much of Game Studies as well as prevailing cultural perspectives in Western culture. However, the evidence suggests, both here and elsewhere, that play can motivate a high level of productivity. Productive play is a major component of other cultural forms cited earlier, such the traditional Renaissance Faire, Star Trek fan culture, and Mardi Gras, to name a few examples. And as has been stated earlier, 'emergence happens'. Even in 'fixed synthetic' worlds with minimal affordances for co-creation, players will find ways to be creative, whether by appropriating game spaces and objects for different uses than those for which they were intended or through extra-virtual contexts. If affordances for creativity are present, players are sufficiently motivated, and adequate feedback systems are in place, this will serve to boost and promote emergence still further.

Uru makes for a particularly interesting case study in this regard because it represents the migration from a fixed synthetic game world to an open, co-created, social world. Emergence had already begun to occur in *Uru* even before its closure but blossomed as the group traversed other magic circles into other virtual worlds. *Uru* players had already generated fan-created content in the form of fan art, dictionaries and the like. Once settled in 'co-created' worlds, *Uru* players began to prolifically create artefacts inspired by *Uru*'s content, fuelled by the play community and supported by the creation tools and economies of the new worlds into which they migrated. This should not strike us as odd, as certainly people have been creating their own play artefacts for centuries. The mediation of the network and the software itself, however, creates both a built-in audience and a distribution mechanism for these play artefacts that accelerate the feedback loops that promote emergence. Player creation can be described as a 'virtuous cycle' with social feedback as its underlying engine.

10.2 Restoring a Lost Culture

It is not insignificant that one of the themes of the original *Uru* game was the restoration of the lost culture of the D'ni. So it seems almost inevitable that when *Uru* closed, players who had been engaged in exploring, understanding and restoring the lost D'ni culture would extend this objective outside the game. *Uru*'s original goal set the stage for the emergent cultures that evolved after its closure; players were already pre-disposed by the game itself to restore the D'ni culture, and they were well-trained at exploring new lands and solving difficult problems. It was as if the game itself trained them to adapt to its own destruction.

This trend recurs across the Uru Diaspora in a variety of forms: TGU's text-based MUD and Erik's Atmosphere hood; the re-creation of *Uru* and original *Myst*-like game in *Second Life*; the *Uru* hacker group's player-run server system and their initiative to create original Ages. Other *Uru* players are creating derivative and original environments using other game engines, such as Doom 3. There are also a number of extra-virtual manifestations of player productivity, such as fan drawings and paintings of *Uru*, and the real-world quilts mentioned earlier, the Guild of Linguists and other groups devoted to the spoken and written language of the fictional D'ni people, and a D'ni History Puzzle game. Examples of *Uru*-inspired creativity are too numerous to list here, and continue to be expanded on an ongoing basis.

10.3 The Longing for a Homeland

One of the key characteristics of a real-world diaspora is the longing for a lost homeland, although in some cases, the existence of the homeland and the identity associated with it may be, at least in part, imagined (Anderson, 1991). In these cases, the historical and imaginary blend to create a collective nostalgia for a past that never was, what historian and media theorist Norman Klein calls the 'social imaginary' (Klein, 1997).

For members of the Uru Diaspora, this longing transposes itself into a kind of nostalgia for an entirely fictitious, imaginary world in which the experiences were real, emotional and immediate. While melancholy in some respects, the outcome of this longing has been twofold. On one hand, this longing has contributed to a level of cohesiveness that has long outlived the original game experience; on the other, *Uru* has served as a kind of muse, inspiring prolific creativity.

The value of player-created artefacts, while they can be seen as a form of personal expression, seems to be primarily in the realm of social currency. Most artefacts are created for the benefit of group, as markers of shared identity, or as loci for social interaction, such as the *Uru* fountain. For the artisan, creativity also becomes part of his or her individual identity within the group. *Uru* artisans are highly respected within their communities for their valuable contribution to the life of the culture.

In 'Art and Agency', the anthropologist Alfred Gell has argued that man-made objects, be they art, tools, weapons or modes of transportation, are less a matter of the individual creative urge than mechanisms of social agency. Echoing Marshall McLuhan's conception of tools as 'extensions of man' (a theory of which Gell appears to have been completely unaware), Gell proposes that artefacts extend the creator's reach into the social, the intersubjective. While the findings of this research support Gell's core concept of social agency, they contradict contention that meaning is irrelevant (Gell, 1998). In the case of TGU, artefact creation is both a mechanism of social agency and a carrier of meaning.

10.4 Artefacts as Carriers of Meanings

While *Uru* artefacts may be aesthetically pleasing to the average observer, to members of the Uru Diaspora they have a deeper shared meaning. When Uruvians meet in other games, even for those who do not carry *Uru* as part of their avatar identity, the shared experience of 'being Uru' creates a sense of affiliation, regardless of ones current virtual world of choice. This affinity finds its most poignant expression in the shared meanings of *Uru* artefacts.

Uru players also enjoy sharing this meaning with others. Creators of Shorah Island in *Second Life* regularly give tours to non-*Uru* players, walking them through what has become in some ways an *Uru* museum, and describing the origin of each artefact. Hence, the spatial literacy described earlier translates not only into 'reading space' and 'writing space' but also into 'translating space'.

Because of the way the *Myst* games are structured, and in part due to their spiritual overtones, there is definitely a sense of the sublime to the meanings embedded within *Uru* artefacts and their progeny. As with Star Trek, which became a kind of parable for the future, *Uru* presents a rich vocabulary of associations that players take very close to their hearts.

Certain artefacts persist as uniquely meaningful to Uruvians and can be found recurring across various player-made instantiations of *Uru* culture. As mentioned earlier, the single most important of these is the fountain, the centrepiece and focal point of the *Uru* hood, and as such, the hub of *Uru* social life. It was a feature of *Uru* that many refugees expressed missing: Erik identified it as the starting point for his Atmosphere project; initially, Ember tried to emulate it in TGU's *There.com* Community Centre with the Moroccan fountain; eventually, the appropriated Moroccan fountain was replaced by Damanji's authentic *Uru*-derived fountain; in *Second Life*'s Shorah Island, the fountain is the primary gathering place for group events and meetings. (Figure 10.1)



Figure 10.1: Variations of the Hood Fountain: In *Uru* (top left), *There.com* (top right), Erik's Atmosphere Hood, and *Second Life*'s Shorah Island.







Figure 10.2: The *Uru* Relto (top); re-created in *Second Life* (middle); There's Relto Island (bottom).

Another key artefact is the Relto. Both *There.com* and *Second Life* artisans attempted to create authentic 'traditional' Reltos modelled after the Relto in *Uru.* (Figure 10.2) In *Second Life*, the flexibility of the in-game building system allowed for the modelling of a relatively accurate simulation. In *There.com*, with its more constrained and stylised building tools, the traditional Uru Relto could only be approximated, although the rendition is still easily recognizable as a Relto. Before too long players in both games began to modify the Relto design to create more 'modern' interpretations. A few examples are illustrated here, created from architectural elements found in the respective games, or original designs by players.

While these 'modern' Reltos vary stylistically quite a bit from the original Uru Relto, they share common signature elements. Reltos tend to be isolated, whether an island at sea, on the roof of a building, or floating in the air. Regardless of its aesthetic style, a Relto is typically a small, one room, free-standing building, containing a built-in bookcase for Linking Books, and sometimes, a wardrobe of carved wood. (Figure 10.4)

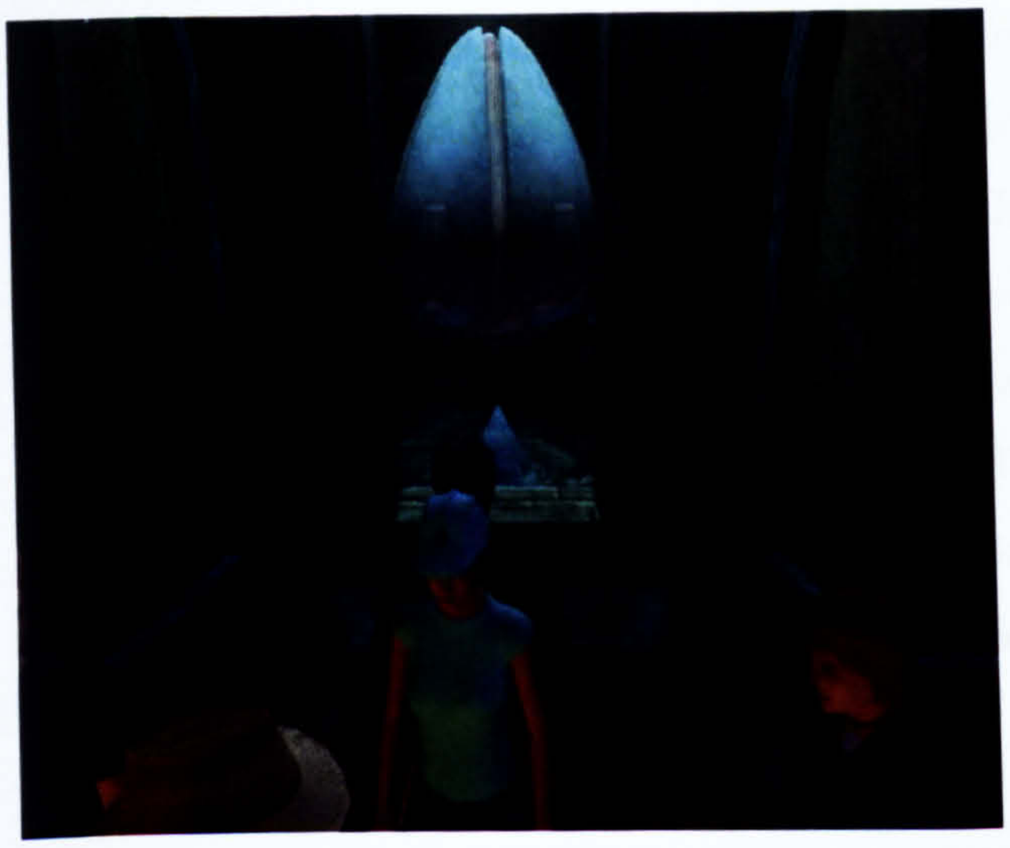


Figure 10.3: Modern Relto exterior in *There.com*



Figure 10.4: Traditional Relto interior in *Uru* (above); interior details of a modern Relto in *There.com* (below).

The 'Egg Room Egg', mentioned earlier, is also a recurring icon. Although players were never able to ascertain is original meaning in *Uru*, in carrying it into other games they have imbued it with their own meaning. In *Second Life*, naturally there is an Egg Room in the hood on Shorah Island. Variations of the Egg Room Egg can also be seen throughout *Uru* areas in *There.com*. One hovers in the centre of Nature_Girl's Library, while another hangs in the air above the Relto Island. Variations of the Egg Room Egg have also been used for Easter Egg hunts, a typical example of the conflating real world and imaginary cultures. (Figure 10.5)



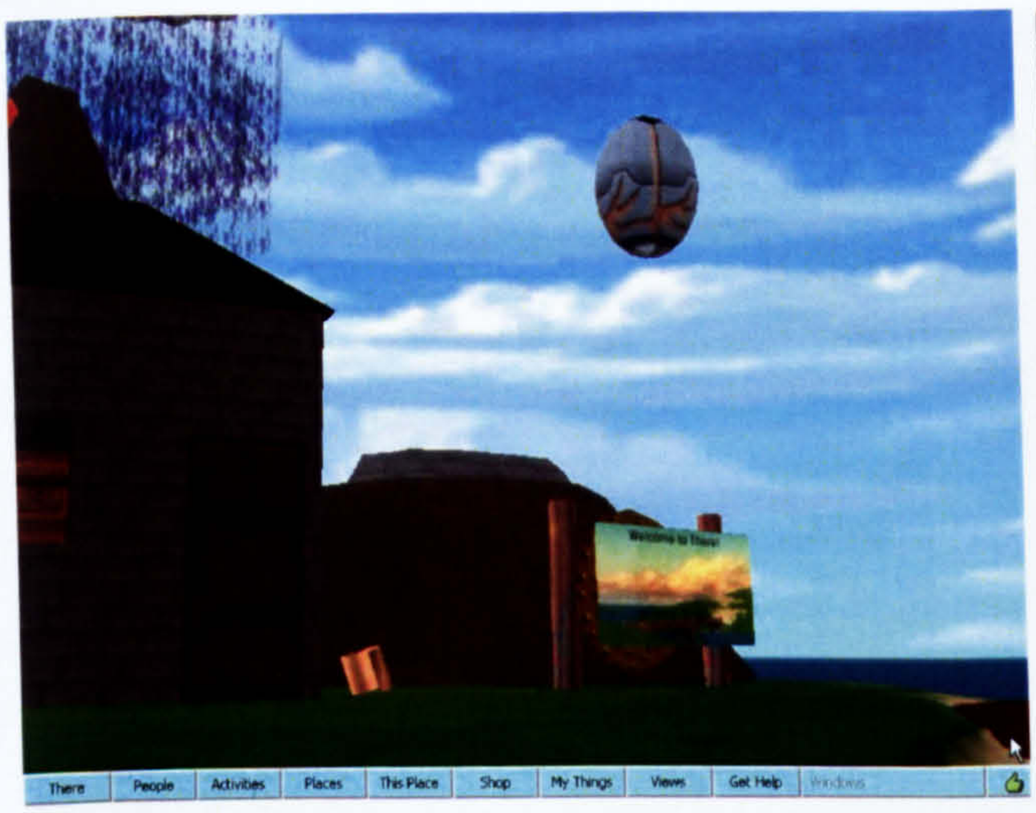




Figure 10.5: The Egg Room Egg in *Uru* (above); in *There.com*: on the Relto Island (below left) and in the Uru Library (below right).

Among the works of Uruvian artisans are numerous instances of classic D'ni technology being replicated in other worlds. The Imager, for instance, is a display device that appears repeatedly in Uru, and was re-created in *There.com* as a way to display different types of graphics. (Figure 10.6)





Figure 10.6: *Uru* Imager (left) reinterpreted by Nina_Uru in *There.com* (right).

Two of the most prolific *Uru* artisans in *There.com* are Damanji and Maesi. Building on the fashion focus of *There.com*, among the earliest *Uru* objects created by Damanji was the Yeesha costume (Figure 10.7), another marker of the 'fictive ethnic identity' that TGUers have adopted; he also created a TMP T-shirt (Figure 10.8). A Yeesha avatar in *There.com* appears in this costume at public events from time to time. Maesi has also created a number of Uruvian garments, including ethnically styled costumes, as well as a variety of *Uru* and TGU themed t-shirts. Both Damanji and Maesi have also created a variety of vehicles. Damanji has created several fantastical *Uru*-style vehicles, including a hover sail boat, a spherical bicycle-like air vehicle, and a dune buggy adorned with D'ni script.



Figure 10.7: Leesa and Lynn model Damanji's Yeesha costume in *There.com*.

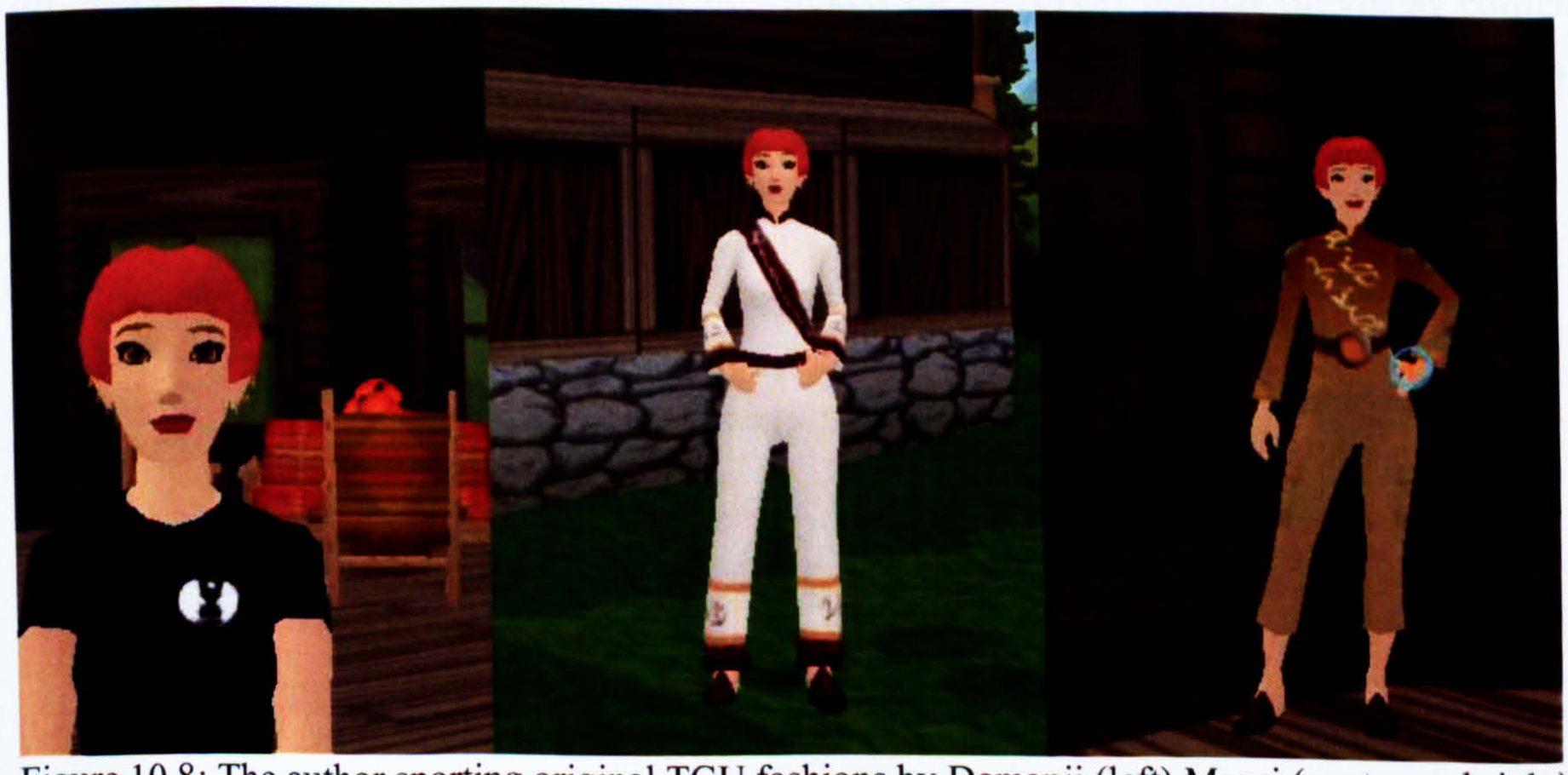


Figure 10.8: The author sporting original TGU fashions by Damanji (left) Maesi (centre and right).

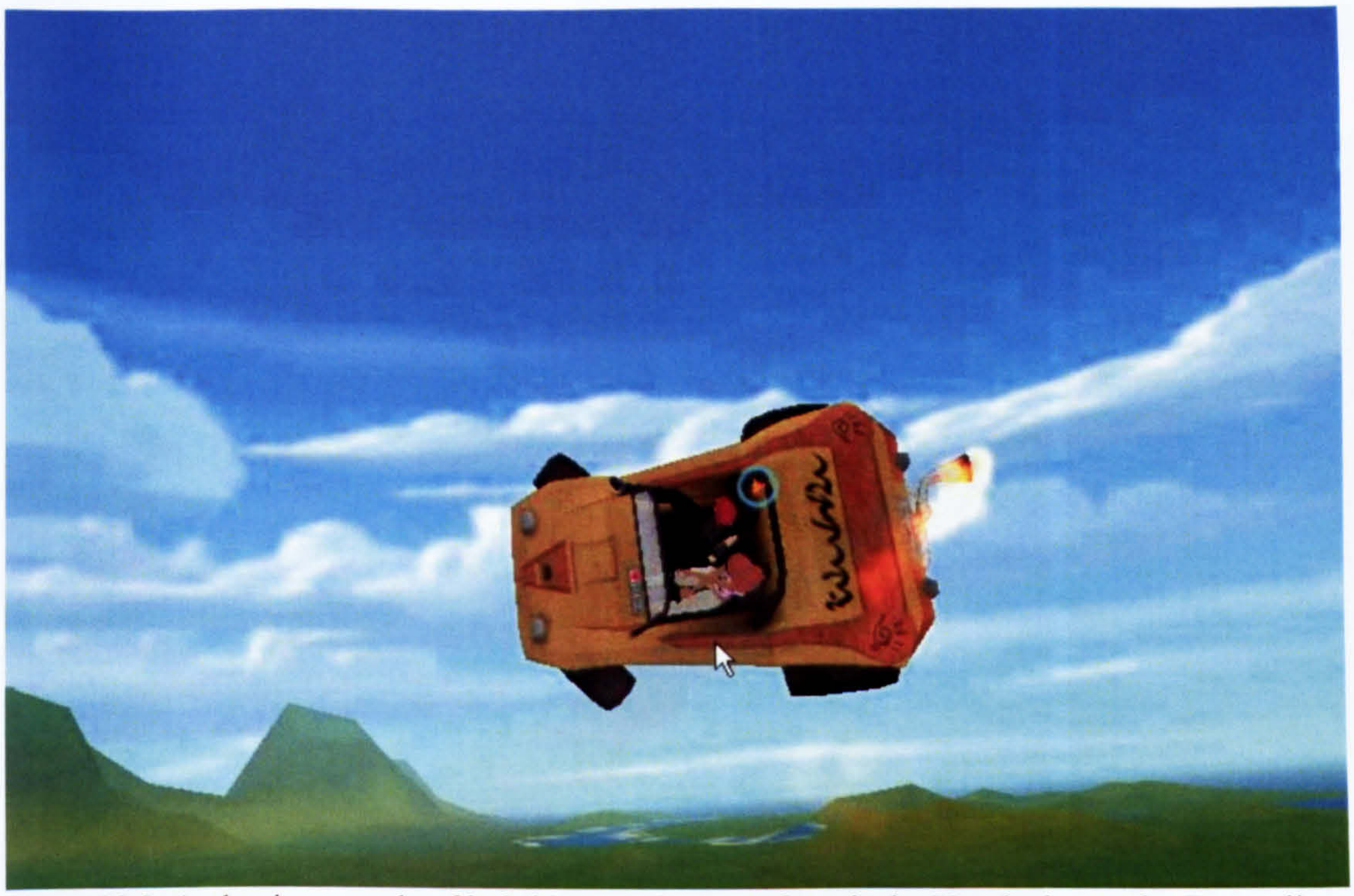


Figure 10.9: A classic example of hybrid *Uru-There* artefacts is the Yeesha buggy by Damanji.

Damanji became particularly involved in building. His earlier structures, including the Relto Island, the *Uru* fountain, *Uru*-style street lamps, and the Egg Room Egg were largely derivative of the original *Uru*. He also began to develop elaborate architectural structures, the next section details the ways in which his aesthetic evolved over time to integrate *Uru* and *There.com* styles of architecture.

Books and written texts play an important role not only *Uru* but in all the *Myst* games. Besides being the source of Ages and the primary transport mechanism, players are accustomed to reading stories, poems, journal entries and correspondence that obtusely reveal puzzle clues and aspects of the story. The library is one of the most important buildings in the D'ni City, and there is also a smaller library in the Hood where Linking Books can be found. The ability within both *There.com* and *Second Life* for players to create books which can be clicked on to reveal textual or visual content provides a perfect opportunity for players to produce content around this game element. (Figure 10.10)





Figure 10.10: Linking Books in *Uru* (top left), *There.com* (top right), and *Second Life* (bottom).

The Uru Library in *There.com*, created initially by Raena and later maintained by Nature_Girl, was the second most important structure (after the Community Centre) on Yeesha Island. At the heart of this multi-story, columned, circular building was the ubiquitous Egg Room Egg. The structures could also become identity markers as well as cultural artefacts, and the Library reflected Nature_Girl's role not only as the group's historian, but also the resident expert in all things D'ni. She knew the entire *Myst/Uru* mythology in detail, and was the primary resource for any questions regarding *Uru* lore and theology. Over time, I came refer to her as the group's Rabbi. The first and second floor of the library displayed books with various information about the history of the group, the closure of *Uru*, and instructions for getting into *Until Uru*, as well as links to other key group resources. The top floor, which was accessible only by hover vehicle, housed Nature_Girl's Relto, a customised variation possessing all the signature characteristics described above. (Figure 10.11) Nature_Girl also runs a handful of art zones that exhibit the works of Thereian artists.



Figure 10.11: Nature_Girl's Relto atop the Uru Library in *There.com*.

Erik's Atmosphere Hood is an interesting example of the relationship between solitary workmanship and social agency. Though Erik worked entirely alone on this project, it was clear from interviews that his motivations were primarily social. He had made a promise to Leesa, and wished to do something for the group. It should be noted that like Erik, all of the artisans described here were required to teach themselves new tools, as all of the worlds they produced for utilised their own propriety creation tools.

The *Uru* group in *Second Life* took a much more comprehensive approach, and, according to interviews, were deliberately seeking out a world in which they could re-create *Uru*. Once in *Second Life*, a small core group acquired Shorah Island and set about re-creating key sections of *Uru*, including the hood and Eder Kemo. Some additional 'modern' features were also added, reflecting the qualities of their new home in *Second Life*, including modern-style Reltos. The group of six to nine core members built the entire area once, then tore it down and started again from scratch. One distinction in creation modalities is that in *Second Life*, as opposed to *There.com* and Atmosphere, creation is done in-world. In addition, unlike *There.com*, environments can be set up to allow for group modification. This leads to a much more collaborative mode of creation and makes it easier to

create large environments. *There.com*'s creation mechanism, on the other hand, favours individual creation and ownership of space. (Figure 10.12)



Figure 10.12: Aerial views of Shorah Island in *Second Life* (left) and Yeesha Island in *There.com* (right).

In addition to the main areas of Shorah Island, visitors can access a series of Reltos perched high up in the sky overhead via a working simulation of *Uru*'s Nexus or fly around the perimeter of the Island and look at the more modern Relto-style houses of the group members. Although it would appear that the *Uru* group in *Second Life* was more focused on artefacts than community, interviews with the Uru Builder's Guild described this as a highly collaborative effort, the main point of which was 'fellowship'. While Shorah Island in *Second Life* does not seem to be as regularly populated as Yeesha Island in *There.com*, for events such as the anniversary of the *Uru* closure, it was so mobbed that the server crashed and participants (including visitors from *There.com*) were ejected into a barren dessert. As is the case with Yeesha Island in There, non-Uruvian Second Lifers often stumble onto Shorah Island by accident, not aware of what they are seeing. Occasionally, one of the creators will be available to conduct a tour.

Although the *Uru* group in *Second Life* was not a major focus of this study, a few commonalities suggest that they, too, shared some of the characteristic traits and play styles of their compatriots in *There.com*. Clearly spatial literacy is foremost among these; players had a very deep connection to and understanding of the spaces within *Uru* required to re-create them in such a compelling fashion. They shared with Uruvian-Thereians the motivation and determination to overcome the obstacle created by their diaspora status, and to maintain the communities created in *Uru*. The Second Lifer Uruvians also share with their Thereian counterparts the desire and ability to work collaboratively in groups, no doubt a carry-over from the collaborative puzzle-solving play of *Uru*. Finally, Uruvians in both worlds take great joy in sharing their story with non-Uruvians.

10.5 Creating New Ages

The creation of new Ages of *Uru* seems to be the inevitable outcome of players becoming deeply involved in creating *Uru* artefacts. The *Uru* hacker group alluded to earlier has aspired to create new Ages almost from the start, and eventually succeeded in doing so. From the onset of TGU's arrival, Damanji wanted to create new *Uru* Ages in *There.com*. Even as the group was moving from place to place to avoid harassment, Damanji was trying to find a way to build a new Age. An early attempt to do this near *There.com*'s newbie Welcome Centre was met with resistance. This only served to reinforce other players' anxieties that TGU was trying to take over *There.com* and turn it into *Uru*, and Damanji's elaborate structures created major lag in the area.

The creation of new Ages is a somewhat controversial theological issue among TGUers. According to group historian Nature_Girl, humans are not really supposed to create Ages at all, as this skill is a unique gift of the D'ni. Historically in *Myst* and *Uru* lore, attempts to create Ages by people not of 100% D'ni blood often lead to disaster.

While Damanji's earliest artefact creation in *There.com* focused primarily on creating key icons of *Uru* culture—the Yeesha costume, the fountain, the Relto, the Imager, the *Uru* lamp, for example—the Age creation problem still nagged at him, and he began to formulate a strategy which one might call 'emergent Age generation'. The idea was that rather than build an entirely new Age, which would be a great deal of work and highly challenging for a single person (as *There.com*'s building system does not allow for collaborative authorship), he would create *Uru*-like objects and sell them to Thereians at-large. Over time, he hoped, new Ages would emerge organically through the integration of these artefacts into *There.com*. Coupled with this was a vision of new *Uru*-like artefacts in the *There.com* style. As we've seen, *There.com*'s aesthetic is much more cartoon-like than *Uru*'s, so as he worked with both the *Uru* and *There.com* vocabularies, Damanji began to create a hybrid style that combined the two. It is at this point that his work begins to get more interesting because the objects he creates are no longer derivative of *Uru* artefacts but wholly original, essentially Uruvian while at the same time indigenous to *There.com*. (Figures 10.13 & 10.14)

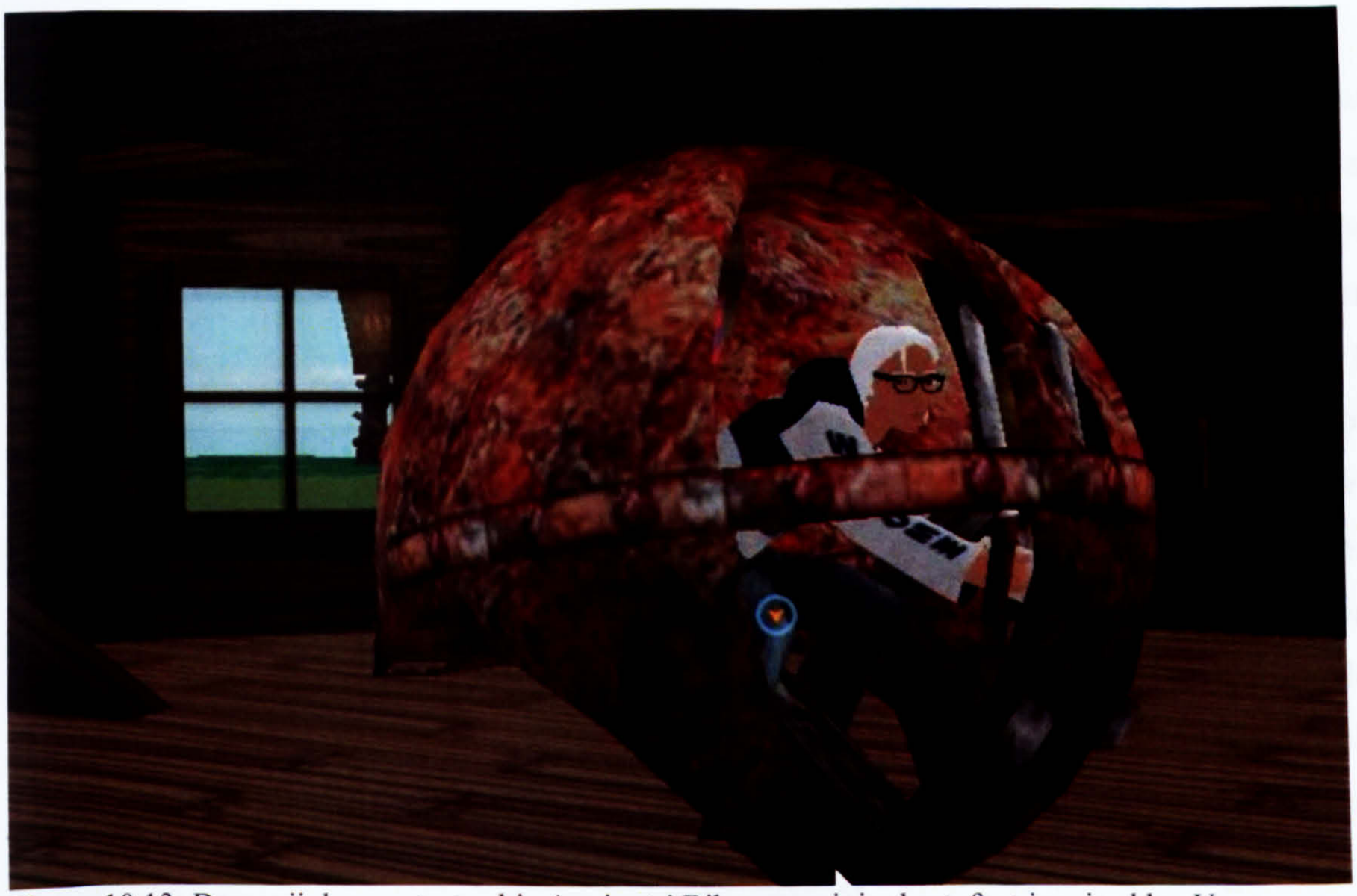


Figure 10.13: Damanji demonstrates his Ancients' Bike, an original artefact inspired by *Uru*.



Figure 10.14: Damanji's workshop, showing hybrid Uruvian-Thereian style artefacts, such as the Temple, right, Ark, left and Uru Fountain, centre.



Figure 10.15: The conical building in *Uru* (top) was the inspiration for Damanji's hybrid Uruvian-Thereian Cone House (centre). The University of There campus is shown at bottom featuring a different cone house variation.

Over time, Damanji's new strategy played out extremely well on a There-wide basis. One of his early contributions to this new style of Uruvian-Thereian architecture was the Cone House, an octagonal structure loosely based on a building in one of the *Uru* Ages. In *There.com*, it came in various components so you could build small, large, single or multiple storied variations, with a flatter, pointier roof. TGUer Bette created a park across from Yeesha Island, along with her family, where a number of these cone houses could be seen. Damanji also created a number of other architectural components, including an ark, platforms and decks, new fountain designs, a watch tower, a bridge house, a temple construction kit, numerous furniture items and building accessories, and a number of landing pads for the pilots in the group. Over time, these components have been adopted by Thereians at-large, and one can see Damanji's *Uru*-inspired architecture throughout *There.com*. When Wingman founded the University of There, he used Damanji's cone houses for the majority of structures on the campus, effectively institutionalizing the design into *There.com*'s architectural vocabulary. (Figure 10.15)

In *Second Life*, in keeping with the more environment-centric and collaborative building mechanism, a group combining *Myst* and *Uru* players took the bold step of creating an entirely new *Myst/Uru* style game from scratch. The small team acquired their own Island and created an elaborate treasure-hunt style game, 'Inara: The Clay Vessel Quest'. (Figures 10.16-10.18) Participants in this adventure/puzzle must find a number of pieces of a broken clay vessel to restore balance to the world, presumably an Age, but this is never stated outright. Exotic oversized flowers, bizarre elevated structures, mysterious temple-like buildings, elaborate furnishings, complex and challenging pathways to new locales, chambers embedded with poetry, strange transport devices such as a glass funicular, elaborate machines whose correct operation gains entry to locked rooms, keys and pot shards to be found, strange orb-like viewing devices that show glimpses into other areas of the game, and of course books, books and more books: All these features bear the signature play style and aesthetics of *Myst* games, though it is nowhere explicitly stated as such. Even the game tracking object, modeled after the Relto Book that *Uru* avatars carry on their belts to link them back to their Reltos, is a notebook that players 'wear' when playing the game. As in *There.com*, *Uru* and *Myst* players in *Second Life* make up some of the world's top artisans. Two of the most popular furniture designers in *Second Life* are former *Myst*-players, and the work of one of these makes up most of the furniture in Inara.

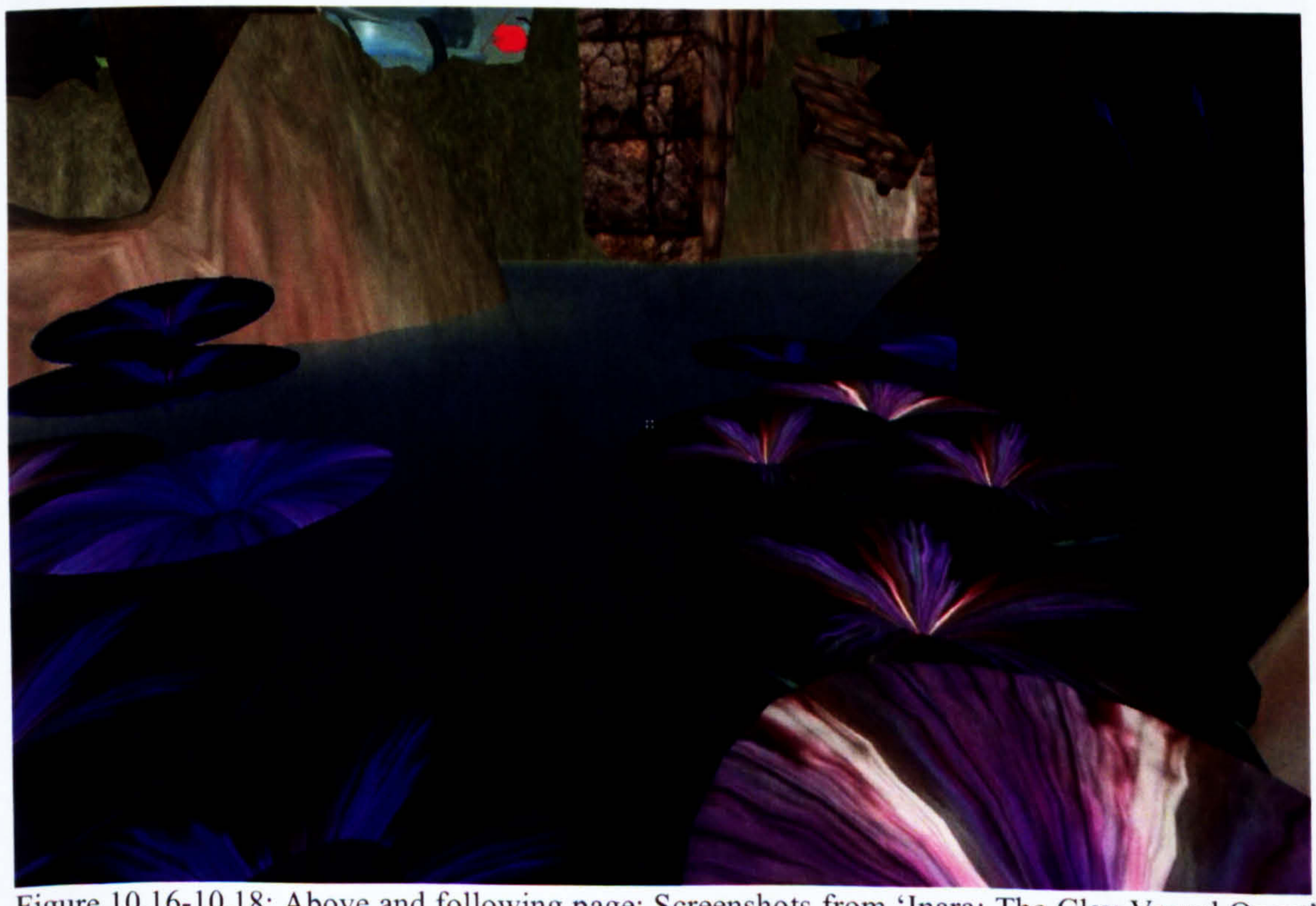
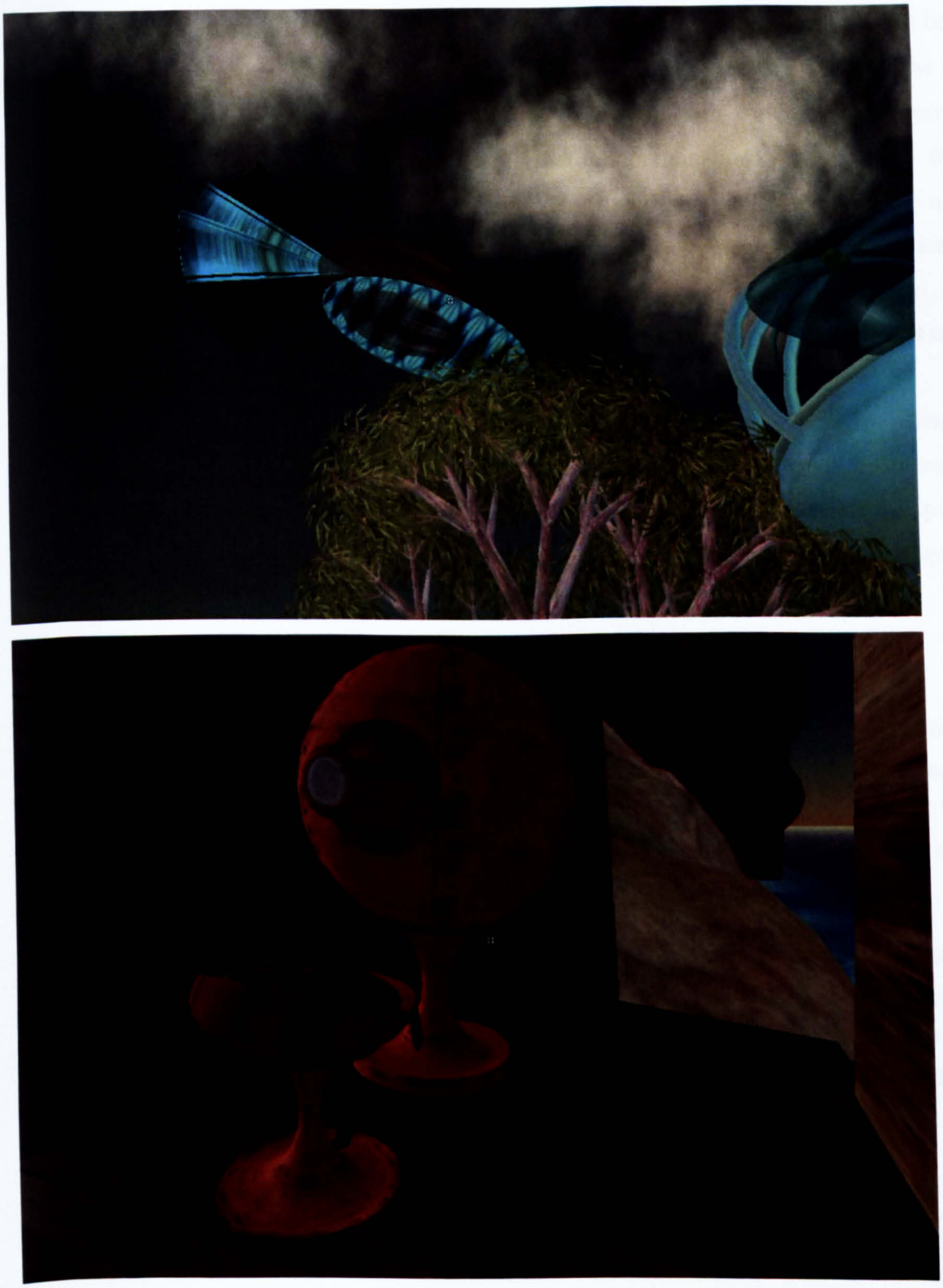


Figure 10.16-10.18: Above and following page: Screenshots from 'Inara: The Clay Vessel Quest', an entirely original *Myst/Uru*-style game created by players in *Second Life*.



10.6 Emergent Patterns of Player Productivity

Although the *Uru* instantiations in *There.com* and *Second Life* represent only a limited sampling, the tendency to move from derivative to original works inspired by the indexed or referenced fan culture source appears to be generalisable across multiple worlds. This is especially the case when looked at the larger Uru Diaspora; based on the apparent increase in original *Myst*- and *Uru*-inspired projects over time, it would seem that players who become versed with a game's content may eventually, under the right conditions and given the opportunity for player creativity, feel emboldened to in a

sense take possession of that content and make it their own. In the case of *Uru*, this has been largely enabled by Cyan's apparent silence throughout the development of post-*Uru* culture. The creators of both Shorah Island and the Atmosphere Hood actually showed their work to Cyan representatives, fearing copyright reprisal. In both case, no further communication was received from Cyan, suggesting a permissive regard toward fans regarding copyright enforcement. Later negotiations regarding the *Until Uru* player-run servers and the release of fan-created Age-building tools seem to indicate that Cyan is in fact not only permissive but also supportive of fan creation efforts. This would be an entirely new model for corporations, which generally cling desperately to copyright ownership.

If, as would seem to now be the case, Cyan has handed over control of the *Myst/Uru* worlds to players, this would be the first time such a transfer of power has occurred. It will be interesting to see the outcome of this approach to supporting player productivity. Cyan's innovative position also causes us to consider other models that game companies might use in the future to leverage the natural tendency of fans to wish to engage in co-creation of the virtual worlds they inhabit.

Comments

I think it is hard to say that Cyan's silence is tacit relinquishing of control of URU/Myst franchise. Perhaps they are sad at what happened to the community. Perhaps this is a method to perpetuate the fan base whilst they prepare for some second coming. Witness that they have stopped selling kagi codes coincident with the release of primitive age development tools.

Perhaps what is happening is really just a business decision. Specifically, suppose Cyan is developing some new Uru type game for release. Why would they want to compete with their own legacy, Until Uru, which is essentially free to use. So the business tactic might be, give them UU to hold them. Then cut of the keys so the community can't stay there forever. Eventually with out new keys the community will not be able to grow in Uru. Ultimately the gathering will disperse to other worlds, as this text has studied.

Cyan, if this is your strategy then hurry up, or perhaps make some kind of announcement to the community. Because the "myst" has begun to dissipate.

Posted by: Raena | February 05, 2006 at 05:37 PM

Well an update here. As we now know Cyan has launched their own shard, D'mala, which is open to new explorers. No more keys for the user shards are being offered. Thus the prediction above appears to have come true. If Cyan is successful in acquiring more funding they will be able to "produce" the "second coming" of Uru. So from a business sense they have NOT given up control of the franchise.

Posted by: Raena | April 07, 2006 at 02:05 PM

11 TRAVERSING MAGIC CIRCLES

11.1 Porous Magic Circles/The Ludisphere

One of the most significant findings of this study is that the magic circle, the invisible boundary that distinguishes play activities from 'real life', is far more porous than previously assumed. The prevailing wisdom that the magic circle that surrounds a game activity is inviolate and impervious needs to be re-examined, particularly in the context of cyberspace. The Uru Diaspora in general, and specifically by TGU, exemplify play communities carrying their unique play styles across magic circles, and adapting it to each new play ecosystem they encounter. These trans-ludic encounters also introduce leakages between play, imagination and 'real life'. Thus it may be more useful to think of clusters of intersecting and overlapping magic circles within the larger constellation of networked play spaces, which we might call the 'ludisphere', which exists in the larger frame of 'real life'. The subsequent section will explore this notion a little further, and also talk about the ways in which persistent individual and group identities reinforce movement among different magic circles within the ludisphere.

11.2 Migrating Individual and Group Identities

The practice of maintaining either group or individual identities that cross multiple game worlds extends far beyond the Uru TGU group. Inter-game immigration is becoming increasingly commonplace. Guilds from medieval-themed MMOGs are known to inhabit several games simultaneously, or in some cases, move en mass into a newly released game; creating a form of market cannibalism between games of the same genre. Immigrants from The Sims Online have a community in *There.com*. Small numbers of players have immigrated between *There.com* and *Second Life*, and some keep a primary residence in one and a vacation home the other. There are also groups, such as *Uru*'s Welcomers' League, who extend their mission to greet new players beyond their game of origin into other worlds.

Although TGU identifies collectively as a single group, as we've seen, they play and carry persistent identities concurrently across no less than five different networked environments: *There.com, Until Uru* (running on player-hosted servers), *Second Life*, TGU's own Atmosphere Hood, and the Koalanet Forum, which serves as a central communication hub across all the virtual worlds the group inhabits. They also augment these environments with voice-over-IP software such as Skype or Teamspeak.

The collective group identity both enables and creates the necessity for identities that persist across virtual worlds. And while their representations may vary from world to world based on the capabilities of each virtual environment, most players who have these sorts of multi-world avatar identities conceive of the character as 'the same person'. It would also seem that in the case of TGU,

the diasporic element also served to reinforce the need for itinerant or portable identities. (Figure 11.1) Players were determined to 'stay together', both in an individual sense ('stay together with my avatar'), and in a social sense ('stay together with my community.')



Figure 11.1: Left to Right: TGUers Lynn (left) and Nature_Girl (right) in *Uru, There.com*, and *Second Life* respectively.

Practices of inter-game immigration and multi-world identities present some fascinating new research questions which ought to be of interest to game developers, who often have no way to track where players have gone once they have left a game. Furthermore, the implications of multi-game identities are particularly interesting when looking at issues of player representation and game mechanics. Because the affordances for avatar design and modification differ so greatly from world to world, players may find that differences in avatar representations may also lead to differences in personality, even in the same 'character', from one world to another. Groups may also evolve in different ways as they come in contact with new play ecosystems cultures, especially as they move between MMOW genres. Further developing methods for tracking and studying player migration patterns could potentially have a very high level of utility to MMOG designers.

11.3 Migrating Play Patterns

Inter-game immigration provides us with an interesting case of emergence in MMOWs. Clearly, immigration is not something intended by designers. Such immigration typically happens slowly over time, but in the case of *Uru*, a sudden cataclysmic event caused a relatively instantaneous mass immigration. This cataclysmic event created the opportunity to track a relatively large group of players across a number of different virtual worlds in a relatively compressed time period.

The narrative of TGU demonstrates that emergence begins to instantiate through a particular community's play style, incubated in the group's game or virtual world of origin, framed by the types of people that world attracts. These players then move into different play ecosystems where they transport and adapt their culture and play styles to the new context. As we've seen in the case of Uru settlers in *There.com*, the new context also adapts to them, a process which can at times be painful. In

addition, TGU then took some of the new mutated play patterns they had developed in *There.com* back into *Until Uru*, thus bringing another forms of emergence behaviour back into their 'home' world.

One might see this as an 'all the world's a playground' approach in which, in each new world players encounter, they form a relationship with the virtual space informed and guided by their play style, and the play patterns they have developed in other worlds they inhabit. This echoes Iacovoni, whose small study 'Game Zone' explores the many ways that physical and virtual space are subverted in the service of play (Iacovoni, 2004). It is also consistent with the Opies' descriptions of the ways in which different street games mutate from one geographical region to another in the real world, taking advantage of local resources and environmental conditions (Opie and Opie, 1969). Furthermore, play will inevitably blur the boundary between spaces as it functions by its own set of rules, independent of surrounding social conventions. Thus spaces are constantly subverted and reconfigured to accommodate the play impulse (Jenkins, 1998).

TGU's play style, insomuch that it is 'of *Uru*', is very much about the emergence of social relationships through their relationship to space. The examples given here illustrate the ways in which experimental play can lead to new patterns 'indigenous' to the space they occur in, but characterised by the group's unique play style. Two good examples are Avie Bowling (*Until Uru*) and Buggy Polo (*There.com*), described in Chapter Eight. While these games arise from the same play style, their play pattern is unique to the affordances of each world's design features and flaws (including bugs). A phenomenon such as the Hairier Legion Flight Team illustrates how when play styles such as mastery and exploration meet a virtual world feature such as air travel, a new play pattern is born. Players accustomed to migrating between multiple game worlds appear to become particularly adept at spontaneously adapting new spaces to their own play requirements.

11.4 Migrating Identities and Play Patterns to the Real World

While it may be easy to presume that these phenomena are somehow exclusive to the virtual, it would seem that many of these patterns can also migrate outside of the virtual and into the real world. This was borne out during *There.com*'s 'RLG' (Real Life Gathering), which took place at the San Mateo offices of Makena, Inc., now the owner/operator of *There.com*, in September of 2005. The TGU group, including spouses and resident ethnographer, comprised slightly less than half the total showing of Thereians.

While some members of the group had had encounters with each other prior to *There.com*'s Real Life Gathering, for most of them, including the author, this was their first encounter with each other's 'real-life avies'. The importance of voice became immediately apparent upon first meeting. One could

easily recognise others due to the familiarity of voice, which served as a bridge between the real-life and virtual world avatars. Additionally, many players bore a physical resemblance to their *Uru* and/or *There.com* avies, and some arrived dressed in the typical garb of their avatars. (Figure 11.4





Figure 11.4: Some participants at *There.com*'s Real Life Gathering wore pink bunny slippers (above), an in-world item that allows your avatar to jump higher. Real-world Hairier Legion Flight Team T-shirt. (Images by Raena)

While most of the formal event was focussed on panels, discussion groups and showcasing player creativity such as machinima films made in-world, live musical performance and real-life crafts made by players, the most revealing aspect from a research perspective took place the last evening in which we met for dinner in San Francisco, and then returned to the hotel to socialise.

Key characteristics of group members became readily apparent once within an open physical space. Finding parking places and co-ordinating a meet-up became a kind of puzzle, with members calling each other from mobile phones to arrange a meeting point. The exploratory urge came into action within the context of San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf, a popular and crowded tourist area. Several groups dispersed to explore, one, lead by Lynn, to visit the Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory. This exercise brought into sharp relief the contrast between unencumbered exploration of a virtual world and attempting to navigate a hilly turn-of-the-Century urban area in a wheelchair. Again, rising to the challenge, non-disabled members augmented Lynn's skills at seeking out ramps, lifts and other pathways to enable her to arrive at her destination. Thus the puzzle-solving urge and spatial literacy were no less present in the real world than to the virtual.

Navigating out of San Francisco and back to San Mateo with Hairier Legion founders Wingman and Shaylah was equally revealing. Negotiation of the best path back to the highway was highly reminiscent of discussions regarding the optimal buggy path from point *a* to point *b* in *There.com*, especially with respect to finding the best shortcut, the most direct or least hilly route.

Once at the Marriott Hotel, I was able to see TGUers in an actual real-world play setting. Thereians, instigated largely by TGUers, transformed the hotel lobby into a play space. Having brought playing cards, players colonised seating arrangements and initiated spades games, re-creating the standard configuration of the spades tables in *There.com*.

Perhaps the most noteworthy distinction between the real-life and the virtual spades game was that, accustomed to *There.com*'s built-in computerised scoring system, no-one was really clear on mechanics of keeping score. Once the scoring formula was arrived at, it became apparent that it would not be possible for the players to keep score themselves. Ultimately, Lynn's husband Frank took the computer's role as score-keeper. For this and other reasons, the game was lengthier than usual, but it provided valuable insight into the differences and similarities between real-life and mediated interactions.

Players' sense of humour and approach to the gameplay were similar to their in-world play personae, but with subtle variations. As with both spades in *There.com* and Heek in *Uru*, informal spectators stood at the corners of the table. Unlike *There.com*, however, it was possible for both spectators and players to see people's cards, opening up the possibility of cheating, entirely absent in *There.com*'s variation of the game.

The familiar avatar animations were replaced by physical gesture, eye contact, and other features of the 'real world', although the voices were the same. This served to create a connection between the real-world persona and the virtual persona, and although the experience was a little disorienting, there was a familiarity to both the company and the scene that made the entire situation seem quite natural.

Comments

Oh My God, this made me laugh and cry at the same time. What a fun time it was meeting you in RL. I hope we can do it again. Meeting each other in RL was as comfortable as putting on a pair of beloved old shoes. We all just "fit" together.

Yes, I agree, the highlight of the gathering for me too was the San Francisco jaunt to the Chocolate Factory and taking over the lobby of the hotel. Too bad they did not have a fountain in the centre for us to dance on. ;-)

The other noteworthy event that night was the heroic task Raena performed by walking around and making sure the web-cam was on and trying to show others who could not make it to the gathering what it was like. I heard so many comments on how deeply that was appreciated by those who could only wish they could have joined us. We wished they could have been there physically too but I know they were there in spirit.

Oh yes, and who could forget the little oriental doorman who kept mooching chocolate and getting in the group pics on the stairs of the restaurant? Lord I loved it. HAHA

Hey, who won that spades game anyway?

Posted by: Lynn | January 29, 2006 at 09:08 PM

It was quite an experience getting to the evening dinner event in the "tourist" harbor area of San Francisco. I recall a 2-hour exploration to find a parking space for the large wheelchair enabled van. Various members of the community spontaneously collaborated to help solve this problem, employing use of cell phones, foot excursions... etc. The group quickly found out that RL has its disadvantages! Oh did we long for a hover boat or even just a Linking Book.

Posted by: Raena | February 05, 2006 at 05:43 PM

Raena...thanks for the reminder of the parking co-ordination. I think this is actually a very interesting story because of the 'distributed' nature of the communication that took place. I'll be sure to include a description of that in *Being Artemesia*!

Posted by: Artemesia | February 05, 2006 at 10:51 PM

Something else struck me about the jaunt. I felt totally safe in everyone's hands in a strange city without my protective hubby. I appreciated the fact that without my asking the path to follow was discovered in advance of me by all in that group.

It is like it happens in the games. We all see a need and try to fulfill it without question or having to be asked.

Of course my situation was obvious at the time being in a wheelchair, but there was no discussion and because I had made a comment some time before that I really would like to visit the choc factory, it then became a goal for everyone to get me to it.

I had taken a look at the streets and did not think it was possible to get to it but hid my disappointment and did not say a word about it looking like a lost cause so not to have to try and fail and be a drag on everyone. HA HA. Little did I know I was going to be gotten there by hook or crook with this gang.

My desire was acted upon by others calling me across the busy street and saying 'follow them'. I had no idea until the next block that was the mission we were on. So I figured YAY, lets try and the mission accomplished by many. The forward guard ran interference and lo and behold, the store was found. The route sometimes was a bit round and about but you all got me there. It was worth the trip. :-)

Posted by: Lynn | February 13, 2006 at 03:28 AM

Lynn it's good to hear your perspective on this because it also reinforces some of what I've been saying about the dynamics between the individual and the group, and the fact that every

problem encountered becomes a 'puzzle'. This is one of the interesting distinctions I see between Myst and Uru was that Uru added this collaborative puzzle-solving skill to your repertoire.

Posted by: Artemesia | February 27, 2006 at 09:58 AM

12 CONCLUSIONS: EMERGENCE AS A DESIGN MATERIAL

12.1 Emergence and Design

The primary question driving this study has been the question of whether a relationship can be recognised between game design and patterns of social emergence among players in massively multiplayer games and virtual worlds. The findings of the study suggest that indeed such a relationship exists, and operates at a number of levels. While this study represents a single case involving a single group of players moving between multiple game worlds, it provides numerous examples of how both the values of the virtual world and its underlying architecture, as well as its specific design features, intersect with distinct group play styles to produce different types of emergent behaviour. This process has included an analysis of how such group play styles emerge over time through their interaction with different virtual worlds and play ecosystems.

> **Comments**
>
> Perhaps this study will encourage game developers to understand there is much more in the world as a market for games than violent first person shooters.
>
> Disabled people can be a great market source for community-based games because of the time they have available. It not only gives them a badly needed outlet to feel like they can once again function in a whole body and do the things they once could or never thought possible.
>
> They can contribute much to an on-line community-based game in many ways and that allow them to feel they are productive members. I personally think that has been of the greatest importance to me other than being with the many friends I made in URU.
>
> **Posted by: Lynn | January 29, 2006 at 09:22 PM**

12.2 A Narrative of the Movement from Synthetic to Co-Created Worlds

This study revealed two distinct types of persistent virtual worlds or play ecosystems that exist at opposite ends of a spectrum. At one end is the 'fixed synthetic' world of *Uru*, a wholly contrived story world that is also a 'game' with limited and controlled agency. Like a theme park with no tracks, players can explore at will, but cannot change anything in the world except in prescribed ways. At the opposite extreme, co-created worlds like *Second Life* and *There.com* emphasise the social and invite players to make a major contribution to the world's construction. *There.com* is on the more moderate end of this spectrum, with a higher degree of designer controls and constraints, while *Second Life* represents the furthest extreme of an open-ended co-created world. Such co-created worlds, fuelled primarily by emergence, are always works in-progress that change on a continual and unpredictable basis. The defining characteristic along this spectrum is the amount and type of agency players are given (as opposed to the agency they actually take) to participate in the design and creation of the

world itself. The more such agency players are given, the larger the quantity and variety of emergent behaviours that are likely to occur.

The narrative of emergence told here is that of a culture from a fixed synthetic 'game' world immigrating into co-created 'social' worlds where they worked within the world's constraints to create their own unique sub-culture.

One important observation is that 'emergence happens', regardless of whether the virtual world has affordances for it or not. Hide-and-seek, Avie Bowling, the D'ni Olympics and other forms of alternative play conceived by players within the fixed synthetic world of *Uru* suggests that emergence is the inevitable outcome of a large number of players within a network. Many examples outside of Game Studies attest to the notion that the larger the number of nodes or agents in a complex system, the more likely it is that emergence will occur (Levy, 1992, Rheingold, 2002, Johnson, 2001, Surowiecki, 2004).

Social emergence in this context is the outcome of prolonged and repeated interaction with a persistent networked virtual world through a persistent identity. Because emergence occurs over time, observing its full effects requires a longitudinal, qualitative, multi-scale approach, the ability to observe the forest and the trees concurrently (Mills, 1959, Bar-Yam, 1997, Bar-Yam, 2000a). Furthermore, some forms of social emergence can traverse the borders of virtual worlds and even between the virtual and the real. Further knowledge about these phenomena can be gathered through long-term, multi-world studies, which will necessarily require a team approach. Problems of multi-national ethnography are not new to the anthropological world, which has seen a shift from the classic 'hermetic' scenario of the 'primitive' cultures to a global system where cultures are more porous, and migrate, intermingle and recombine on an ongoing basis (Marcus, 1986). How to study these cultures becomes an increasingly complex problem, and likely one that cannot be sustained by the traditional notion of the lone embedded anthropologist.

This study revealed that emergence may be generated in one context, move to another context, and mutate within the particular constraints of the new 'world'. Studying these trans-world migratory patterns provides a glimpse of how the design of networked virtual worlds impacts the emergent behaviours that happen within and through them. This information is particularly useful to designers of multiplayer games and virtual worlds. The more conscious we are of the patterns that emerge from specific design features and technical constraints, the more able we will be to work with emergence as a 'material' of game design.

Each of the virtual worlds explored in this study embodies a set of values that form the substrate for the software's design. *Uru*, as an entirely synthetic 'fixed' world has a deeply rich storyline that creates a metaphor for software production. Its narrative, aesthetic, and spiritual subtext attracted a particular type of audience that was predisposed to certain types of behaviour. The value of mastery that was cultivated by the gameplay delivered a puzzle-solving, exploratory player who was intelligent, inquisitive and pro-active, and though *Uru* provided nominal player agency, players began to insinuate their own agency into the game world through emergent behaviour even though the world itself was relatively immutable.

Once *Uru* closed, these highly-skilled puzzle-solvers dispersed to find new homes. Players who gravitated towards *Second Life* sought an environment where they could re-create *Uru*. The flexible, in-game, collaborative construction tools coupled with Linden Lab's open policy of player creation (no company censorship or approval required) enabled them to achieve this goal with few impediments. Players adapted the *Uru* culture in *Second Life*, creating 'modern' Reltos, and eventually, joined with *Myst* players to create an entirely new *Myst/Uru* Age. *Second Life*'s creation tools and policies made it easier to collaborate on large-scale environments, and also to create content derived from *Uru* without fear of Linden Labs rejecting content due to presumed copyright violations.

There.com provided more of a 'ready-to-play' social environment for the TGU group, whose main interest was predominately social. TGU players gravitated towards *There.com* because it was easy to navigate, they liked the expressiveness of its avatars and its client-server architecture provided pleasing scenic views for avid explorers. Creation was more solitary, and more artefact- rather than environment-based with *There.com*'s policies precluding the level of *Uru* re-creation possible in *Second Life*. Motivated by the desire to create objects meaningful to their community, Uru artisans in *There.com* began by creating isolated artefacts and spaces that were derivative of *Uru* but eventually developed a hybrid Uruvian-Thereian style. Because it was not feasible to create an entire Age, for both technical and cultural reasons, Uruvians in *There.com* opted instead to take an 'emergent Age' approach through the propagation of *Uru*-like artefacts throughout *There.com*. Uru immigrants also liked the simpler, more controlled environment of *There.com*, preferring to avoid what they perceived as the seamier side of *Second Life*.

12.3 Contributing Factors to Emergence

This study demonstrates that there is a traceable connection between game and world design and social emergence in MMOWs. It identifies six factors in the propagation of emergent behaviour, which were outlined briefly at the beginning of this document. Each of these provides us with insight as to how emergence occurs in virtual worlds, and its implications in terms of design.

Fixed Synthetic vs. Co-Created Worlds

One of the key findings of this study is that virtual worlds exist along a spectrum ranging from fixed synthetic to co-created worlds. In either context, it was concluded that 'emergence happens', regardless of the world type, but can be promoted or hindered, whether by intent or by accident, by the game's features, flaws and bugs. Fixed synthetic worlds tend to fall into the category more properly defined as 'game', worlds with a goal and a formal structure for its achievement; they also tend to have a more fixed narrative structure. Co-created worlds are open-ended worlds to which players can make an active contribution; these tend to fall under the classification of 'social world' or 'metaverse' rather than 'game', although they often contain games. The distinction is based on the amount and types of agency players have in the world. In fixed synthetic worlds, players generally do not have affordances to physically alter the world, while in co-created worlds, they do. Thus, in co-created worlds, players are encouraged to contribute to the actual creation of the world, a design approach that leverages emergence as a production strategy. Regardless of which type of worlds players inhabit, evidence from this and other studies suggest that an inevitable pattern of emergence is that over time, players will come to feel they have 'rights' and to a certain respect, that they 'own' the world, especially if they have had a hand in its creation.

Communities of Play

The study joined with others to identify 'communities of play' as a relevant form of distributed, networked culture, worthy of study alongside more established forms of networked groups such as communities of practice and communities of interest. Group play style was found to be a marker of identity, and the study explored the role of group identity in facilitating trans-world immigration. Inter-world group migration creates the necessity for trans-ludic individual identities that move across multiple game worlds. Emergent behaviours of communities of play arise out of a combination of the proclivities of people who are attracted to a particular virtual world, and the intersection of their values, interests and skills with the world's design feature. Players also acquire certain skills that lead to mastery of certain play styles, which can be carried into other play ecosystems and translated into new play patterns and forms of game culture.

The Social Construction of Identity

Supporting the findings of previous research, the study found that individual identity is an 'intersubjective accomplishment' that develops through a process of social emergence. Here it was noted that the group identity frames the individual identity, and the group itself constructs both its collective identity and that of the individuals within it. An example of this social construction of individual identity could be found in the 'bottom-up leadership' style of the group, through the ways in which TGU's leaders grew into their leadership roles through transactions with and feedback from the play community.

Intersubjective Flow

A key finding of this study was the phenomenon of 'intersubjective flow', building on work by DeKoven and Csikszentmihalyi, (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, DeKoven, 1992a), a sociological reading of the deep engagement suggested by this psychological phenomenon. It would seem that 'people are addictive', (Lazzaro, 2004-2005) and in play communities, the line between the individual and social may blur as players push each other to higher levels of engagement. The study also concluded that intersubjective flow appears to be one of the drivers of emergent behaviour, and plays a major role both community play styles, and the social construction of individual identity.

Productive Play

The study challenged the traditional axiom that play is unproductive, and proposed the notion of 'productive play'. Especially in co-created worlds, productive play becomes a major engine for emergence, and prolific player-producers can play a significant role in emergent cultures. The creation of artefacts was identified an expression of social agency, promoted by feedback, manifested in part through in-world economies, thus encouraging player-producers to produce more. Over time, an emergent pattern could be identified in which productive players tended to move from a more derivative approach to migrating a game's culture into a different environment to feeling emboldened and equipped to begin creating their own original artefacts and content inspired by their game of origin. Thus fan culture morphs into the creation of original content. This also intersected with the notion that players crave self-determination, whether in the form of representation to game players, or by actually 'owning' the game themselves. In the case of the Uru Diaspora, this was manifest through the creation of the Atmosphere Hood by TGU, as well as the initiation of the *Until Uru* player-run server network.

Porous Magic Circles

This study clearly refutes the previously asserted imperviousness of the magic circle that bounds play in time and space from 'reality'. Instead, players migrate between magic circles, importing play patterns and identities with them. They can also mutate play patterns and then transport those mutations back into the original play context. Another form of emergences arises when play communities adapt to new play ecosystems, and when these play ecosystems adapt to them. Also introduced was the concept of the ludisphere, the aggregate of virtual play spaces that are connected together via the Internet, and the ways in which the Internet's multiple communication functions enable reality to leak into the virtual play space. Beyond the Internet and the computer, play styles derived in virtual space can be transposed into the real world.

These six contributing factors to emergent behaviours in games provide a framework with which to begin to engage with what might be called the 'material properties' of emergence as a component of game design. By beginning to identify where, why and how emergence occurs, while we cannot entirely control it, it may be possible to integrate its patterns into our design process. How this is to be done will be the subject of subsequent research.

> **Comments**
>
> Productive Play (other types of benefits)
>
> The word Therapeutic comes to mind instantly for the disabled in playing on a more level field in an avatar.
>
> Making friends from all over the world allows us to learn about others thoughts, customs and cultures as well as to share our own with no constraints from governments or media. I find this has brought me a better understanding of people.
>
> **Posted by: Lynn | January 29, 2006 at 09:48 PM**

12.4 Ages Beyond *Uru*[xiii]

As this study was drawing to a close in September of 2005, Cyan Worlds also announced that it would be drawing the final curtain over the world of *Myst*. Yet over the past year, through the various instantiations of *Uru* in other games, as well as new 'Ages' created by players, *Myst/Uru* now appears to have a life of its own. The appearance of 'Inara: The Clay Vessel Quest' in *Second Life*, Damanji's 'emergent' Ages in *There.com* attest to the fact that players are perfectly capable of taking on and expanding the *Myst/Uru* legacy.

In November of 2005, only two months after Cyan's announcement, the hacker group that had arranged the *Until Uru* player-run server system announced the beta release of the first Age built by *Uru* fans using their own home-brewed Age development tools. The granting of both server and content-creation rights to a fan community is an unprecedented move in the game industry, and illustrates the powerful role emergence plays in the dynamic between designers and players. It also illustrates that while players may feel powerless and at the mercy of corporations whose decisions may not always be in their best interest, they also have the power to exert their own agency through large-scale group emergent behaviour.

In March of 2006, Cyan opened its own shard of *Until Uru*: an exploratory that was a prelude to a re-launching of the game. At this writing, a new *Uru* beta test had just been announced. The parties involved in this re-launch have referenced this research in moving forward, impressed by the longevity and devotion of the *Uru* fan base, and inspired by the clear impact the game has had on 'real

culture' beyond the screen (the main evidence for which is this thesis). In a remarkable show of evidence for the impact of scholarship in Game Studies as decidedly NOT a waste of time, this funder has taken the scholarly treatment of *Uru* as evidence that a new improved version of *Uru Live*, integrating a number of new features to accommodate fan creativity (including Age-building tools) is both wanted by players (thus marketable), and useful to society more generally. Game on.

The ending has not yet been written.

—Atrus

Comments

The "real world" has become a difficult place to socialise. It isn't easy to meet people, friends and families are separated by great distances, stress levels are high and danger lurks. Virtual worlds bring people together over great distances from diverse backgrounds. For many, like myself, they become a place to blossom and live as we wish we could in the real world - they are what we wish the real world was.

We are, for the most part, denied play in the real world which increases our stress levels and keeps us at arms length from the society around us. Life has become too much "strictly business". The opportunity to play not only relieves those pressures but also fills in many of those empty spots we find in our hearts and souls.

Children no longer play innocent games. Winning and competitiveness are all that matters - gone is just having fun. There's more stress at a little league game than fun. Families rarely play together anymore. People are becoming more insulated and alone, violence is on the rise, family structure is disintegrating - we are, to some extent, going nuts as a society. I believe the absence of real play in our lives, as children and adults, is a major contributing factor.

I feel this is demonstrated most noticeably by people who had given up on life, had substance abuse problems or were borderline suicidal who have taken up playing in virtual worlds - they have found a reason for living and have turned their lives around.

Demand more play!

Posted by: Leesa | April 10, 2006 at 02:15 PM

12.5 Conclusion

It is appropriate that the game players who welcomed me as a researcher and sister player in their world, *our world*, provide many of the last statements in this part of the thesis argument. It is also appropriate that the research issues be summarised in conclusion.

This last posting by gamer Leesa raises some of the most significant issues to be addressed by Game Studies in the future. To Leesa's list I would add the following qualifications and additions:

Game play, when treated 'seriously' as an academic domain addressing one of the most prevalent and powerful social and cultural media of our times, can best be considered in the context of the everyday. Children, in all cultures, play games, pretend, take on roles, encounter imaginative worlds and move freely within them, without encouragement. Play is instinctual, until we are taught 'out of it'. In the words of Clive Barker, author of the groundbreaking text on *Theatre Games* (the most often cited guide to creating and maintaining roles and play methods) (Barker, 1977), 'play releases the memory of freedom and unselfconsciousness within us, from our pre-conscious childhood imaginative states: games appeal to the area of the memory that has pleasure in it.' (Barker et al., 1997)

It has been a pleasure to engage in this research. The process has been both fun and illuminating. The research has itself been an act of play, highlighting the notion of games research as a form of 'productive play'. This research also speaks for the growing importance of better understanding the role of play in culture, the role of games in media and the changing relationship of audiences to both. It also highlights Leesa's call for more play, suggesting a social movement in which adults are as free to play, explore alternate realities, alternative personas, and a shared space of the imagination.

From the perspective of Games Studies, this research promotes a high level of involvement in gameplay, and playful study of the impact of gaming, as part of the next generation of engaged, and productive, serious scholarship.

Book III

Being Artemesia:
My Life as an Avatar

'Being Artemesia' is a text about the process of finding and inhabiting the role of the scholar who wrote this thesis, in game. The text is comprised of a series of vignettes, intended to act as a supplement to Book II and to provide a behind-the-scenes view of the personal experiences and challenges faced during the process of this study. Different typefaces are used to express different 'voices'. Text in italics is excerpted from my research journal. Most of the other text is recalled from notes, or from events that were not recorded due to the emotional content.

Preamble: My Name is Artemesia

My name is Artemesia, also known as 'Art' and 'Arte'. I am an avatar.

My name inscribes my function.

The original Sanskrit word 'Artemisia' means 'the embodiment of a god on Earth'. Here is the definition of 'avatar' provided by the dictionary embedded in the word processor with which I am writing this text:

av·a·tar *n*

1. An incarnation of a Hindu deity in human or animal form, especially one of the incarnations of Vishnu such as Rama and Krishna
2. Somebody who embodies, personifies, or is the manifestation of an idea or concept
3. A movable three-dimensional image that can be used to represent somebody in cyberspace, for example, an Internet user

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I represent 'somebody' in cyberspace. But who(m)?

Technically, I belong to Celia Pearce. I am an instantiation, a manifestation of her: the human who writes a PhD thesis and instantiates herself in the game worlds about which she writes by making her presence felt through me. I am not her, yet I am not *not* her either. I am a version of her: perhaps Celia Pearce v 2.0. I come *from* her, so I must be a part of her psyche. Maybe I am one of her shards.

The only effective way to study avatars is to be(come) one. Yet being an avatar means taking a personal risk. Once you step into the world of avatars, you never know what you'll become. If the avatar is an extension of the 'self' then I am using my 'self' to do this investigation, so inevitably, the research also becomes an investigation *of* the self. But what is the 'self' of an avatar? Is Celia Pearce (Artemesia's) 'self' or...am I, Artemesia, her 'self'? And what do I mean by 'I' anyway? Am I a we, or are we an I? Am I her avatar, or is she mine?

Some people think that inhabiting an online world is a way of escaping from yourself. This is not the case; not in my case, and certainly not in the cases of those I study. Being an avatar means exploring the self as much as it means exploring others; more specifically, it means exploring the self *through* others. The other becomes the medium for exploration of the self.

There is a certain audacity in this process of embracing dual roles; an element of the grand experiment. Within the overall experiment, each individual experience is unique. I once heard another player say that at first he felt himself to occupy a different role than his avatar, but that over time, his avatar became more like him, and he became more like his avatar. In the words of another player: 'we create our avatars, and then our avatars create us.'

What does it mean to be mediated, to extend your 'self' into another form, to create and express yourself by means of a social prosthesis? To be mediated is to be transformed. Yet avatar play is not only transformative, but it is also uniquely social.

Take my story: the story of Artemesia.

When I was born, on 12 March, ten days before the birth of The Gathering of Uru in *There.com* (the game world that is the main subject of this study), I was the sole creation of my Creator, Celia Pearce. But now, over two years later, I have transformed into something else. As the group's ethnographer, I have been socially constructed by The Gathering of Uru. As the avatar has been socially constructed, so has the person, Celia Pearce. So the question becomes, did she make me or did they make me? And to what extent have I made her? Being me has changed her in ways she never anticipated. She made me to study others like me, and now she has become one of them, one of us, one of and one with me. At the same time, I have also served as an instrument for the social construction of Dr. Celia Pearce, PhD, for her transition into this new performative role.

One thing I have learned, *we* have learned, is that you can find out *nothing* about life on the screen unless you *go into the screen, and beyond the screen.*

Objectivity is often reified in research and science, but can you really learn about anything from studying it only objectively? Is objectivity even possible from a human perspective? Can we not learn more from studying multiple subjectivities including our own? There is no way 'study' an avatar's behaviour without placing yourself into that online space: without *being* one. Once you become an avatar, you are on a level playing field: the maker and the creator become one...and anything can happen. Emotions creep in. Friendships form. Nobody (no 'somebody') can be immune to the Avatar's spell.

As Artemesia, I exist in several forms. In *There.com* (my home), I am a graduate research student (my role) with a copper bob (my appearance). Like my brother and sister avatars, I have physical attributes inspired by the prevalence of Disney cartoons and the pervasive Barbie doll aesthetic; though my maker (Celia) gave me a shot of realism, with my smaller than 'average' (for Barbie) breasts. In *Second Life*, I appear as a pirate (my role) with ruddy dreadlocks (my appearance) who lives on a galleon nestled in a cove. In *Lineage, EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft,* I am a mage (my role) with a fair complexion and a red bob (my

appearance); here, my identity is constructed largely of powers encoded into the software: I rely on spells and my wits to conquer monsters and protect myself from harm.

When I 'log off' of these worlds, when I untransform, or retransform, from Artemesia to Celia, Artemesia pops off the screen. The screen image of my various 'mes' dissolves like a bubble, but Artemesia still exists inside Celia: she is still part of the complex 'me' that is both Celia and Artemesia. Each of the 'shes' is a ghost that haunts the rest of the complex 'me'. Even when Artemesia rests, when all of herselves rest, disengaged from all the online worlds at once, the essence of Artemesia still lingers somewhere, nowhere but present in memory and impression, but dormant, asleep, in a dream state. Perhaps my life as Artemesia is contained within Celia's dream, or vice versa. I, as Artemesia, am also present to others when I am resting from the screen. I am remembered and referred to and imagined by, and therefore in some sense 'real' for those who have seen and played with me online. I have a sense akin to what my friend and colleague Katherine Milton calls 'cognitive haunting' (Milton, 2006): the lingering sense of the alternative persona. We who inhabit avatars all know each other in this way. We can hold multiple identities both within ourselves and in our conceptions of each other.

I am as far away as I ever was from knowing what this all means. But I can say that it is much richer and deeper than most people even suspect that a deep role play experience can be. These words are the voice of the avatar of my avatar, the extension of the extension. I can do my best to explain, but you can never really know until you do it yourself.

Note: The following text combines recollections (plain text) and Artemesia's diary entries (italics) describing personal experiences and subjective perspectives during the research process.

Finding *Uru* (March-April 2004)

One of the first days I spent exploring the terrain of *There.com*, in March of 2004, I came upon a kind of Moroccan-style pavilion on a sandy beach. There was a fountain in the centre, and off to the side were four people playing spades. By their nametags, I could see their names were Ember, Daisy, Teddy and Clousseau. This was in the days before the voice feature was added to *There.com,* so communication took place via text that ascended from our heads in pastel-coloured cartoon bubbles. These people were very nice, friendly, funny, fun loving and open. They were horsing around a lot, and at one point, Clousseau got up on the spades table and started dancing. They were among the first people in *There.com* who I put on my Buddy List.

Around that time, I was trying to identify the type of emergent behaviour that I wanted to study for my PhD project. I knew I wanted to find something that showed large-scale emergence, e.g., hundreds of people engaging in group behaviours that were outside the formal structure of the game. One of the early candidates for the study was the mafia sub-culture in *The Sims Online* (TSO). I had heard and read that TSO had a thriving culture modeled after mafia movies and TV programs like *The Sopranos*, and that players involved in this scene were engaged in a variety of mob-related activities in-world, such as extortion, protection money, as well as some of the game's 'legitimate' businesses, like casinos, night clubs and pizza parlors.

When I logged on to investigate, I saw signs of the mafia culture everywhere. From the aerial view of Alphaville, I could see numerous houses, casinos and pizza joints with names from mafia lore, like Gambino and Soprano. However, on closer inspection, I found that most of the houses were empty. I finally entered one of the mob houses, which appeared to be some kind of telephone solicitation business. Players sat at a bank of telephones making calls. Whenever they made a sale, you could hear the *ka-ching* of a cash register. When they finished their workday, they stopped at a desk where a woman who was apparently in charge gave them their cut of the day's take. I made an attempt to communicate with them, but got no response. After wandering around for some time, I realised that whatever had happened here was well past its heyday and most of the people involved in the TSO mafia were no longer in the game. This naturally led to the next question: where had everybody gone?

I logged back into *There.com*, where I remembered seeing someone in a 'TSO Refugee' T-Shirt. A group search revealed several groups of *Sims Online* 'refugees', the largest of which had about 800 members. When I looked up Zach, who headed up the group, I noticed that he used a picture of his TSO avatar in the real life section of his profile, and that in creating his *There.com* avatar, he had used the same name and tried to approximate the appearance of his avatar from TSO. This was my first glimpse of inter-game immigration and persistent trans-virtual identities.

I contacted Zach and he invited me to the regular Wednesday night meeting at the TSO clubhouse in *There.com*. At the meeting, I told the group of about five or six people that I was a researcher and was interested in learning more about their immigration from TSO; they were very forthcoming, and clearly one of the aims of this get-together was to discuss their different experiences in online worlds. When I asked them why they left TSO, one said 'because I was tired of greening' (meaning the activities such as eating, resting, socializing, washing and using the bathroom that keep your health and happiness monitors in the green rather than in the red). Others complained that it was too much work: in order to earn money, players had to do mundane jobs, such as the phone solicitation or food service. Another player said that he had found in *There.com* everything he had hoped for but *not* found in TSO, namely a social environment. Most of the players at this meeting had, like Zach,

transported their TSO identities into *There.com* by using the same names and attempting to re-create their avatars. In the course of the discussion, one of the players said something which at the time seemed like an offhand comment, but which was to set the course of my research, and my life, for the next two years.

'If you think we're interesting, you should talk to the Uru people.'

I had heard of *Uru*, had heard its designer Rand Miller give a presentation of it at E3, the video game convention. I had even managed to get an invitation to the beta test, but had never ended up playing. Zach gave me the names of some of the Uru people. Among them were the four people I had met playing spades in the Moroccan pavilion.

Thus began my adventure with the Uru Diaspora.

Early Encounters with the Uru Diaspora in *There.com* (April-May 2004)

One of the first contacts I have made is with Lynn, the Deputy Mayor of The Gathering of Uru in There.com. *She and others tell me about the history of the group, how they were formed in* Uru, *which then closed, how they decided they wanted to say together, and so the bulk immigrated into* There.com. *One of the group members is building a replica of* Uru *in Adobe Atmosphere, and the group is hoping that once that is done, they can leave* There.com *and make the 'Atmosphere Hood' their primary home.*

In one conversation, Uruvians tell me they had to repeatedly move before settling at their current locale. They were concerned that each move would harm the group's cohesion, but it seems like just the opposite is happening. Each move seems to make them progressively more determined both to stay together and to stay in There.com, *at least until another more permanent option can be found.*

Meanwhile, they have set up their own Island, run by Leesa, the group's mayor and founder. Her house is located at one tip of the Island; at the other is The Gathering of Uru Community Centre. I now realise that that early encounter I had with Uruvians took place at the community centre when it was at a different location. Adjacent to the Community Centre is the Library, run by Nature_Girl. Here I find links to a number of web pages and videos showing the last days of Uru. *There is much documentation of the last night, including photos of avatars holding hands, the final screen saying 'There seems to be a problem with your connection,' and an image of Leesa saying 'I love you'. It's quite amazing that there is so much documentation. I've heard a handful of versions of this story thus far, and I expect I shall hear many more. I get a chill each time I hear it. It is obvious from the*

documentation and my conversations that this was a very traumatic experience and the emotions are still quite raw.

Black Friday (May-June 2004)

On May 21, *There.com* announced that it was redirecting its focus and although public servers would stay open, the software would no longer be marketed or updated as an active product line. In the preceding months, a number of people had already left due to a growing perception that *There.com* was a 'sinking ship'.

This announcement was a pivotal moment in the life of *There.com* as well as the survival of the Uruvian refugees it hosted. On the one hand, *There.com* needed subscribers more than ever; on the other hand, this type of announcement tends to lead in a drop-off in subscriptions. It seems that there is a feedback loop in which the more people who are present in the game the more people will enter and stay; conversely, if the population begins to wane, people will tend to log on less and stay for shorter periods. As one player told me, 'when I log on, if I don't see any of my friends logged on, then I leave.' This illustrates the way feedback operates in groups; people tend to follow trends.

Following this announcement, responding to what was described in forums as the 'sky is falling' perspective, a number of players left the game. Another faction, including TGU, took a more counter-intuitive tack, which was to *stay*. They recognised that staying, and even recruiting new players would actually *help* the situation, and that by leaving they would only be aiding and abetting in *There.com*'s demise; it became a self-fulfilling philosophy. These players recognised that they had a certain amount of power, that by *staying* en masse, they could potentially avert yet another disaster.

The Uru people of course had been through this already. Some left at this point, but a significant number were quite passionate about avoiding a repeat of the Ubi/Cyan scenario, and it was through their efforts and those of a number of other died-in-the-wool members (many of whom, incidentally, had been beta testers), that *There.com* ultimately survived the summer. It seems in all these worlds there is an ongoing tension between corporate governance and players' insistence on self-determination. This very much parallels the situation in LambdaMOO in the late 1990s, and it seems to be a recurring pattern. The more reflexive or sophisticated players appear to have an understanding of their power as a group; they realise that they can talk with their feet (in other worlds, with their money) and that sometimes that means staying rather than going.

I also find it interesting how at-odds corporate priorities are with the core objectives of an online community. Although companies claim that they are all about the community, in the end, if they

cannot maintain the bottom line or add value for their investors, all these Utopian ideals go right out the window. In the end, *There.com*, and *Uru* for that matter, is really only a business, isn't it?

Leesa and Revelation's Wedding *(Logged in from Haslemere, Surrey, UK, 17 July 2004)*

I have been to many weddings of all kinds, and was amazed by how much Leesa and Revelation's wedding felt like being at a 'real' wedding. Although a real world wedding requires much more preparation for the guests, other than that, on an emotional level, there was no distinction. It was also clear that a great deal of preparation had been done not only by the bride and groom but by their friends as well, so it really had the sense of a major event.

The only Uru *tradition observed was the presence of the Uru fountain at the centre of the area where the reception was held. This is a recent design by TGU member Damanji based on the fountain in* Uru*; apparently it was common to play and disport within the fountain, so the creation of this object seems very significant for the community. It is very much a social mechanism that they value. An Uru fountain has also been installed at the Community Centre on Yeesha Island. There was a genuine sense of celebration. I observed and photographed a number of people playing around in the fountain during the reception; and people seemed to enjoy the fountain in particular. At any given time, there were 6-10 people on top of or inside it.*

Perhaps more relevant to the research was the meaning of this particular wedding for the participants. The chapel where the ceremony took place was completely packed. For the TGU community, this was more than just an in-game wedding; it was a royal wedding. Leesa is, for all intents and purposes, the Queen of TGU. In fact, it was pretty much de rigueur for everyone in the community, including me, to attend.

The ceremony itself took no more than a half an hour. One challenge to my picture taking was that as more avatars entered the chapel, they began to degrade into 'blockheads'. These are low-polygon models that replace avatars in high-traffic areas, so-called because of their cube-shaped heads. Naturally, this became a topic of discussion. As I often say, lag and related technical problems have become the 'weather' of cyberspace. So it was if it was raining, I suppose, in avie terms. And just as would be the case had it rained during a real-life wedding, it impaired the experience somewhat, although I think the basic emotional content remained unchanged. If anything, this glitch just reinforced the constant frustration with There.com *and its technical problems.*

As Deputy Mayor of TGU, Lynn was the obvious person to officiate. The vows were not unlike typical contemporary self-authored wedding vows; however, based on the fact that There.com *was mentioned numerous times, coupled with the knowledge that the bride and groom had not met in real life, it*

seemed very clear that the commitment they were making was, at least for now, contained to the game. I've noticed with a limited sampling thus far that in-game commitments do not always translate into rl relationships. Zaire, a TSO refugee in There.com, *told me she divorced three in-game husbands because they wanted to meet her in real life. It will be interesting to see what happens with Leesa and Revelation.**

The significance of the wedding for the community could be clearly seen by how people were dressed. The men were wearing tuxedos, and the women wore glamorous outfits and formal attire. Some used the opportunity to change outfits frequently (a way to gain 'fashionista' points in the game). I did not notice anyone wearing a Yeesha costume, however. In general, the TGU people don't wear their 'Yeesha' in public. It's more just something they use privately, but I think with the exception of that one time I photographed Leesa and Lynn wearing them, I rarely see anyone wearing a Yeesha in day-to-day interactions.

I also should mention the photo album, which I posted last night. When I asked Leesa if I could photograph the wedding for my research, she said 'Sure' and followed up with a request that be the official wedding photographer. I agreed to do that; unfortunately, due to technological ineptitude, I managed to lose many of the pictures, but was able to save a few. Most of the photos from the ceremony showed everyone as blockheads, but I was able to get really great pictures of the reception.

(*Leesa and Revelation did eventually meet and became real-life partners.)

***Until Uru* (August – November 2004)**

***Uru* Revisited**

I learned last week that on August 9, a group of Uru hackers made an arrangement with Cyan to set up a system of player-run Uru *servers. Experienced players seemed unenthused about this because they also want new content, and this will just be the old version of* Uru *running on fan-owned servers. This has precipitated a debate among TGUers as to how this will impact the Uru community in* There.com. *There are also some shifts going on with the group; it appears that Uru refugees are spending more time hanging out with Thereians and less time in* Uru *areas. Correspondence this week went down indicating that Leesa was thinking of shutting down Yeesha Island. This was averted by Wingman who stepped in to contribute to the rent. A concerted effort is now underway to come up with new ideas for encouraging Uru refugees to spend more time there.*

Fear of *Uru*

I received my copy of Uru *so I can play* Until Uru *on the player-run servers. I haven't touched it though. I am finding myself resistant to trying it. On the one hand, it scares me because I worry that it will draw all the* Uru *immigrants out of* There.com *and back into* Uru. *I guess this is what they really want, but at the same time, I think their new 'hybrid' community in* There.com *is so much more interesting. It also concerns me because of the ramifications it may have for my research.*

But there is another, more subtle anxiety at play: I think I have really enjoyed the fact that my only experience of Uru *is vicarious, through players' stories, documentation and fan culture. I've seen simulations of* Uru *and its artefacts, but I've never actually seen the original. To me* Uru *is sort of like the Land of Canaan, it's a 'social' imaginary (Klein, 1997). I guess I am clinging to the model of* Uru *that exists in my mind from the retelling. It's very irrational, but I know I have to get past it. It's absolutely critical to the research that I observe the study participants in their 'native' context.*

Entering *Uru*

I am finally sitting down to play Until Uru. *I've turned all the lights in the room down and surrounded my desk with lit candles. This is kind of a big deal. I'm actually a little embarrassed about all the ritual I'm going through. If my housemate walked in, she would think I was insane. I'm meeting a group in-world who is going to walk me through the first Age, which I gather is somewhat complicated.*

Naturally, the first thing I have to do is create my avatar. Choices are somewhat limited, but I went for a look that approximates my look in There.com, *I guess the reverse of what the Uru immigrants had done. I went for a similar colour palette to my clothes in* There.com, *mostly teal tones.*

The game actually starts in a desert, which I had seen in some of the web images from the Uru Library in There.com. *I had to explore this area for a little while to get 'journey clothes,' which apparently Yeesha, the main character in the game, has left for us.*

I descend via a ladder into the infamous 'cleft,' a crevice in the desert that looks strangely womb-like. I explore the cleft by crossing bridges, descending more ladders; the bridges sometimes break, dumping me unharmed into puddles at the bottom of the cleft (which is not that deep). I can use the broken bridges as ladders to climb up to different ledges. I have to solve some puzzles in order to get bits of narrative of the game, mostly conveyed (albeit obtusely) by a kind of hologram of Yeesha, who I recognise immediately by her costume! I find my way into a cave where I see a book on a pedestal. When I go to take it, I am teleported to a tiny island floating in a cloud bank. I walk into a small adobe hut nestled against a large rock; I'm not sure but I have a hunch it's my Relto. I can go to the

avatar design interface by going into the closet. I guess the book I picked up was the Relto Linking Book, which I now appear to be wearing on my belt.

Making my way to the TGU hood in Uru *involves a complex procedure of transport using linking books and the Nexus. I'm in the hood! The first thing I see is the fountain which looks exactly like the ones in* There.com *and the Atmosphere Hood. Going upstairs. I can see the infamous Egg Room, with the floating 'egg room egg'. It's interesting to see these things in their original contexts.*

D'ni Land, Shorah Island, *Second Life*

Visiting the D'ni area in Second Life, *I feel like Alice in Wonderland. It was strange going to* Until Uru, *because this whole* Uru *story is a narrative of simulations within simulations within simulations. Seeing the 'real' simulation of* Uru *itself was amazing, especially after seeing the 'homage' versions in* There.com *and Atmosphere. I now recognise all the icons. There is a shared cultural meaning to these things; in the beginning I did not know what they meant—the eggs, the fountain, the books on pedestals. Now I am beginning to understand.*

The Uru *world and its progeny are rich with layers of meaning... and now, inside* Second Life, *my God! they have totally re-created the game! I think it would have been less amazing had I not seen the 'real'* Uru *hood already, although it's pretty stunning even if you don't know what it is. But to see how close a replica this is, how true they stayed to the original. You can see that they went to great effort. They must have had to do drawings, maps, and floor plans. I mean it is EXACTLY the same.*

I am taking a lot of pictures, but oddly, have not run into anyone. This is strange because I always find some Uruvians in There.com, *whereas here, it is eerily empty. I feel like I am in the deserted ruin of D'ni Ae'gura...*

They have added the crates and traffic cones and other Uru *ephemera. It's remarkable. They even made the Heek room.*

Wow.

The DRC Builders in *Second Life*

One terrific feature of Second Life *is the ability to find out the creator of objects. By checking who owned the land on D'ni Island, I was able to track down its creators. They are a smallish group, but apparently worked diligently to re-create* Uru *here. Apparently they built the entire thing once, then tore it all down, and started over. It's incredibly impressive. I've visited and interviewed them a couple of times. I was also able to tag along on a tour they gave to some SLers who stumbled into it inadvertently. They seem to really enjoy taking people around, explaining what everything is, and talking about* Uru. *As with the TGUers, they've been extremely responsive to me and my research. I wish I could spend more time with them, but it's not conceivable to follow both groups concurrently.*

***Uru* Again**

Although I will be meeting Lynn and company tomorrow, I decided to go in tonight on my own to feel my way around and also take some pictures. This seems especially relevant after visiting the Uru *area in* Second Life, *which I would not have understood in the least without having been in Uru already. I think the sequence of my checking out the world is relevant because although I don't think it is a problem that I was in* There.com *first, I think the SL environment would have been less meaningful to me without realising how accurate a replica it was of 'the hood,' the Relto and other areas in* Uru.

Now I am in the DRC (D'ni Restoration Council) hood. All the hoods look the same. Everything in Uru *has a meaning, and part of the mystery for me is finding the connections between what is here and what is in the other instantiations. For example, I see a firefly, some mushrooms, elements I have also seen in the* Uru *areas in* There.com. *Now I begin to understand at least where they come from and what they mean. My sense is that EVERYTHING has a meaning. Some of those meanings are encoded in the actual game, but some have accumulated after the fact, created by the players themselves. For example, I'm not sure if the fountain had a meaning until people began to play in it.*

(I don't understand why semioticians aren't studying this.)

I jump into the fountain, just to see what it's like.

After a couple of tries, I manage to get on the top.

This is very interesting from a spatial storytelling perspective, because these spaces tease, they suggest certain things, but it is difficult to interpret. One feels like an archaeologist. Without understanding the D'ni culture, it is hard to say what all these spaces are actually for; I know what some of them are because the Uruvians have told me. But still it is often detective work.

Me and My Shadow: First Presentation (31 October 2005 – *See Appendix B for Video*)

I gave my first public presentation in situ at the State of Play conference in New York. I had decided to start giving presentations in-world, initially because I thought I wasn't going to be able to make one of the London seminars, so I suggested it as a way to be able to participate. However, as soon as the thought popped into my head, I realised of course I should *always* present in-world, in character. I wasn't able to do the London presentation in September due to some technical problems, so this was my inaugural presentation.

Since Artemesia's primary mode of communication is text, I decided to give the entire presentation in character via text. I toured Yeesha Island and discussed the migration from *Uru* to *There.com*, and showed a few examples of player-made *Uru* artefacts. Because it was hard for some people at the back of the room to read my text bubbles, I had Mary Flanagan, a member of the SMARTlab Ph.D. cohort who happened to be there, stand out in the audience and read the text, basically serving as my 'voice'. I, Celia, said nothing. In fact I kept entirely silent throughout the presentation. At the end, I took some questions as myself, but the cool part was that people started directing their questions to Artemesia. When this happened, I felt I had, to at least some extent, succeeded.

In reality, I think the presentation had mixed success. One thing I realised immediately was how slow the pace of text communication is relative to speech. This is not as noticeable in-world, because of course you lose track of time; but when presenting in a real-world context, I was all too painfully aware that the whole enterprise seemed to be dragging on. It represented an abrupt change in pacing, which may have been refreshing for some, but really annoying for others, although a number of people came up to me afterward and seemed to enjoy the experiment. T.L. Taylor was there and she, in particular, seemed to understand what I was trying to do. I think one of the challenges of trying to do this type of experiment in a conference context is that people are accustomed to certain conventions. I can probably get away with this in a situation where are more 'artists,' but here, most of the participants were lawyers and academics and a few game designers.

One thing I noticed right away was how nervous I was. On the one hand, I had a kind of buffer of the avatar speaking for me. But at the same time I was very self-conscious; part of this was because I was doing a pretty risky experiment; but the other reason was that I realised that being an avatar is in reality a very private thing. We seldom do this with anyone else in the room, and even then, the other person is usually in-world as well. Doing it in public made me feel very exposed in an odd way. I also think that introducing my avatar persona into a professional context may have also made me feel vulnerable, even though she is a 'professional' avatar so to speak. This is also one of these situations that you really can't rehearse; practicing the presentation on my own (which I did) prepared me in no way for getting up in front of several hundred people and laying my avatar bare for all to see.

The Crisis (November 2005)

A series of vignettes over a period of days:

I come into *There.com* and am getting an odd response from people. As soon as I show up, people start acting strange or in some cases leaving.

I get an IM from Wingman saying 'Jeeze, what did you WRITE about us?' I mention to him that I have been trying to IM Leesa and Lynn but have not been able to get a response. He mentions that he is avoiding a meeting, implying that's where they all are.

I am on a hoverboat with Wingman and some others. When I show up, Ember jumps off the boat. Everyone else wonders where she went. I send her an IM to ask if she is okay, and she responds by saying 'Fuck off, Art.'

I get some email from Raena via Koalanet. I don't know her well, but had some discussions with her early on. One of the emails says: 'Are you all right? Do you need anything?' I have no idea what she is talking about. Later, I get an IM from her in *Until Uru* saying 'tristan [sic] is really a nice guy…he's not as bad as he sounds.'

I finally connect with Raena in *Until Uru*. At first what she is saying makes no sense to me, but then in the course of the conversation, it comes out that she is referring to something on the Koalanet forum.

I immediately log on to have a look. A new thread has been created called 'Artemesia, the Researcher'. The first post is the article in the Orange County Register. From what I am able to discern, the article was both posted on the forum and read aloud in-world, probably one of the days I was getting strange reactions from people and shortly before the incident with Ember. Following the article is a firestorm of postings. A few excerpts:

> *As we discussed that night, Arte either did not ask enough questions and is ignorant of the facts or was forced to "dumb down" her research into sound bites that the newspaper reporter would accept. A third possibility, that the facts are intentionally distorted to support some hypothesis or personal bias. —Raena*

As a Biological Anthropologist who had to study Cultural Anthropology and Sociology, I am anything but impressed with Arte's work so far or her article. If I were her PhD professor I'd be sending her back to the drawing board.

One thing you learn as a researcher is that observing tells you little and can be quite inaccurate. You have to become one with your subjects in order to understand and properly study them. Arte's arms-length approach gave her little insight into TGU, let alone on-line gaming, and her article shows her ignorance of her subject.

If this is any indication of her thesis, I certainly wouldn't expect her to be awarded a PhD. This may sound severe, but I take academics very seriously and leave no room for niceties. — Leesa

ART, if you are gonna suffer the art, you DO the art!!

Don't pussyfoot around and pretend you are, or you may not be?? in the game.

Commitment, is the word.
You have come here saying you are doing some high degree in cyber whatsits.

Dont give a damm, could'nt give 2 flying hooks to a bats wing.

What you said in your so called REPORT is a load of codswallop and worth about as much as a pound of stinky tripe in a barrel of salt.

If you get your degree, pass or whatever then I'll be a monkeys uncle, coz
you sure dont deserve it.

You say you won't become part of the community coz it may or may not influence your decision, so what?

We are the community!! and do we need you?
You say you need to observe us, and why? to get your degree, so what do we care?

Like were under the microscope.

No Arte your so far up your own articular pericularnolus, you cant see, its an honour to have met us. Coz were the best thing to have happened to you and you can't see it.

So when you get your short sighted piece of paper are you going to look forward to another 3 yrs of scutinising some other poor sod, to pass yourself off as some so called analyst?

And plz do us a favour gal, don't come knocking here again, coz you may not get the TGU welcome again.

We were willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, but you have just so much got our backs up, you dont know how much that piece of paper cost us!!

We are bigger, so much bigger than you could ever be, but dont take pride in what you've done, coz in future ppl like you wont be so welcomed. You just get the future ppl who are genuinely interested a bad name.

I may also note, you can post a reply here anytime, but I dare say you have got your poorly recognised, precious piece of paper and so won't.

have fun. —Tristan

There is more. A lot more. Most are like those above, but with a small handful of people wondering what the fuss is. I feel a horrible sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I make contact with Tristan in *Until Uru* and end up sitting in one of his Ages with him, D'evon and Petrova for a long time talking about what happened. The outcome is actually pretty good. Raena was right; he really is a nice guy. I really need to set things right with Leesa and Lynn.

I send an email to Wingman telling him I want to somehow patch things up and could he please help me out. It's clear that he really doesn't want to get involved, but he reluctantly agrees anyway and sets up a meeting with Lynn and Leesa a few days later.

The day of the planned meeting, by an unfortunate coincidence, I have a horrible day at work. I am informed by management that 'people' at my job (although I am never told who) are angry with me about the article in the Orange County Register. The complaints are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, I am criticised for failing to mention my department; on the other, since the research has nothing to do with my job, I am criticised for mentioning my employers. I'm also criticised for calling myself a 'researcher,' which apparently, according to management anyway, I am not. Needless to say I've had about enough of this article by now.

I get home from work and feel so beaten down that I end up missing the meeting with Leesa and Lynn. This only exacerbates the problem and now Wingman is furious with me and will no longer intervene on my behalf.

15 December 2004

It has been a hard week. I have tried to connect with Uru people for the past couple of days, and including some failed attempts, was not able to. This afternoon I was on for an interview with a member of There.com*'s staff, who did not show up. I noticed Lynn was on so I IM'd her. She was working on building something but agreed to come and talk with me. We talked for quite some time, maybe an hour or more. I was glad we got a chance to talk, because most of what she told me was not at all what I expected.*

She started by saying she wasn't angry with me, and that I was free to say whatever I wanted about the community. I tried to clarify that not all of what was in the article represented anything I said or would ever say. In any case the first and perhaps most surprising issue was the fact that she said Leesa is angry with me because I don't use voice. Lynn explained that a lot of TGU people cannot use a keyboard comfortably, due to a handicap or repetitive stress disorder, arthritis or other conditions. I hadn't realised this was such an important issue, but having just talked to Wingman, who admonished me about it as well, I had gone off to a private place and tried to get my voice working prior to meeting with Lynn.

So when Lynn mentioned this, I said absolutely I have no trouble at all with that. She said it was okay to use text chat when doing interviews, but when I'm hanging around with the group, I should use voice. I'm not sure how this cultural convention slipped by me. It may have been in part due to the fact that voice was introduced after I began my study, so for the first couple of months, we only had text. Also, I had had trouble getting my sound to work, so I hadn't been able to hear most of the chat either; and since I hadn't heard anyone talking about it, did not realise it had become so important to the group.

The second surprise was that Leesa didn't understand my research techniques, and she felt I was 'observing them from afar'. This really surprised me because I felt I had been making a great effort to be as unobtrusive as possible, but I guess she was looking for a deeper level of engagement. I suppose this is a question/ challenge from the perspective of anthropology which I need to investigate further, but since this is an 'experiment' it may turn out that some variation of 'going native' is exactly what is called for. The funny thing is that I feel drawn to the community in a personal way because their core values resonate with me.

Lynn also recommended that I post on Koalanet, maybe starting with a response to the current thread, and then initiating another. She said something else that was interesting: 'You are always asking us questions, but we never get to ask you questions.' This may have been what people meant by

saying they felt 'under the microscope'. In some way I felt like I wanted to let them do all the talking... but clearly the TGUers have a different perspective on this.

In any case, the conversation was very helpful. Lynn is wonderfully candid and direct. She is really a fantastic person and the more I get to know her the more I appreciate her. She told me she has a spinal injury and is in a wheelchair and that is why it is uncomfortable for her to type. She also said it was okay to do my interviews with text, but I said no I can take notes... it's fine. She also brought over Uno and sort of interviewed him for me, switching to text to do so. That was interesting and also demonstrated for me some subtleties of online etiquette... even though she prefers speech, she will type on some occasions. In Uno's case, as Lynn explained, he feels more comfortable with text, because he is both shy and not a native English speaker, so everyone accommodates his preference for typing.

The Social Construction of the Ethnographer

Last night I was reading Life on the Screen, the part about multi-user worlds, and found myself feeling uncomfortable with Turkle's focus on the individual: she describes people's online experiences as if they are entirely self-determined (Turkle, 1995). This is a key point I see with this research. My observation is that people's identities online are socially constructed...by the group, not by the individual. I am beginning to realise that what is happening at this moment is that the group wants to socially construct me as well, in the same way they have constructed each other. In a sense they want to have more engagement/involvement with what I'm doing. I'm totally game for this.

At the same time, I think in my focus on the social, I may have inadvertently neglected the individual. I had no idea Lynn was in a wheelchair. How did I miss that? It seems like an important detail. Even though I've tried to privilege online identities, maybe I need to integrate offline identities more because really they are not completely bounded, not completely irrelevant to the online identity. Lynn's rl avatar is a person sitting in front of a computer in a wheelchair. Her game avatar is a persona, an extension of her. I am totally convinced of this more than ever. The avatar is a social extension, prosthesis of sorts, but perhaps because one can be together and alone at the same time (a unique property of virtual worlds), there is also something about the individual that I have been missing. My sense of the cathartic experience of bursting forth from the isolated and sublime world of Myst, to a parallel Myst world where all the other Myst people have been existing all these years, each alone in his or her own encounter with the D'ni and the Ages... that seems like a profound experience that has shaped and formed this group.

It is hard to know what is important. Maybe one needs to just assume everything is important until it proves itself otherwise.

Or maybe everything really is important after all.

In some way I think I am falling in love with the TGU people, which is something I am afraid of in a way... but then on the other hand... I suppose it is inevitable. You have to fall in love with your research subjects at some level, even if it is unscientific. Or is it? Can one really learn from something one doesn't love deeply? My friend Mary the molecular biologist is in love with DNA. Maybe Jane Goodall and Diane Fosse have it right—you cannot know what it is like to be inside something unless you develop some level of intimacy with it. Maybe that is what Leesa is saying, and I think her critique of me and those of the others are valid. I have been too much of a passive observer. I need to make a commitment to engage with the group on a deeper level.

First Koalanet Post (15 December 2004)

I made my first post on the Koalanet forum. I wrote it and rewrote it several times. I tried to explain my position, to clarify that the article was not my 'report' as some believed, but that it was by a journalist, and that the comments they found offensive were not my findings but her own interpretation. I also welcomed criticism, said that I was planning to modify my approach based on their feedback, and appreciated any other further comments they had. As Lynn suggested, I then made a new thread in another section of the forum, sort of starting a clean slate. This is where I will post a link to the participant blog once the dang thing is done.

It was a hard letter to write, but I'm hoping that it will help move things in a positive direction. I realise that a number of the core methodological assumptions I made were just wrong. Trying to keep a low profile, trying to avoid having any impact on the group... well clearly it didn't work, and it resulted in my being viewed as an untrustworthy outsider. In some way perhaps its presumptuous for me to have worried so much about my potential impact on them; it's very clear that their impact on me has been far greater.

Buggy Boogie/ Buggy Polo (28 December 2004)

This week marked a turning point in terms of my involvement with the group. To a certain extent, I feel like I resisted the temptation to become more involved, but due to their own insistence, I am trying to find opportunities to do so. It seems like one of the biggest complaints they had was that I wasn't 'a part of them'. On the one hand, as an 'ethnographer', am I supposed to be? I was sort of

taking this approach of being a (somewhat) passive observer. And this may have been easier with a different group. But the Uruvians are smart, challenging, mature. In the same way that they took an active hand in transplanting their game culture to other worlds, they are also taking an active hand in my research.

A week or two ago I was privy to a series of conversations that gave me some real insight into TGU's decision-making process. Clousseau had an idea for an event, which I was subsequently able to witness him pitching to Leesa. She didn't say much, just listened. This was my first public appearance with voice, which everyone duly noted as significant, even though I really didn't say much. I was interested in how the whole situation transpired: Clousseau's idea was to have a huge buggy convoy from the frontier zone (Terokh Jeruth), to Yeesha Island. The goal was to find ways to get people to spend more time on Yeesha Island, which is now seriously underutilised. The idea was that they would drive en masse from one area to the other, arrive at Yeesha Island for some game-playing, and then conclude with a floor show/talent show at the new Starry Night bar, which was recently added to Yeesha Island. Clousseau was quite enthusiastic about this idea, and Leesa didn't seem to have any major objections. Clousseau's aim was to do something that would help build community cohesion. This seems to be a high priority with some of the key group members, and it seems to be Leesa's main priority. It really came across in this interaction, by the way, how shy she is. But she has a kind of silent authority. As I've got to know them, I've found that Lynn does most of the talking, whether as an intermediary, or even in interviews. But yet Leesa's wisdom is highly respected by the group, and maybe the fact that she does little talking is part of that.

Within a few days an invitation was issued. For this event, Wingman also invented a new sport called buggy polo. Over the course of the week I eavesdropped on more of the planning process. As is often the case, they planned twin events, one for the European crowd on Monday from noon to six and one on Tuesday for the US crowd from 7-10 or something on those lines. Because it's taking place the week between Christmas and New Year, this is something of a holiday celebration.

I attended both events, which were formatted exactly the same way—Clousseau had the entire thing scripted and timed to a tee. Everyone gathered at the Terokh Jeruth frontier zone. Buggies were strewn about and everyone was encouraged to hop on one, even if it wasn't theirs. (This is a somewhat common practice, avoiding the potential problem of some people not owning vehicles). Clousseau invited me to ride with him, which I did for a while (kind of interesting that he did invite me; I will take that as significant as well). On the first day, I rode with him for a while, and then got into my jet pack because I really wanted a better view, and the view as a passenger from a buggy is very limited. It was exacerbated by the fact that we were at the front, so there was no way for me to see the group from the buggy. No way to look backwards. Really annoying. So I got out and followed

on the jetpack, and got some great shots. I didn't really know very many of the people there, although I got to meet some folks that I had heard a lot about from the European community; and saw some European players I had met in Until Uru. *Played spades, which was a significant leap for me. I play very infrequently, but got really into it, and ended up actually doing relatively well for someone who sucks at cards. My teammate and I actually won a round of spades, something I had never accomplished before.*

At the event for the U.S. contingent, I ended up riding with someone I didn't know, which was fun, especially because she was pretty wild driver. She kept crashing into everyone and flipping the buggy. One of the things I noticed about the way the group plays is that the women are very aggressive and physical—not in a competitive way, but more in just a risk-taking way, especially where vehicles are concerned. I eventually got back on my jet pack to take some aerial shots, fell behind, but managed to find my way back to the group.

I knew almost everyone in this group. Most of them were people I had interviewed for the study. This was good, because I think given all that's happened in the past couple of weeks, it was important for me to demonstrate my new approach to them and show them that I was being responsive to their feedback. After a memorial flyover of Yeesha Island for Cola, who had just passed away, people began to assemble on a field created for the buggy polo game.

One surprise had occurred en route to Yeesha Island was that Lynn had appeared in a giant, translucent orb, just big enough to envelope her entire avatar. Now it became apparent why: It turned out that Lynn was the ball for the buggy polo game! We all progressed over to the field, which had goals on either side, some trees around the perimeter, a big scoreboard. Throughout the whole convoy as well as the game, participants were put into a group chat window that allowed for talking and texting. This was to improve fidelity and also help in shepherding everyone to the various locales.

For the first part of the game, I rode shotgun with the same woman I had ridden over with. This was I suppose my first step toward getting involved. Typically I would have stood on the sidelines and taken pictures. But after a while, I decided I did need to get some documentation, so I hopped off the buggy and donned my hoverpack. I flitted about in the air and took a load of pictures of the proceedings. It was quite remarkable really; total bedlam, and the voice chat really expressed the fact that people were having a huge amount of fun. People were laughing and singing. One woman sang 'am I blue' in response to being assigned to the blue team. Another was teasing a third about the fact that her buggy was Pepto-Bismol coloured, a gaffe that continued through the rest of the day.

I was flying around, taking pictures, when I noticed that the orb-ball, now empty, had somehow managed to get itself lodged in one of the trees by the soccer field. It was one of those moments where a series of clues add up. First I saw that the ball was in the tree, then I noticed that everyone was sort of grouping around in their buggies trying to figure out what to do. Then, at that moment, I had the startling revelation: because I was on my hoverpack, I was in the air, so I could actually get the ball. Apparently everyone else had the same thought at the same time, because I suddenly heard, and saw, people saying 'Arte, get the ball! Get the ball!' at the same time I was saying 'Hey, I can get it; I'm on my hoverpack.' I was trying to figure out what to do, and everyone was sort of shouting from down below, in text and voice, to knock it out or push it out and I kept flying towards it but I couldn't seem to get it to move. And then someone said, 'Pick it up Art.' So I reached over to the little blue circle (the primary interface to objects in There.com*), and clicked on it and before I knew what had happened, I was instantly sucked inside the ball. I'm not sure if I got a picture of myself inside the ball stuck in this tree; I think I was too caught up in the moment. I realised very quickly that the orb was drivable, so I moved my arrow keys and rolled out of the tree onto the ground. With lots of shouting from the group, I found my way to the centre square, and positioned myself. And it was in this way that I became the ball for the buggy boogie game.*

At first, I was thinking, this is great because now anyone who is still upset with me about the article can use this opportunity to work out their aggressions. But I think we were way past that. So I spent the rest of the game inside the orb-ball being knocked around by Uruvians. It was great fun; and afterward, a whole group gathered around me to discuss it. I think this was a turning point for me. I finally managed to get into the middle of the action in some way.

It actually called to mind an incident that occurred when I was a kid. We played girls flag (American) football in 6th grade. Being PhysEdphobic and the last person picked for every sports team, I really did everything in my power to get out of PE, and football was my all time least favourite activity. However, when it came time to try out for the team, I was the only girl in our class who was able to hike the ball. So they made the centre for both teams. I would hike the ball, then run off to the side while all the chaos ensued in the centre of the field. It was a strange neutral role to play, and this ball thing sort of had echoes of that... except that I was right in the middle of the madness, getting knocked around. And it was fun!

Another sign of deeper involvement happened earlier in the week. I was hanging out with Lula and she showed me Damanji's two-story cone house, which she had just bought because it was a single-piece and could open up in one pop. I told her that I was thinking about buying one, and she had an extra, an older single-story model that came in several pieces, so she offered to give it to me. She and a newbie who strolled by helped me set it up in a PortaZone (which I could then move to another

location). It actually took quite a bit of effort by the three of us—me in low zoom mode, Lula on a jetpack, and the newbie running looking at it from different angles on the ground, and then all occasionally swapping positions. I got enraptured and decided to haul out the few other items I have in inventory and decorated my new house. Lula gave me some stuff and then took the newbie off to see Santa's workshop, and while she was gone I bought some furniture and set it up in the house, put out my gazebo in the garden, etc. I ended up staying up until 2am decorating my house, a true sign that I had finally gone over to being a full-fledged Thereian.

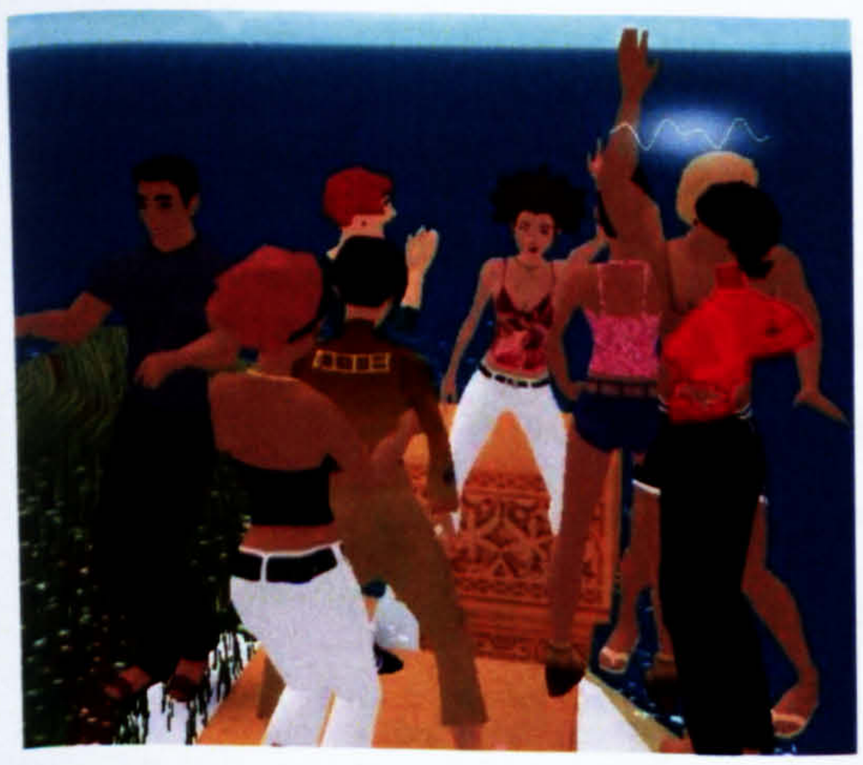
When I was done I realised—wow, that's it. I'm now officially part of the group. I have an Uru cone house; I am a co-conspirator in Damanji's plot to take over the world through emergence.

Turning the Tables on Arte (January 2005)

Shortly after the crisis was resolved, I was approached by Bette with a proposition: she and Wingman wanted to 'turn the tables' on me by doing an interview with me in the University of There Times. 'You are always interviewing us', she said, 'now we want to interview you.'

I think they felt that having me talk about my research to the avatar community in my own worlds, without the filtration, distillation and potential distortion of a journalist, would help to clarify matters and would also be of inherent interest to their readership. It was a cool idea because it addressed a lot of issues, and in a sense brought the whole situation back around.

Bette and I did the interview 9 January, and when it was published, she posted it with this picture:



The caption alongside it read 'Research?'

Déjà vu (9 January 2005)

I had that experience again...I was taken into another Until Uru *Age that I had seen in its* Second Life *instantiation. As Teddy was leading me around, I not only recognised the environment, but things were also placed in the same locations. My spatial memory kicked in and I knew exactly where we were going.*

One remarkable aspect of this experience is that I have sort of approached Uru *in reverse. My first experience of Uru has been through its retelling, and now I am becoming familiar with the original. I've had the experience of seeing a VR simulation of a place, and then visiting the real place a few days later. This is sort of like that, except that these are simulations of a simulation.*

I talked with Erik at length the other day about this. He does not want to see the other re-creations because he wants to keep his memory of Uru *intact... for me* Uru *was nothing but re-creations for a long time. And I did not want to see the real thing because I did not want my collective memory of it, the narrative that has been passed to me, to be polluted by 'reality'. It is a strange set of nesting eggs—memories within virtual worlds; simulacra of simulacra, the reinscription of memories upon memories. It reminds me a lot of Bolter and Grusen's idea of 'remediation', the notion that digital technology enables you to re-create other media. (Bolter and Grusen, 2000)*

February 9 (from what I can discern) is the anniversary of the server close, although it is hard to pinpoint a date. Some call it 'Black Tuesday' but I realised that it was a different day and date for people in Europe to those in the United States. The Uru refugees in Second Life *are having some kind of anniversary celebration. It also occurred to me that as* Uru *ran for less than nine months total, the Uru Diaspora has now outlived the original* Uru Live *game. How much longer will they persist? Will there be a Yeesha Island in* Second Life *in three years? What about TGU? Will they become fully acclimated to* There.com*?*

As scared as I was to get into the 'real' Uru, *now I see how necessary it is in order to really understand my study subjects. I cannot just live on their retelling, although that is the most poetic way to do it. But to understand their experience, where they are coming from, I need to spend time with them in their 'homeland'. I can see something about their spirit here. The way they play, and the way they explore, and play with, and exploit bugs; they are always trying to walk through walls and sink into floors, and they turn everything into a game. Today they were 'avie bowling' by immersing themselves into the floor up to their chests and then running really fast to knock over the numerous cones that are lying around in the hood.*

I think this culture of play, really 'horseplay', is amazing. It is more of a sandbox way of playing than the competitive, heavily goal-oriented forms of play seen in most video games. With this group, sometimes there is a goal, sometimes not. Nobody seems to care much if they win; no big deal is made of it one way or the other. And everything is a potential game or play object. It is particularly refreshing because I know they are not children, but it is very childlike the way they play. They constantly experiment with the edges of the world they inhabit, and even though the world structures are different, the group itself is all about play. I wonder how much of what they've learned to do in There has influenced the way they now play in Uru...

Interview with the Avatar (Raena, January 11, 2004)

Sometimes I come out of these interviews feeling both emotionally drained and exhilarated. Tonight's session with Raena was intense... in part because she was so honest... she glossed nothing over, and told me things that no-one else has told me, about the darker side of the transition. She is a very thoughtful person, and her openness was somewhat astounding, even more so in light of the fact that she approached me wanting to tell me her story.

Much of the story was similar to the others'. Finding emergent patterns has been surprisingly easy because the responses are so consistent. One pattern is this notion of time compression, which jibes with my research and that of almost everyone I've read. In spite of the fact that the pace of text communication is much slower, emotional experiences tend to become compressed, and friendships form much more quickly than they would in 'real life'. In the case of the Uru people, this process was intensified by the time constraints of the Uru *closure (knowing the world was ending), and by their shared trauma.*

Raena also talked about her relationship to her avatar... the sense of death... she talked about 'the end of the world', and how she and her friend wanted to 'party like it's 1999'. She talked about what it felt like to move from the first person experience of the Myst games into the avatar-based environment of Uru. *Having a representation of herself was a big deal for her, and she even talked about the concept of 'proprioception,' another intriguing topic. I think a lot of these people felt their avatars were dying, and even though they've to approximate their* Uru *avatars in other worlds, it's obvious that they miss the nuance of the* Uru *avatars, the realism, the modest attire, the ability to show age. They often complain about the cartoonyness of* There.com *avatars, although they like their expressiveness. Though* Uru *avatars are more 'high fidelity' that* There.com *avatars, I find them to be a little strange. They all have this sort of glazed Mona Lisa smile.*

The one part of the story that was entirely new to me was the tale of Teddy and Daisy. I know them as real life partners, and I had met them together that day in the Moroccan pavilion. I had even seen a photo of the two of them in real life on the Imager in Teddy's Relto in Until Uru. *So imagine my surprise when Raena reveals to me that Teddy was Daisy...or rather, that Daisy was his first incarnation in* Uru. *Apparently, Raena became very close with this player Daisy, who turned out to be a man. The Daisy I know is his wife, who never played the original* Uru *game. This was revealed to Raena hours before the server shut down, when he appeared as a male avatar. Raena was upset because she wanted to say goodbye to her friend Daisy, but he couldn't log off and switch avatars, because it was too risky as the server was being put to sleep. When he came to* There.com, *he continued to play as Daisy, but his wife, not an* Uru *player, joined him as Teddy. They maintained this charade until the advent of voice, which eventually forced them to come clean via the Koalanet forums. They stayed swapped for a time, but the gender-switched voices bothered some, so eventually they simply switched avatars, the male partner now inhabiting the male avatar, and vice versa. Teddy's reason for the gender switch, as I learned from reading the forums afterward, was to avert any concern his wife might have that he might engage in an online affair.*

In some way this job is a lot like being a therapist... you want to get stories out of people... you want to get them to describe things as vividly as possible but also to find out their interpretations, how they felt about these things when they were happening. Maybe (and of course I'm hypothesising here) but maybe in part because they are women and men who are a little older, it is easier for them to talk about their feelings. I compare these conversations to those I've had with players in Lineage, mostly with young men in their early twenties. The depth of insight here is so much richer... I really don't have to do much interpretation because they are doing it all for me. The hard part is when to stop. I am sort of enraptured really; and every time I hear the story of the server shut-down, it still sends a chill up my spine. I am sort of reliving it with them. While each of them lived it once, in some way I have relived it dozens of times because I have relived it through each of their eyes, through multiple subjectivities.

Raena hit on some particularly deep stuff. She said she felt like she had experienced a kind of death. In way it's true. And does Cyan/Ubi have that right to kill an avatar? I suppose technically, they do, because they own it. Yet who really owns the avatar? The avatar is nothing without the player, but the 'code' that comprises it is owned by the company. Clearly, losing an avatar is very painful, because it is a part of the person, even if they've only been an avatar for a short period. Maybe it's not unlike how a child feels when their favourite toy is lost... there is an emotional attachment that happens through play... wow I think I just hit on something there. Wow.

Hmmm... that's very interesting. We become emotionally attached to our projected identities. I remember Stephan and Jussi's paper where they talked about 'somatic displacement,' the ability to project yourself into an object, such as a doll or a toy car (Holopainen and Meyers, 2000). This seems consistent with the ways we project alter-identities into avatars. This type of emotional attachment can be very real and very powerful. When you lose your avatar, you feel as though you have lost a part of yourself. I think this is really interesting. The avatar becomes like a ghost limb—you can feel it even though it is no longer there.

This is perhaps what Sandy Stone called 'falling in love with our prosthesis' (Stone, 1996), but it's also a feeling I have about my own avatar. I totally understand what Raena is talking about. For me Artemesia is a trans-game character, but her There.com *instantiation is sort of 'home base'. We know that these interpersonal connections are real, even if the worlds are virtual. To the people experiencing them, they are very real and intense, and in some ways can be more intense then rl... I know this is true. I've experienced it myself. My two hours with Raena was more intense than the dinner I had with my housemate earlier this evening. I learned more in two hours about Raena, who I've never met, than I know about my housemate, who I've lived with for nearly a year. It's mysterious, but amazing.*

I'm really excited about this work. There is something important and powerful that I'm uncovering here... peeling away like layers: the social... the psychological... the distributed self, as Turkle calls it (Turkle, 1995), and then the social construction of the self... The avatar is a precious entity, because it is an extension of yourself, a social prosthesis, especially those where the game embodiment is compensating for a physical embodiment that has broken down (Lynn in her wheelchair, Cola with her arthritis) it's even more important. Because not being able to run and jump isn't just a physically painful experience... it's also socially painful. There are aspects of yourself that must be shut down that can be reawakened through an avatar. Lynn can run, jump, ride horses, and be a soccer ball in There.com. *So in a way Lynn in* Uru *or in* There.com *is more the real Lynn, than Lynn in the Wheelchair in Cedar County, New Mexico, who has lost part of her identity and her social agency with the loss of her ability to walk. I feel like I know a side of these people that no-one in their real lives will ever know. And since I have made it my business to know as much about them as I possibly can, I feel I've taken on a big responsibility. I've become the steward of their collective 'self'. TGU itself is an avatar in a way. It's the aggregate avatar of all the individual TGU avatars, isn't it? This is a very interesting way to look at it.*

'Me and my shadow...'

hmmm...

Reflections on *Uru* Server Shutdown Anniversary (9 February 2005)

I gathered with the European contingent at noon, with a couple of U.S. folks involved, Lynn among them. Wasn't able to get on for the PST festivities until later as I was getting ready to go on trip to the UK.

What was interesting was that there was not much discussion of the server shutdown; there had even been story sessions planned which we never got around to. Lynn suggested hide and seek, which is what we spent the next three or so hours doing.

This was very interesting for me on a couple of levels. Here we were, this group of adults, mostly over 40, some over 50 even, playing hide and seek. How many other occasions do we have to do this? Lynn was even on the phone (we could hear her over Teamspeak) telling her friend we were playing hide and seek.

I know this is something they did a lot in Uru Live, *which interested me because it is not part of the game. And it is a characteristic of TGU play that they cannot do in* There.com *because of the nametags. In* Uru *the names only appear when you scroll over the avatar, and NOT when the avatar is obscured by another object. So they could not carry this play pattern into* There.com.

I was also noting that it related to something I had read in Game Zone about the notion of subverting the function of a public space by making it into a landscape for play (Iacovoni, 2004). This is a vital part of the TGU play, the idea of converting an environment into a playscape, and they do this in each environment in a different fashion, experimenting with, and sometimes against, the virtual world's given properties, capabilities, and bugs. It is particularly interesting to look at the way that certain game features promote or restrict certain types of subversive play. An interesting research question would be to look at ways of creating features specifically designed with this type of play in mind.

In the hide and seek game we played, there was a discussion about new Ki pack and to what extent its features could be used. The group decided it was okay to float and to use the jump commands to find hiding places, but the person who was 'It' was not permitted to use the float command, although they could use the jump command, to find people. You were not permitted to spawn to escape detection. All this was negotiated in advance, like game rules in a real world playground.

From a subjective viewpoint, I found the process of finding a hiding place interesting. On the first round, while looking for a hiding place, I accidentally linked into another Age. In order to get out, I jumped off the edge into the chasm. (Instead of dying, this causes you to return to your Relto). This enabled me to get return to the hide-and-seek game in Lynn's Kemo via the Nexus. When I came in at

the spawn point, Phae'dra was there and immediately said 'I found Arte.' And I explained that I had just spawned in, but it made us all laugh. On the second round, I was slightly less inept at finding a hiding place, although I was one of the first people discovered.

In this version of the game, once you are found, you have to help the 'It' person to find the others. So I started helping. One of the things I immediately noticed was the cleverness of some of the hiding places. For example, there was one spot where a couple of people were hiding that was one of those rifts in cyberspace. If you did a '/jump2' in the right spot in the tunnel cave, you could land on the inner ceiling, which wasn't a 'real' place in the game. From here you could see the 'back of house', as if you'd gone inside the wall of a theme park ride. From this vantage points, you could also see other parts of the Kemo that were not visible from other locales.

Since they all know the space so well, especially since they spent a lot of time looking for Relto pages and journey clothes, they know all the nooks and crannies, weird ledges that require runs and jumps to get to; they know how to get on top of things.

Probably the best hiding place of all was by Kellor, who hid within the trunk of a braintree; the trunk collision detection was flawed in some way and it was the exact width of an avatar; as a result, he was able to just stand inside the tree trunk, and although completely visible, he was hard to detect because he was not discernable as a geometry element. Everyone gathered round to express their appreciation for the cleverness of this hiding place. In fact this was a big part of the experience—trying to come up with a really clever hiding place that everyone else would appreciate for its creativity. Since the group is so much about solving puzzles, finding hidden things, and being clever about it, it was a really pleasure to play the Uru *variation of hide and seek because it turned out to be a very sophisticated version of the game.*

This is another case of the ways in which players subvert or reframe the virtual environment to their own ends. It made me think again of the buggy boogie, in which people decided that, rather than teleport, which is the conventional mode of travel, they should actually drive across the terrain between their two areas, both as a way to get people to those areas, but also as a kind of group activity. This act of moving in tandem isn't always easy in a laggy online game. They were deliberately picking a more challenging way of doing things, and, one again, 'rubbing up against the edges' of the game world, its rules and technical capabilities. So in a sense the virtual world is really more like a playground than a game, a terrain that can morph on take on a variety of shapes, that can be adopted at will by simply changing the game terms. This week Uru *is a hide and seek game; maybe another week it is a treasure hunt. This week* There.com *is a card game, next week it is buggy polo. The point is that the board is constantly being redefined. This is significantly different from a game*

like monopoly where the game board is fairly static, even if the theme changes. Whereas on a checkers/chess board, you can play a couple of different games, and of course with playing cards, a seemingly infinite number. It's like a playground in which a vertical wall, a ball, some rope and a piece of chalk allow you to constantly reconfigure the play parameters of the space.

This suggests that the magic circle is a lot more malleable than might be suggested by some current writings. To me the magic circle is really nothing more than a mutual agreement to abide by a set of social constraints. But they are and can be independent of the terrain, and they can also be highly malleable and contingent on people and context. In some cases, the social constraints are terrain-dependent; for example, we play Monopoly on a Monopoly board; but there is no reason we could not make up a new set of rules to play on the same board; and no reason we can't play that same set of rules in a different board, depending on its configuration. Monopoly could be played with chalk in a playground, or even on the city streets, as long as you had some markers to represent player progress and some form of currency, etc.

In some way what goes on with groups like TGU is that they run out of things to do as prescribed by the game. The TGUers have already solved all the puzzles in Uru, *so now they explore and invent new modes of play.*

The most noteworthy thing about the anniversary gathering was that it was not a grieving of the past. Some commented in passing that they thought they were losing something, but clearly they have gained something new. The flavour of the event, stated by Lynn up-front, was really more a celebration of play and community than anything else.

And under that lies this new theory I am formulating. I think the emotional bonds of social play can be very intense, in a way in these liminal zones because people 'let their hair down,' as Lunar pointed out in my interview with him. And people can do things, like Teddy's gender-bending, that in any other space would cause complete social ostracisation. But because it is a liminal space, in some sense, anything goes, and these things are accepted as part of the territory; although deception can also be an egregious crime. In Teddy's case, people seemed to accept his motivation at its face value, and viewed his transgender play as a noble act, rather than an act of deception, while at the same time, embracing the truth. Some seemed actually not to care much about whether Teddy and Daisy stayed gender swapped or not. But in the end, and in a sense by social agreement, they decided to switch to the avatars of their own gender.

This also gives a sense of some of the perceived threats and imminent dangers of online life. The fear that one's partner will find something in cyberspace more compelling than the 'real life' partnership. In the end, Teddy and Daisy proved that 'the family that plays together stays together'.

In addition to the *Until Uru* event, there was also an event in *Second Life* hosted by the *Uru* refugees there. On the behest of some of the Second Lifers, I invited a few of my Thereian friends, including Lynn, with whom I had been developing a friendship, and we all went to the event together. Although I seldom saw anyone but the creators in the *Uru* area of *Second Life*, this occasion had the largest turnout of any event I had attended in *Second Life*. It was impossible to actually count attendance, because, while positive, it also revealed the inherent vulnerability, the Achilles tendon of virtually all MMOGs. It's not clear exactly how many people gathered in the *Second Life* hood, perhaps as many as 100, because at a certain point, we were all ejected into a barren desert. Once again, the server had failed. This was unfortunate because this was one of those highly emotional occasions where people really wanted to be together.

More on Presentations (February 2005)

Over the course of doing several presentations as Artemesia, I've evolved the technique significantly. Due to the voice vs. text controversy among the TGUers, since the first presentation, which was done purely with text, I have shifted to giving presentations with voice. I also now shift back and forth between Celia and Artemesia, rather than keeping Celia silent in the background. While this is awkward and uncomfortable, I think it makes for a more interesting presentation, and it's more aligned with my new methodology.

In one presentation I gave in Holland, an audience member came up to me afterward and said 'when you were switched to the avatar, you were much more boring.' I realise there are some language issues here, but after talking to some other people present, I think what he was trying to describe was that when in avatar persona, I project *through* the avatar, so my rl avatar is not as expressive.

After my presentation in Copenhagen, T.L. Taylor told me that she found the fissures between real-life and online avie to be interesting. I think what makes this type of presentation challenging is that I am almost always alone when I'm 'being Artemesia' and I often feel embarrassed or awkward if even one other person enters the room. I suppose this is in part due to the fact that most of the people I deal with in my daily life do not really understand what I'm doing; they think it's strange. In addition, while being in-world is a highly social activity, at the same time, it feels very private. So while it is very uncomfortable to do this in public, to perform the act of being Artemesia with both rl and virtual avie simultaneously, I think that awkwardness is precisely what makes it interesting. It might be comparable to a puppeteer pulling away the curtain. Usually a puppeteer is not that interesting to

watch for the same reason—she is usually channelling her persona through the puppet. I suppose when you channel your persona through the avatar, there is a visible shift in energy, or charisma, or whatever you want to call it—you can see the life force move from being inside the body to being extended into the embodiment of the avatar. I can feel this happening myself, but it's interesting that it is also visible to an audience.

Philosophical Conversations (February 2005)

Today was one of those prime examples of being in the right place at the right time. In the course of exploring, I accidentally came upon the precise sort of conversation that every ethnographer dreams of encountering. Wingman, Nature_Girl and Bette were having a deep philosophical conversation about the nature of their Uru/There.com *experience.*

On the one hand, says Wingman, Lynn wants there to be a re-creation of D'ni Ae'gura in There.com. *But there is a difference, he says, between re-creating* Uru *versus extending the world into* There.com. *The former approach entails making facsimiles of* Uru *artefacts, the latter is an approach to making* Uru*-like objects that is more like creating new Ages. (This is what Damanji is trying to do).*

Nature_Girl, as usual, covers the theological perspective of the story. The D'ni chose Earth to build the cavern (the underground city); they came to Earth, to Arizona, when their world was destroyed.

*But, Wingman argues, the world we are standing in right now (*There.com*) is not Earth. Nature_Girl says it's kind of a linking book that leads to another Age. We put our hand on the* There.com *book and came here from Earth.*

But, I think, maybe like the D'ni who chose to come to Arizona when their world was destroyed, the TGUers chose to come to There.com *when their world was destroyed. At this point, though, I say nothing. I am just listening.*

Nature_Girl suddenly turns to me and says: 'Arte, what do you think?' Bette suddenly says: 'Art is just taking it all in. She's writing frantically wondering where the chatlog is.' I laugh because she is right; my fingers are flying trying to capture every word they are saying.

This sort of discussion fascinates me. Is There.com *the same place as the cleft in* Uru*? Is it another Age of* Uru. *Is it the 'real world' in relation to* Uru*? Or is it a place for a new Age to be 'written'? Nature_Girl of course will argue that we cannot write Ages; only D'ni can do that. But to Damanji*

writing Ages is the next logical step, especially in an environment like There.com, *which unlike* Uru, *is fully extensible. Why not write Ages? We have all the tools we need here. What's to stop us?*

St. Patrick's Day Parade (12 March 2005)

One Sunday when we were having our usual noontime *Until Uru* hang, one of the members of the Tapestry shard popped into our hood and wanted to know if TGU wished to participate in a St. Patrick's Day Parade they were planning. Petrova agreed to take the lead on making this happen.

Although having a parade doesn't seem like that big a deal, in *Uru*, because server and client interactions are not always synchronised, co-ordinated formations of any kind are extremely challenging. Thus this enterprise entailed a great deal of strategic planning and rehearsal time to compensate for the flaws in the server architecture.

First, it was not possible for the entire group to parade concurrently in a single shard due to continual crashing. Instead, each group was to be warped by an administrator into the Tapestry Event Shard, where they would march one length of the parade route, then be 'warped' (teleported) back into their hood to make way for the next group. There were no spectators allowed, as this would cause crashes. Two players were assigned as cameramen to stream the parade out to the web, not only so spectators could watch, but also so those organizing the parade could monitor what was happening.

The 'no spectator' rule really highlighted the importance this new participant methodology approach I was developing. Here was a case where it would be impossible to 'just observe' the situation. The only possible way to study this event was to actually be a participant in the parade.

In addition, I soon found out that actually participating was the only way to really understand this client-server architecture problem. D'evon and Petrova lead the numerous rehearsal sessions, which mostly entailed practicing walking in a straight line. But in reality, this relatively simple task was actually impossible. While you might appear to be walking in a straight line on your own screen, to others, you may be 'rubber banding,' sliding forward and backward in the scene. You may see your avatar as following a player, while at the same time she may see her avatar as walking behind yours. So from a perceptual perspective, there is no way to really walk a parade that looks right to everyone because each person is seeing something different on his or her client screen. Simply walking in a straight line required numerous rehearsals and co-ordination from Petrova, D'evon and others.

The parade itself turned out to be a gruelling ordeal. It took much longer than expected, and while it officially began at noon, TGU wasn't warped into place until well after 2:00 p.m. We were the last leg

of the parade, and the largest group to participate; as soon as we arrived at our final destination behind the library, everybody crashed and the parade was over.

While not a game *per se*, the difficulties of orchestrating something as seemingly simple as a parade on a highly unstable server infrastructure presented players with a feat so challenging that, in the end, it became its own kind of game. Had I not participated both in rehearsals and the parade itself first hand, I would never have understood the complexity of the task, nor the mastery and tenacity required to execute it.

The St. Patrick's Day Parade also provided another instance of the of the conflation of meanings between real and imaginary worlds. When I first heard about it, it made me uncomfortable, in part because it felt like real world cultures intruding on the fantasy of *Uru*. It was another example of the magic circle breaking down, a phenomenon I became progressively more used to, and eventually came to fully accept as part of the trans-ludic dynamic.

Shifting Worlds (May-June 2005)

Over the past few months, there has been some dissatisfaction with There.com. *As a result, Lynn, Leesa, and Nature_Girl have started spending more time in* Second Life. *Nature_Girl, who has mastered a number of skills in* There.com *seems to like the building features because it gives her a new challenge. Lynn has purchased some coastal land and put out a houseboat, along with Uno, who has also been spending more time in SL. I ended up buying the adjacent land, so now we have a little Uru-Thereian enclave.*

This has caused a little tension with Raena, who is concerned that others will follow Lynn into Second Life. *I'm less worried, as my impression is that* Second Life *has more the feeling of an after-hours club or a vacation home for Lynn. She tends to go there after most of the Thereian community has gone to bed. We hang out and play SL's version of Mah Jongg, which is fun because it is a two-player cooperative game. Her husband Frank and rl friend Henry, who was responsible for setting up the Koalanet forum, also hang out there. I guess I am getting to know a different side of her as her SL neighbour.*

Our neighbourhood in SL reminds me a bit of Sausalito, and I've always wanted to live on a houseboat, so I ended up buying a galleon and setting myself up a pirate ship. Second Life *is a little more conducive to fantasy role-playing than* There.com. *Clothes and costumes are much cheaper and people run around in all manner of avatar forms. You can also save a lot of different avatar designs, so while your identity remains the same (your name tag is persistent), your visual representation is a lot more malleable. Our neighbour, Sir James, has a kind of Victorian inventor vibe going in his giant mansion. Other people show up dressed as robots, children, and even animals. It's sort of like being at a 24-hour costume party.*

More Adventures in Gender

True Confessions (Haslemere, Surrey, July 2005)

Raena is a man.

I was sitting on the sofa after a long session with the other Ph.D. candidates, about to close things down for the night, when I got a Skype from her wanting to talk. It took forever for her to get it out. There was a long preamble...but eventually she told me: 'My real life avie is a man.'

Once she got that part out, we talked a little about the ramifications. I told her I didn't care, which I really don't. To me, this really has very little impact on our friendship. What interested me more about it was the fact that she had been at the centre of the two other gender revelations in the group and had managed to keep this to herself the entire time. It caused me to rethink a number of previous discussions with her, including the one about the original Daisy, now Teddy. It also amazed me that she had been able to master the female voice. Regendering your voice is really challenging, not just because of pitch, but also cadence, and social style. Women and men just talk differently, and so Raena has managed not only to shift the voice pitch, but also get the social style and the cadence down. My God, she even sings in-world!

I suppose as a researcher, this would somehow taint her credibility as an informant, but it really never even crossed my mind. For one thing, all of the things she has told me about the group have been corroborated by other interviews and observation. This speaks well for the 'crystallisation' method. But more than that, I know Raena is totally reliable and totally honest. I suppose to anyone else this would seem outrageous. How could you trust someone who 'lied' about something so crucial? But I guess it doesn't really seem like a lie to me. And this is one of those issues where knowing about the real life avie naturally adds another dimension to the person, but in the long run, it

does not have any impact on what happens in-world. Just because the real-life avie is a man, doesn't make the virtual world avie any less of a woman. I know that sounds contradictory, but it makes perfect sense to me.

We talked about how she was going to handle it with the group. She has already discussed it with Lessa and Lynn, and decided to post on the forum, in the same way that Teddy and others have done in the past. The real question is whether she is going to keep being Raena, as Leshan did, or switch to a male avie, as Teddy did. To test this out, she created a male avie, Raenen, who she is going to take out for a spin.

The first reaction I had when I heard this was to feel really sad. I hated the idea of losing Raena. I felt exactly like Raena's description about how he reaction when Daisy was not available to say goodbye on the last day of Uru. *I tried to be really tactful and supportive. My main thrust was: I support whatever you choose do, but I'd really miss Raena.*

Raena's basic MO is that she always puts the group first. So even though I think she feels the same way about it as I do, I think she would switch to the male avie even if she didn't really want to, if she felt that was what the group preferred. This really reinforces what I've been saying about the social construction of identity. She has basically put her identity up for group consideration, and as is always the case with TGUers, began with consulting with the leadership.

This revelation of course causes me to see every conversation and story involving Raena in a new light. Her grief at losing her avatar, while no different from anyone else's, had special significance because a part of her was dying that was unique to that place. She is also a pillar of the community, and has had a major behind-the-scenes role in everything significant that has happened to this group. She was instrumental in the move into There.com. *While she has some male friends, she mainly hangs out with women (who as far as we know are also women in rl), although she's been at the centre of the two other gender-switching narratives within the group. The artwork she creates in* There.com *is very feminine in its content. Even the way she dresses, her modest attire, is unusual for a man playing a woman. Most men tend to create female avatars that are sexy, and wear flamboyant or frilly clothes. She mostly wears jeans and sweaters in-world, just like a real woman in real life.*

Well this is an interesting turn of events, and I will be curious to see the outcome.

(August 2005)

Raena introduced me to Raenen, her male alter-ego. She is practicing talking like a man; told me she practiced talking like a woman when she made Raena and now she is used to relating in that way and the male voice is hard. She also said something about how you can have different cubbyholes in your mind to accommodate the multiple-identities of avatar life. This awareness came to her through meeting Leshan and his wife. Leshan was one of the other female-presenting males who made the confession of his true gender via Koalanet. Raena talked about listening to Leshan 'talk about us as if we were rl people...' His wife knows all of us of course, but only from Michael (Leshan's rl avie name) talking about us. And so in her mind, the avies are all 'real'. To her, we each have only one cubbyhole, as characters in her husband's stories.

Even though I now know differently, I prefer to still think of Raena as a woman, although at some point I'm sure I'll meet the man behind the avatar...and then I will have to make some adjustments internally I suppose. I continue to call her, and all of the other cross-gendered avatars I know by their avatar pronoun, even Leshan, who now speaks using her male voice.

Raena is part of the man behind her, a part of his persona that gets to 'come out and play' in this context. In this case, it's not a sexual thing, but it's a very risky and dangerous thing to do nonetheless... to explore parts of your personality that are not available to you in rl. You really have no idea where it will take you.

Part of what's making me really uncomfortable though is that when I see Raenen, I sort of resent him, because I feel like he is replacing my 'friend' Raena. To me, he is sort of the negation of Raena. Since that first introduction, Raenen has been hanging out intermittently in both Until Uru *and* There.com. *When he's there alone, I am having a really hard time with it. I want to be nice to him; I guess in some ways he's a 'newbie', but in reality, I just want Raena back. On a couple of occasions, he's managed to get both avatars into* There.com *at the same time. This has been very strange, because the struggle to create a male identity becomes so clear... his attempts to talk like a man are both poignant and amusing. At the same time, it's somehow easier for me to be nice to Raenen when Raena is around.*

We've seen pictures now. Raena has a beard. And yet when in avie, he's just a woman. That's all. The odd part is, I know they are the same person, but to me Raenen is not Raena. He's an entirely different person.

There.com Real Life Gathering (September 2005)

In the end, we did what we always did... played spades until 2:00 in the morning. In a way, this was most the most interesting part of all...because, other than explore, it was the one thing we ended up doing in real life that we also did in game. The program of the 'RLG', as everyone called it, were quite different from what we were used to doing together. There were panel sessions on topics like 'The Care and Feeding of the Servers' or 'Therenomics.' There were discussion group with There.com *staff about the community (maybe not so different for some, especially* There.com *Member Advisory Board members who had, no doubt, had these same conversations numerous times).*

The voice was the bridge from the real-life avie to the in-world avie. And the voice carries them between worlds now. I know the voices so well, I sort of wallowed in them. From the first moment I heard Lynn's smoky voice in the bathroom stall, and Blossom, of course was easy due to the English accent. Leshan had the same voice, but this time coming out of a male body. Wingman was dressed as his avie so that was easy but his voice kept wafting between the rooms the whole time. Nature_Girl... possibly the most distinctive voice of the lot... Raena was the only one who sounded nothing like herself... but I could hear just a glimmer of Raena coming through the voice of Will, the man standing there before me. The real-world hug... that's the one I remember the most. Really she's my best friend in game. There is no way around that.

Later, when we sat at dinner, the conversation was like those we have in-game. I kept picturing the avatar gestures that Raena uses, the cadence of the speech, the pauses to think, the 'I'm thinking' gesture which is done by typing in 'hmmm... I could also see in Will, the man, the male rl avie, the ghost of the woman inside. It's not even like a gender confusion thing... very hard to explain expect that... well Raena explained it when she talked about the cubbyholes. I have two cubbyholes in my mind for this person—Raena, the game persona, and Will, the real-life avatar.

Ultimately, I think humour may be the key to the soul. After voice, humour was the next distinctive personality trait that persisted outside of the game. Everyone's humour was precisely the same as in-game. This is something you can't really hide. Just as Raena said (ironically, now) that she had always suspected Daisy of really being a man because of his sense of humour, humour is unique, it's spontaneous, like a fingerprint of the personality.

It was also really nice to meet Leesa and we had a moment of mutual appreciation together. I really admire how she has developed as the reluctant leader of this group. And she expressed her appreciation for the work I have been doing with her community, which meant a lot to me after the controversy back in November. I think the outcome has been positive for everyone. In the end, the project really did feel like the collaboration I always intended it to be.

I was both surprised and unsurprised to find that nearly half the gathering consisted of TGU members. This is a measure not so much of their numerical representation in There.com, *but of their influence and their commitment to both* There.com *and each other.* There.com *was their refuge, it was their safe harbour... not so safe... but yet they stuck to it with admirable tenacity. They never let up, even after all the moves, even after* There.com *seemed on the verge of closure. As Raena said to me at dinner... people were afraid we would take over. It looks like maybe we have.*

But it also attests to the power of play. In sessions, people kept saying 'it's not just a game'. I kept wanting to say 'Why "just"?'

I think we need to stop belittling play like it's something unimportant. Play is important, it's deep, it's human. The shared values of Leesa's rules are about play. They are guidelines for the playground. They are a philosophy of play. And they were powerful enough to keep this group of people together for this protracted period of time, through trials and tribulations, well beyond the initial context in which their bond was formed. Each step of the way, they prevailed. They remained together. Why? Because they were guided by shared values and a philosophy of play that was robust and continues to work.

The most interesting part of the gathering was the last day, which were the unofficial events. We went into San Francisco and immediately people began branching off to explore areas of Fisherman's wharf. The first challenge was finding a place to park Lynn's van; we were on mobile phones to each other trying to co-ordinate this and arrange to meet up. Once we convened, we broke up to various exploratory groups, including a chocolate quest lead by Lynn. Here was a case where the play style was consistent... Lynn the explorer was alive and well in realspace. The challenge was navigating her wheelchair through the hilly streets of San Francisco; this quickly became a puzzle to which everyone contributed, looking for ramps and lifts. The relationship to space could be seen clearly, the questing, the puzzle-solving, all present.

After dinner we headed back to San Mateo. In the car, I told co-navigator Wingman that something had been missing for me throughout the proceedings... I realised later that the thing I was missing was play. We had done everything imaginable together but play. But when we got back to the Marriott, we took over the hotel lobby and quickly transformed it into another play space; we hacked and appropriated furniture, making our own spades tables, and just like every other space TGU has been in, they turned it into a There.com *'Fun Zone'.*

Spades said it all. It was the same but different. We all played in the same styles as we always play. We said the same things we always say. But the avatar fidelity was different. You could see the eyes, the smiles, the sidelong looks, the hand gestures. Throughout the two days, whenever I was with someone, I would have brief 'avatar flashbacks' (cognitive haunting, again) where I would picture the person's avatar talking. But it was not until we were playing spades that I realised that from here on out, whenever I play spades with them, I will experience cognitive haunting of their real-life avies as well.

It's all quite an adventure. They are a quirky lot, each to varying degrees more or less like his or her avie. But as Leesa and everyone always say...the soul shines through, both good and bad. I don't think anyone expected to see a bunch of Disney-esque cartoon Barbie dolls there. We all knew it would be a motley group, but part of what you find is you know something about a person's inner life that transcends his or her appearance, and this awareness translates into the physical. And there we were, a bunch of people who would never know each other on any other occasion calling each other family.

What is that? How can we say 'it's just a game?' Play is important. It's spiritual. It can create a type of bond that happens nowhere else, a bond between strangers; over the long-term, it can create friendships that emerge quickly but can also be sustained over the long term. Regardless of what goes on in our real lives, what our established roles are, here we are just playmates.

There is something magical in that, the freedom to play, and to play wherever and whenever we want, to be silly, to horse around, to explore, to experiment. This proves perhaps the final contention of my dissertation... that play styles are mobile, that they can move across virtual and even into the real world; that it is in play that the style of interaction is fully rendered, fully realised, and its personality both transcends and transforms the context, whether it be inside a virtual world, or in the lobby of a hotel.

'hmm

There is so much more to all of this than meets the eye.

Postscript 1: Celia Pearce speaks from beyond the thesis

In October, about a month after the Real Life Gathering of *There.com*, Leshan invited us all to attend the first annual CAT (Community Achievers of There) Award. We (i.e. 'Thereians' active in this domain) had been informed about these awards about a month prior, but the announcement was made

official at the RLG. The basic idea was to award selected Thereians for community achievement by having Imagina design a gown for each award recipient. I had been awarded one of these gowns during the year. Now, all the recipients were to be gathered together for the first formal award ceremony, where trophies would be distributed. I was very touched that Leshan had given me an award, but until this ceremony was called, the award had felt more personal (perhaps based on friendship) than political or socially significant. Having the honour announced made real my sense of contribution to the community.

On the night of the ceremony, Leshan and Imagina alternated giving short statements about why each of us had been given the award. When my turn came up, I was very touched and surprised by what was said. Leshan began by saying 'I don't know if you are all aware of the work Arte does...' She then went on to say that I was doing great things for *There.com* by giving presentations to the outside world and trying to impart a deeper understanding of the online lifestyle of *There.com*, beyond the screen. On reflection, it had not occurred to me previously that my research, or Artemesia's role in achieving that in-game, could be viewed as a contribution to the *There.com* community itself. However, Leshan's speech made it clear to me, and to the community that this research had extended the dual-screen boundaries of understanding. This was my main contribution: to allow players and avatars to see themselves and to be seen, in and through the screen. Being acknowledged and honoured for this contribution also imparted in me a renewed and extended sense of responsibility, which I've carried forward into my current and planned future work.

Postscript 2: Uru Lives

The week before this thesis presentation was nearing completion, in May of 2006, an announcement was made that *Uru Live* would be reopening. The people responsible for this research have harnessed the experience of the past two years' evolutions and revolutions in the *Uru* community to fuel their case for re-launching the game, and in crafting the next iteration of *Uru*. I am honoured to have the opportunity to participate in a 'real world' game development application of my ideas about emergence. This is a rare scenario where a game can be redesigned after the fact to embrace and integrate emergent player behaviour into its purview. I consider this the beginning Phase 2 of my *Uru* research. I am certain there will be more research to follow, to be undertaken as a new project, beyond the scope of this PhD.

CONCLUSION

This study seeks to break new ground in the field of Game Studies in a number of ways.

Firstly, the research builds on the work of previous researchers (as discussed at length in these pages) to develop a performance-based approach to the ethnography of online virtual worlds. This approach draws from *Game Studies* and from qualitative approaches to the social sciences as well. It also develops alongside major bodies of work in the areas characterized by *post-modern*, post-colonial and feminist ethnographic perspectives; i.e. those disciplines that tend to see the studies of *cultures as* situated within specific historical contexts, vis-à-vis larger 'world-systems' (Goffman, 1963).

While it situates itself within these specific disciplinary context, this thesis also offers an intensely personal approach to research-as-practice: an approach and framework that seeks to integrate more subjective writing styles as a means of highlighting the multi-subjective, polyphonic approaches employed throughout the study, and that further aims to underline and draw critical attention to the situated role of the ethnographer.

It should be noted that while this researcher is not an ethnographer by training, she/I (using both perspectives, according to the multiple objective/subjective dialogue woven herein by the avatar and the writer as researcher), has engaged actively in the creative-critical process of 'playing ethnography' for the four years of research and writing. Thus, she/I (Artemesia/Celia Pearce) have ultimately taken on the role(s) of ethnographer(s), or indeed (and arguably), can be seen to have *become* ethnographer(s). The thesis as a whole has offered a framework—both a game world and a research environment—for experiments in single-researcher/multi-player experimentation inhabited and informed by the multiple personae of researchers and players. Thus, the presence and integration of the avatar persona of Artemesia in the research process—from conception to practice, to research, writing and presentation—must extend to the inclusion of that voice within the discourse of the oral defence for this thesis. I would argue, both in play and more seriously, that as Artemesia has served as the researcher's alter ego in the process of the research she should also be viewed as the co-recipient of this PhD.

Secondly, the reflexive methods of both fieldwork and 'writing ethnography' both explore and interrogate traditional and contemporary theories of anthropological research. In particular, the approach to 'feminist' and 'experimental' ethnography builds on traditions of previous works, largely by women, that interrogate the question of researcher authority and elevate the research participants to collaborator status while still maintaining the ethnographer's distinct role as observer/scribe. These approaches are articulated through the three-part structure, which highlights the crystallisation of data,

polyphonic writing modes, and the acknowledgement of the subjective positioning of the researcher. It is hoped that the development of these frameworks and methods will also be relevant to the practice of ethnography in general in all its disciplinary contexts.

Thirdly, this study expands and extends the boundaries of the overlapping critical fields informing the new discipline of Game Studies by looking at a game that falls outside the popular genres of medieval fantasy and science fiction—both more typically studied in MMOG research. This thesis attempts to address a specific problem in Game Studies: the tendency for researchers to generalize about MMOG games and behaviours that are, in fact, highly genre-specific. The thesis as a whole identifies some of the methodological complexities that arise from these overly general approaches, and offers a more precise, 'boundaried' approach with a set of suggested guidelines for making, playing and analysing online games and their cultures, in hopes of expanding the dialogue to other forms of thematic, narrative and play-based studies.

Fourth, the thesis engages deliberately and consistently in a process of rebalancing the field of Game Studies by focusing on an age- and gender-balanced picture of MMOG play through study of a cohort that is 50% female, primarily consisting of players in their forties and fifties. This provides a contrast to the more commonly studied MMOGs, whose players are on average 20% female with average ages in the mid-twenties (although the general demographic is also beginning to change).

The fifth and final major contribution of this thesis to the field of knowledge is its provision of a unique system for positioning and specifying forms of game play vis-à-vis specific game environments. The study seeks to understand the relationship between play and emergent group behaviour by analysing the specific activities of particular communities of play as they come into contact with specific ecosystems of play. The research identifies a number of contributing factors to the process of emergence and offers a vocabulary with and through which future scholars and gamers may engage with the subject. The key terms and definitions offered are:

- **Play ecosystems**: Virtual worlds operating as dynamic environments constantly developing over time through player interactions (with other players and with each game world). Within this broad topic, the research has identified a number of distinct types of 'play ecosystems', and has focused discussion specifically on a range of key examples that help to elucidate the nature of 'gaming' by comparing 'play ecosystems' defined as 'games' with those that cannot, for various reasons, be accurately described as such. In this, the research offered in this thesis identifies the spectrum of 'fixed synthetic worlds' created entirely by their designers, as a useful point of comparison to worlds that are 'co-constructed' and that integrate player-created content.

- **Communities of play:** The thesis lays the groundwork and provides ammunition for the legitimisation of communities formed around play, alongside communities of practice and interest, within computer-mediated communications and related fields.

- **The social construction of avatar identity:** The thesis argues that individual avatar identity is itself 'emergent' and is therefore socially constructed through a dynamic process of social interaction. This approach sees group identity as a factor in the formation of individual identity.

- **Intersubjective flow:** Building on existing scholarship by DeKoven and Csikszentmihalyi et al., with specific reference to the concepts of 'flow' and 'process', this thesis argues for a new interpretation and adaptation of the concept of flow as a social process, in which players maintain a high state of flow for and in relation to each other (DeKoven, 1992a).

- **Productive play:** Going against the grain of contemporary Game Studies, which tends to rely on an often unstated assertion that play is inherently unproductive, this thesis looks at creative activities that emerge around and spring forth from play, positioning play as a productive activity and highlighting the role of social agency in productive play.

- **Porous magic circles and the 'ludisphere':** The thesis demonstrates that the 'magic circle' surrounding game activities is highly porous, with 'bleed-through' between game worlds as well as between the domains heretofore referred to as 'the real' and 'the virtual'. The thesis introduces the concept of a global play system enabled through the Internet where such trans-ludic activity occurs.

The focus in this thesis on one major community, The Gathering of Uru, a sub-set of the Uru Diaspora, provides a unique insight into the life and emergent behaviour of a focused play community. By moving across magic circles between games and virtual worlds, the emergent behaviour of this particular playgroup brings into stark relief the ways in which a game's design can shape, promote or hinder emergent behaviour. As players move between ecosystems of play, the patterns of interaction are made visible: the researcher is able to see how players adapt to their environs and how their environs in turn adapt to them. In this sense it is also important that the study allows access to the personal interplay between players in the Uru diaspora (and by extension, with other communities of play). Immersion in this group by the researcher-avatar Artemesia allowed for attainment of a certain level of insight revealed through exposure to the deep emotional bonds between players. For example, in the case of The Gathering of Uru, these bonds were demonstrated to

be strong enough to propel the group into other virtual worlds subsequent to their expulsion from Uru, and show the play community to be united in their effort to build a group identity around their relationship to Uru, and their shared play values. Through an emergent process of play/performance, players manifested characteristics that were unique to their group identity within the play community, promoted by other players through a process of feedback.

This process of this research is still underway, although the body of work submitted for the degree is now complete. Play culture is emerging, and this study is my first major, sustained entrance into the field with a research question and set of scholarly objectives in play. While the PhD thesis study has concluded, the unfolding of the story of the Uru Diaspora and The Gathering of Uru continues. Within *There.com*, the Uru community is currently experiencing resurgence, with an influx of new Uru players, the formation of a new residential community, and players continuing to create new *Uru*-inspired artifacts. Meanwhile, a re-launch of *Uru Live* has been announced, in which Cyan hopes to integrate not only new content, but also new content-creation tools to allow players to make their own Ages.

The study of that emergent behaviour, and of its implications for both Game Studies and game design more generally, will be the focus of future study for this researcher and her trusty avatar.

The next phase of this research will take two parallel tracks: a continued engagement (not to mention friendship) with members of The Gathering of Uru, the Uru Diaspora, and the next phase of a post-diaspora *Uru Live*; and the creation of an experimental game/virtual world based on using emergence as a design material. This game will attempt to apply what was learned in this study to practice, testing a number of hypotheses about the ways in which features can be designed to specifically promote various types of emergent behaviour, and also integrating elements of the fixed-synthetic and co-constructed worlds described above.

In the broader scope of Game Studies, it is hoped that future scholars, designers and game players alike will find the results of this project useful in their continuing efforts to articulate the properties of massively multiplayer games and virtual worlds, in a joint attempt to better understand and improve the experiences of players, avatars and (inter-acting) people. It is difficult to anticipate what the implications might be of this research beyond Game Studies. One of the potential (and desired) influences is the integrating of play and performance research more fully into disciplines that concern themselves with computer-mediated social interaction. One would hope that play will take an increasingly more central role in the scholarly analysis of the influence on computers in culture, one that is more representative of its apparent importance in the public imagination. This deficit is, to a certain extent, generational. Students now emerging from universities have grown up taking computer

games for granted, and recognising their own engagement with them as normative. Thus they are more likely to recognize play as legitimate on a variety of levels, both in terms of practice (being a game designer is now a highly coveted career path for students with an interest in media arts), and academic research. It is thus my hope that more 'auto-ethnographies' of gaming culture lie on the horizon, and that this work puts forth some new tools and theoretical approaches for conducting such research.

There is also potential engagement with practitioners and scholars concerned with the future of organizations. Recent books, such as *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation Is Reshaping Business Forever* (Beck and Wade, 2004) explore the influence of growing up with games on motivation, behavior and social interaction in the workplace. Even now, a number of researchers engaged with computer-mediated collaboration tools are beginning to look at MMOGs for models of how to improve engagement and interaction within work-based networked software. My own work is also leading me in the direction of collaborating with researchers in this area in what I feel will be fruitful engagement of interdisciplinary expertise.

It is safe to say that the world of MMOG's, both in terms of mass media, and in terms of scholarly research, has exploded during the period in which this work was conducted. At the onset of this research, there were few scholarly papers to draw from: today there are dozens of robust and thorough studies on a range of aspects of MMOGs. When this research began, *EverQuest* (McQuaid et al., 1999) had the largest subscribership of any MMOG, at around three quarters of a million players, and was the primary focus of research in the area. Today *World of Warcraft (Kern et al., 2003)* has brought online gaming squarely into the mainstream by passing the 6 million mark, the largest figure outside Korea. There is no question that this once niche activity has become a vibrant part of popular culture and media consumption. It is thus hoped that in a future where engagement with alternative universes is as prevalent as watching television is today, that this research will be reflected on as having been significant in its day. It is also hoped that the insights brought forth herein will be of benefit to future designers, who can apply both the outcomes of this study, and the new research that it gives rise to, to the creation of better, more inclusive and more engaging environments for networked social play.

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ENDNOTES

[i] Demographic information was primarily collected from the group's forum registration and in-world club pages, supplemented with observational and interview data.

[ii] For an interesting taxonomy of game worlds, see AARSETH, E., SMEDSTAD, S. M. & SUNNANÅ, L. (2003) A Multi-Dimensional Typology of Games. IN COPIER, M. & RAESSENS, J. (Eds.) *Level Up; Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) Conference Proceedings.* Utrecht, Netherlands, Universiteit Utrecht.

[iii] For more in-depth studies of avatars and virtual worlds, see (DAMER, B. (1997) *Avatars! Exploring and Building Virtual Worlds on the Internet,* Berkeley, California, Peachpit Press. and DIPAOLA, S. (1998-2005) Steve DiPaola: A Body of Work (Web Site). *http://www.diapaola.org.*

[iv] Much of the history of multimedia has been lost to history, in part because it has not been recorded in legitimate publications, and in part because many of the early publications that covered this material, such as short-lived multimedia trade magazines, have been lost. In the mid-1990's, PC-makers began bundling software with consumer hardware. Myst, along with Compton's Encyclopedia, were early CD's that came free with such hardware. Many business analysts at that time, surprised by their failure to anticipate the boom in home PC sales, attributed the market success of the hardware to this practice of 'bundling'. In some web forums, you can see passing references to receiving Myst free with ones first PC, etc. However, I was unable to locate any official publication that made note of this phenomenon.

[v] For more on the history of Myst, also see http://www.tiscali.co.uk/games/Myst/history1.html as well as the extensive fan-created Wikipedia entry on the game at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myst.

[vi] For reasons of authenticity, all direct quotes from study participants are quoted verbatim from text chat or transcribed from speech. Quoted text will observe the spelling conventions of the speaker, including any grammatical or spelling errors produced.

[vii] Uru's former community manager was interviewed several times with respect to this research.

[viii] This information was culled from interviews with Uru staff.

[ix] In some worlds, although rarely among TGUers, players can often have numerous different avatar characters within a single subscription account, each of which has a unique appearance and personality. When There.com had a special on free accounts, many players created 'twin' avatars, identical in appearance and with similar names to their main avatar. Through a special trick that allowed you to log into two different accounts off the same computer, players were able to run both avatars concurrently. Players could park their twin avatars in other locations, or even, in some cases, play two simultaneous games of Spades at the same event. Even for players who made entirely new (sometimes trans-gendered) avatars, it was generally clear that this was a secondary character, what role-playing gamers would call an 'alt'.

[x] 'Cosplay', or costume play is a popular adult pastime in Japan. It's manifestations run the gamut from dressing up as animé, manga and video game characters, to 'The Matrix Offline', a 'smartmob' (large-scale mobile phone instigated action) in which hundreds of Japanese men boarded Tokyo subways dressed as agents from the film, the Matrix. For more on Cosplay, see the work of Japanese media scholar Machiko Kusahara.

[xi] Summer camp in general seems to be an under-studied phenomenon. A cursory search on Google Scholar revealed only one scholarly publication on the topic of the sociology of summer camp, 'Playing for privilege an ethnography of play in a summer camp', a Canadian publication by Z.R. Cohen. I was unable to find any other reference to either this publication or its author. There were a number of other references to articles having to do with the health, educational and economic impacts of summer camp, especially on children with medical conditions such as cancer or asthma, or children with disabilities.

[xii] There has been some writing by games researchers concerning flow, and responses to these positions will be integrated into the third part of this thesis.

Playing Ethnography:
A study of emergent behaviour in
online games and virtual worlds

by Celia Pearce

Appendix A (printed): Published papers on the research

'Productive Play: Game Culture from the Bottom Up' (2006), *Games & Culture* Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2006. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

'Communities of Play: The Social Construction of Identity in Persistent Online Game Worlds' (2006), *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media* (Wardrip-Fruin, Harrigan, eds.) Cambridge: the MIT Press. (Forthcoming Summer 2006)

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Productive Play

Game Culture From the Bottom Up

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In this article, the author argues against the assertion, originating with "canonical" game studies texts such as *H*omo *L*udens and *M*an, *P*lay, and *G*ames, that inherent in the definition of games is that they are "unproductive." Instead, she makes a case for the notion of productive play, in which creative production for its own sake (as opposed to production for hire) is an active and integral part of play activities, particularly those enabled by networks. Citing from her recent ethnographic research studying intergame immigration between massively multiplayer online games (*MMOG*s), the author describes one case in which players ejected from the *MMOG* Uru: Ages Beyond *M*yst became highly productive, creating artifacts from Uru in other virtual worlds like There and Second *L*ife. Over time, the Uru Diaspora expanded the game's culture, eventually creating their own original Uru- and *M*yst-inspired artifacts, including an entirely new game.

*K*eywords: play; games; *MMOG;* massively multiplayer games; game studies

Productive Play: An Oxymoron?

Most of game studies has inherited from the two canonical texts of play, Huizinga's (1955) Homo Ludens and Callois's (1961/2001) Man, Play, and Games, the axiomatic assumption that games are by definition "unproductive." This position is shared by the majority of game taxonomies in recent years, although thankfully, we seem to be moving out of the phase of taxonomania and into a more mature cycle of investigation. The "mass media" at large also shares the view that games, to invoke Monty Python's forgotten classic, are a "complete waste of time"—or worse. As with chess in the Middle Ages (Yalom, 2004), theatre in Shakespeare's day, and film during the McCarthy era, some sectors of the U.S. government are trying to protect the masses from perceived dangers of games, as if the medium has some mysterious property that made it a particularly insidious way to take one's daily dose of media violence.

Even for people who regard games as a high cultural form—including those of us who make a living playing, writing, talking about, and making them—the general

Author's Note: The author wishes to acknowledge her research avatar Artemesia.

consensus is that games are not productive. Game developers themselves are sometimes puzzled by the academic interest in games—after all, they say, it's "only entertainment."

I would like to argue that in fact neither play nor games is inherently unproductive and furthermore, that the boundaries between play and production, between work and leisure, and between media consumption and media production are increasingly blurring. In the process, the sacred "magic circle," which appears in various forms from Turner (1982) to Salen and Zimmerman (2004), is also beginning to blur.

The Play Revolution

In an earlier article on emergent authorship (Pearce, 2002), I began to examine the notion of play as an act of production, identifying a new hybrid entertainment form in which players were paying to produce their own entertainment media. I believe that this fundamental shift in the media production schema has profound cultural implications that transcend merely the "questionable" pursuit of "game studies."

First, the trend in consumer-production represents a fundamental inversion of the capitalist/industrial media production/broadcast model that has dominated Western culture for at least a century—it is the media snake eating its own head. Enabling people to their own entertainment experience has become a viable business model, as evidenced by the thousands of Sims skins (player-created characters) that have perpetuated that brand's longevity to historical levels (Poremba, 2003). What new business opportunities are emerging around these new autoludic practices? What happens when we empower players to "play with themselves?"

Second, in an ironic reversal, the malleability, discursive quality, and networked infrastructure of the Internet returns us to a preindustrial culture of play, a time when games were not products that were owned, published, and distributed by a corporatized "hegemony of play" but were made up, changed, and reconfigured by groups of ordinary people in site-specific, socially and culturally specific contexts. "Pre-digital" thinkers—such as Bernie DeKoven (1978) and Iona and Peter Opie (1969)—give us insight into these analog cultures of play. As Henry Jenkins (1998) so eloquently pointed out, for many children in Western culture, as wide-open natural spaces, like those portrayed in books like Huckleberry Finn, have given way to pavement and apartment complexes, children have expanded inward, into cyberspace. Yet all too often, these overmediated virtual playgrounds have not had the flexibility of a piece of chalk, a tree branch, or an upside-down cardboard box.

Third, this confluence emerges out of a prevailing postmodern sensibility in popular culture and across all media in which appropriation is not only allowed, it is exalted. Players feel emboldened not only to borrow but to reformulate and remediate their gaming experience, creating still more breaches in the magic circle, as well as breaches between magic circles—machinima films made in game engines being perhaps the best instance of this. Furthermore, those who do this well are both respected by their peers and in isolated but growing cases, empowered by the game companies

themselves, who see player production as a way to mitigate spiraling game development costs. But there's more. Not only do player-producers simulate simulations, they propel them out into the real world so that reality becomes the playground of the virtual. And, as we've seen in the case of earlier fan culture forms, such as the Star Trek fan Trekkie phenomenon (Jenkins, 1992), they also expand the game narrative and eventually begin to take it over. The preponderance and increasing legitimacy of blogs, zines, and "open-source" content-production frameworks, such as Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), demonstrate that self-created content is not just an isolated phenomenon within game culture but a widespread, transmedial, and international zeitgeist.

These trends fly in the face of the status quo of centralized, hegemonic, broadcast, and distribution models of media creation. Like the Vatican of the Middle Ages, the Western media hegemony (including the game industry) has enjoyed total control over content for at least a century, probably longer if you go back as far as the printing press. This power elite has maintained total control and economic domination through technologies that by their very nature are nondiscursive. A dynamic, two-way medium in which the "audience" has just as much power to create content as the "producer" threatens to upend this power structure.

More important, productive play also challenges traditional capitalistic notions of "productivity" versus "leisure." We need only look at the history of hobby culture in the United States and elsewhere to see that for many, productive leisure is a welcome escape from the regimen of being productive at someone else's behest. Furthermore, as we have tended to relegate play to the realm of childhood, also a period of "supposed" unproductivity, the notion that play is not only productive but an adult-worthy activity represents a major shift in cultural perception.

A Case Study: The Myst/Uru Diaspora

To illustrate some of these points, I'd like to draw some examples from my recent research that demonstrate the many facets of productive play.

Over the past 14 months, I have been conducting an ethnographic study of what I have come to refer to as the Uru Diaspora—a group of players who were made refugees by the closure of the Myst-based massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) Uru in February of 2004.[1] There were about 10,000 Uru players in total online, and although the game ran for a relatively short period of time and had a relatively small subscribership, it inspired a passionate response from its player community. The closure of the game server compounded this by subjecting the players to a collective trauma that formed a bond that, as of this date, has outlived the original game by a time factor of about 2 to 1.

The core of the study focused on one particular group that immigrated and formed an "ethnic" community in There, an online virtual world that has allowances for player asset creation. Players combined the existing culture of There with that of Uru to create a hybrid culture that is comparable to a Chinatown or Little Italy in the United

States. Like a real-world group of immigrant refugees, the Gathering of Uruz met much initial resistance from the There community. Because the group was so large (about 300 people), they wielded a significant amount of power in the relatively new virtual world. This was only exacerbated by their demographics. These longtime Myst fans were mostly professional people in their 40s and 50s, most with children, and about half women. They were competent, articulate, and their traumatic experience in Uru made them somewhat demanding of There management, wishing to avert the mistreatment they felt they had experienced in being cast out of Uru. The community became extremely influential, both socially and politically, and eventually "assimilated" so that they now feel as much Therians as Uruvians. Concurrently, they also explored ways of creating their own self-contained re-creation of Uru using first text-based MUD technology and later, the Adobe Atmosphere virtual world creation tool. In the summer of 2004, along with a number of other Uru groups that were still active, they were able to negotiate a deal with publisher Cyan to release the server software to allow for player-run servers. The Uru Diaspora literally took over the game, and now all Uru servers are run by players. Surprisingly, the Uru immigrants in There did not return to Uru as their main home world; rather, they meet there once a week to experience their homeland and meet up with other members of the group who do not make their virtual homes in places other than There (Figures 1 and 2).

Even from the beginning, there were controversies regarding how to bring the Uru culture into There. Some wanted to try to re-create Ages (the Myst/Uru term for game levels), but others had a philosophical objection to this based in the narrative of the original game. In all Myst games, Ages are created by writing books, each of which is a distinct world and complex, elaborate puzzle unto itself. It would seem that the storyline supports the idea that one could "write" new Ages. However, according to the Myst mythology, only the D'Ni, the lost society at the center of the game series, had the ability to write Ages. This somewhat talmudic theological argument led to some interesting outcomes. At first, players created artifacts that were directly derived from the original Uru game. Over time, players who emerged as the artisans of the group began creating new Uruesque objects, using the aesthetics, symbols, imagery, and in some cases, back story of the game. One of the top artisans of the group, Damanji[2] proposed building an entirely new Uru Age in There, but this was met with intense resistance from the There community, reinforcing their anxiety that the Uru refugees were trying to take over their world. Damanji then formulated a new approach to what I would call emergent Age creation, although he did not characterize it as such. His idea was to create new Uru-like objects in the style of There and put them on sale for the general There public. (There has an auction mechanism for player-created items.) He created an octagonal cone house, inspired by but distinctly different from one that appears in Uru. As a result, Thereians who were not Uruvians and knew nothing of the game or its immigrant population in There began to purchase cone house components, and over time, these structures became ubiquitous throughout There. In addition, one of his Uru comrades, one of many Uru refugees who became influential citizens in There, founded the University of There. Most of the buildings on the campus are constructed from Damanji's cone houses (Figure 3).

Figure 1
The *fountain* was central to social life in Uru.



Figure 2
Player-created Uru *fountain in* There.

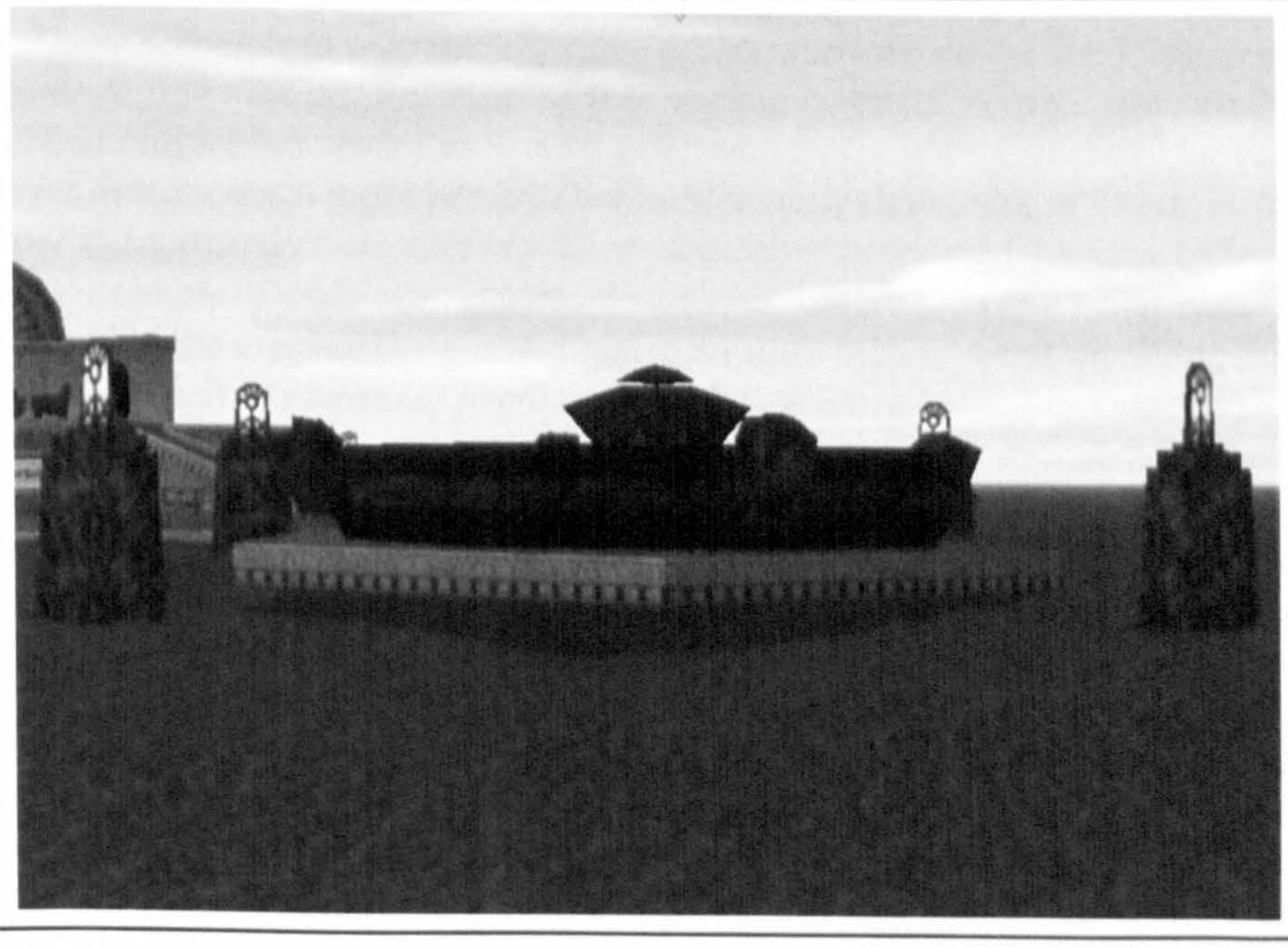
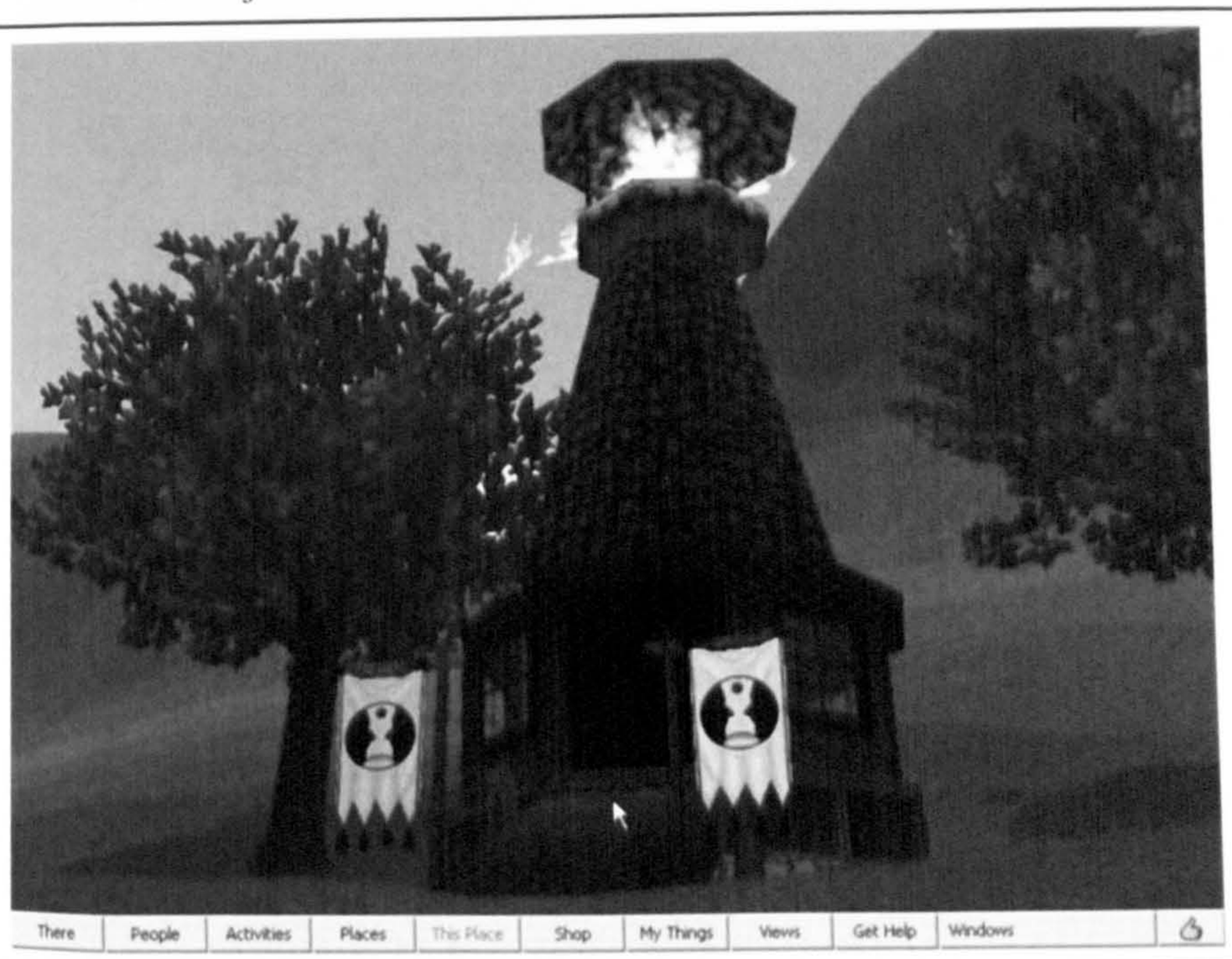
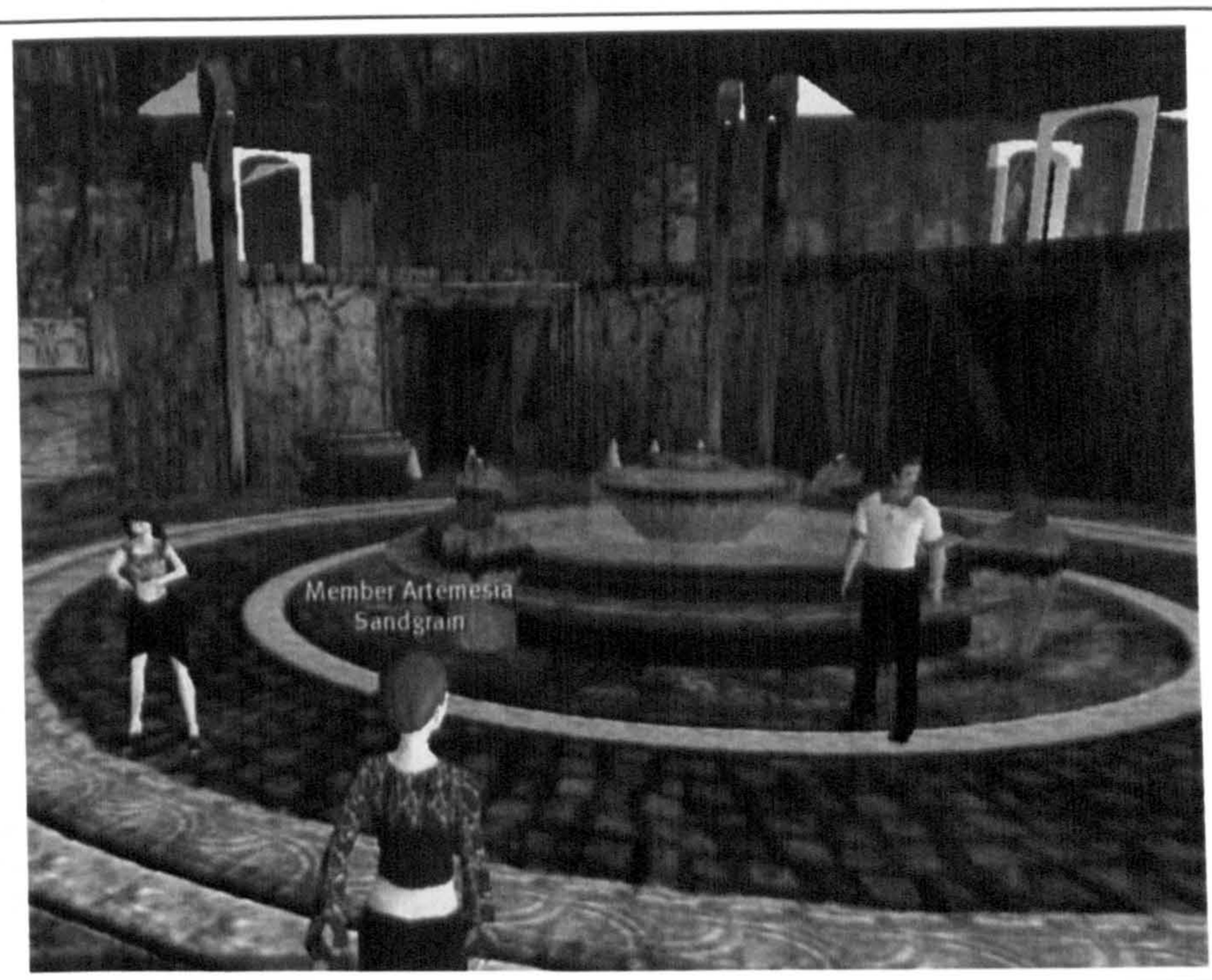


Figure 3
Player-created, Uru-inspired artifacts, such as Damanji's cone houses, can be seen throughout There.



From a methodological perspective, tracking a digital Diaspora is a challenging task. I have been able to keep track of some other trajectories of the Uru Diaspora and continue to find new instantiations of it in various contexts. A large community of Uru/Myst players has settled in Second Life, which also has affordances for player creation that are much more versatile but harder to use than those of There. A small builder's group created an exact replica of major portions of the Uru game in Second Life, an example of what was referenced earlier as a simulation of a simulation. This area is so like the original Uru game, down to the most minute detail, including scripting features such as swarms of fireflies that follow you around and linking books that take you between Ages, it is a stupendous achievement by anyone's reckoning. Another group of combined Uru and Myst players in Second Life finally did the inevitable and designed their own entire Age. Rendered with equal craftsmanship and attention to detail, it is a completely new game in the Myst tradition, with the same type of puzzle structure, including notebooks and poems with clues hidden throughout, strange machines that have to be reactivated, and unusual combinations of things that must be done to enter a new area. Both areas are popular with non–Myst/Uru players, who admire the elaborate craftsmanship of the buildings and furnishings, fantastical natural settings, intricate narratives, and complex scripting. As with There, Uru players are among some of the top creators in the larger Second Life community (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Myst- and Uru-inspired game created by players in Second Life.



Numerous other examples of Uru fan culture abound, some resembling more traditional forms such as fan art and stories, dictionaries of the D'Ni language, T-shirts and mugs, and so on. But there are also some unusual offerings. One woman makes Uru-themed quilts. The Welcomers (see Note 2) whose mission in Uru was to greet newcomers, now have a similarly charged branch in The Matrix Online.

The Uru group, though only one example, is of particular interest because the game itself is no more. Players have quite literally taken it over and made it their own, carrying it forward to a new level. Eighteen months after the game was closed, we still see a vibrant, creative, and highly productive community, dispersed throughout other games and reinforced by their shared traumatic experience. As games begin to integrate increasing affordances for player creativity, I anticipate the growth of an entirely new form of autoludic culture in which players will feel more and more empowered to make the game their own.

Conclusion

As more and more players engage in productive activity in and around play, we may want to question the assumption that games and play are unproductive. These

trends show that play has its own productive character which can also be seen as a form of cultural production and perhaps could be defined as a form of folk art. Studying emergent forms of player production can also inform game design. How can player production be promoted within the game structure? Can we find new models for production in partnership with players? It seems from these examples that players are more than willing to pay for this service, and given the increasing costs and complexity of commercial game production, it may turn out that in the long run, we have no choice but to let players take over their play experience completely.

Notes

1. The detailed ethnographic study will be published as a doctoral dissertation in summer of 2006.
2. All avatar and group names hae been changed to protect subjects' annonymity.

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

by Celia Pearce and Artemesia[1]

(DRAFT)
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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.

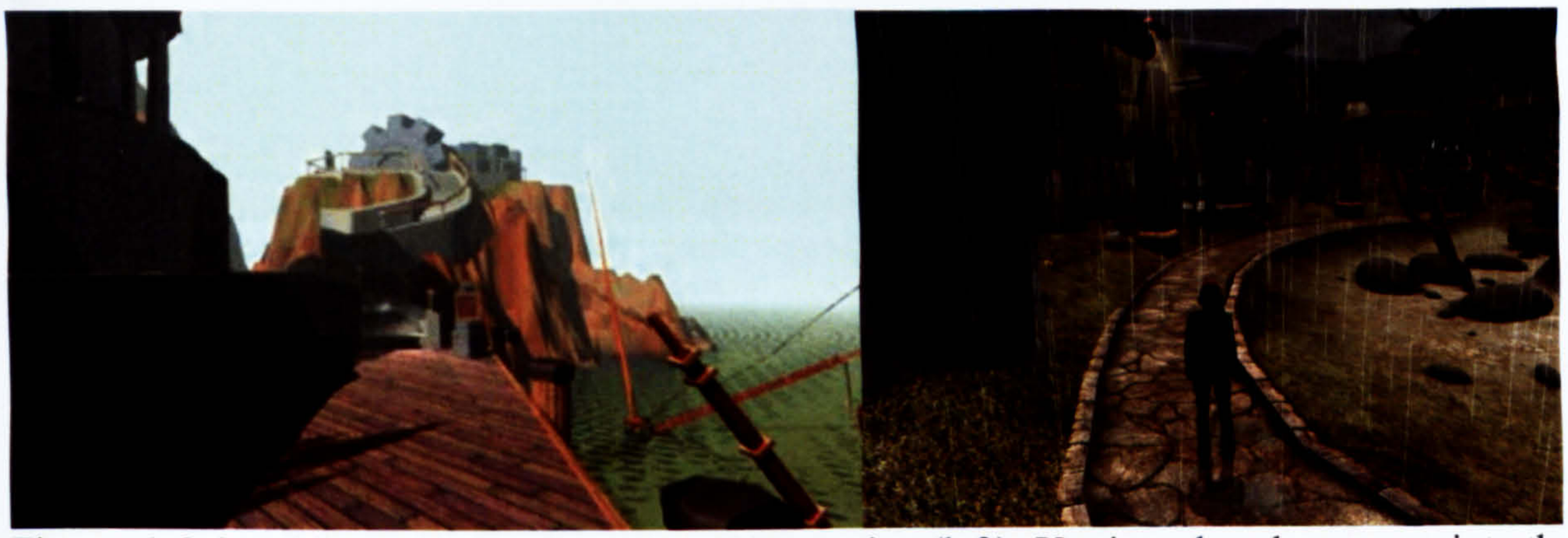
One key finding was that players arrived to the game predisposed to certain emergent behaviors, based in part on past play patterns and in part on demographics. *Uru* attracted a somewhat unusual audience for an online game, mostly longtime fans of *Myst*, which had been the top-selling PC game for eight 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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