Digital Dwelling: Building in Online Worlds

Bjarke Liboriussen
University of Southern Denmark
bl1895@gmail.com

"Second Life" basics: Sex, violence, dwelling

The attraction of game worlds such as "World of Warcraft" is not that puzzling, but why spend time in "Second Life"? Since "Second Life" has been consistently designed as an experiment into user freedom, this world is of particular interest to the study of online worlds (or "virtual worlds"). "Second Life" can give us a sense of what happens when a world grows from virtually nothing, and with intended minimal interference from its publicists. Everything inside "Second Life" is built by users, but what do users build for? What experiences do their designs support? "Second Life", in other words, offers a suggestive glimpse of the basic, experiential categories emerging from almost absolute freedom in an online world.

Sex, is the most obvious answer, when considering fundamental, experiential categories of "Second Life". The statistics are tricky when it comes to interactive pornography in "Second Life", but sexual activity is certainly built for and takes place on a large scale.

Violence is another answer. Digital, interactive media has a certain affinity with violent action. To have an experience of an interactive nature, the user must have frequent opportunities to act, and to perceive an immediate change in the state of the digital world resulting from his or her actions. Allowing the user to watch death and destruction as the result of pressing a button is an efficient way of achieving interaction (Ryan 2002: p. 603). Violence has been designed for in certain parts of "Second Life". The truly trigger-happy user will prefer other online worlds more specifically aimed at violent action. Still, it is thought-provoking to see violent action emerge as a major, experiential category of "Second Life".

Sex and violence. One could point to other, more refined experiences: learning, listening to music, or the secondary experience of shopping (which is often aimed at facilitating more fundamental experiences, such as sex or violence). But even without the benefit of exact statistics, it is safe to assume that users spend far more time engaged in interactive pornography than attending concerts; far more time fighting than learning French. The basic affinities of online worlds seem to resemble those of other audio-visual media. As Jean-Luc Godard famously suggested, all you really need to make a film is a girl and a gun (again: sex and violence). The online world is, however, not only an audio-visual medium, but an interactive, audio-visual medium. Another major, experiential category, one as fundamental as sex and violence, emerges as a result of the "Second Life" experiment into user freedom: *dwelling*.

Dwelling and immersion

The idea of dwelling is an architectural and philosophical one. It denotes a specifically human relationship to a well-known place. Media scholars, however, talk of the sense of presence generated by interactive media by invoking the concept of *immersion*. Many factors leading to immersion have been suggested, but as Marie-Laure Ryan notes, "[t]he interactive nature of digital worlds is the true foundation of their immersivity" (595). In other words, immersion is not theoretically contingent on three-dimensionality. This claim seems validated by early, ethnographic work on text-based worlds. Annette N. Markham describes how users of 1990s, text-based worlds conceptualised their online world in three, basic ways: as tool, as place, and as way of being (86). Apparently, users had some sense of place right from the medium's beginnings, but all other things being equal, sense of place has been strengthened with the introduction of central-perspective 3D-graphics and a higher degree of motor-isomorphism (i.e., resemblance between user input and avatar movement). The experience of online place begins to resemble the experience of offline place a little more, making architectural thought a little more relevant.

To dwell is not only to be immersed in place, but also to build, as Martin Heidegger argues. Heidegger insists that true building is not only the construction of housing but also a kind of cultivation; cultivation of something that grows on its own, but needs you to "to cherish and protect [it], to preserve and care for [it]" (1971). Heidegger's points seems to be confirmed by my own, ethnographic observations from within "Second Life".

Many buildings in "Second Life" are collective projects. I will briefly mention one ambitious, large-scale project that I have been following since early June 2007. The five builders describe themselves as a "family". In their building, they carefully mix together several different historical styles to create the sense of a building developed slowly over a large span of time. The project reached a first peak in October 2007 with a very well attended housewarming party, but the family kept on modifying the building; major additions and changes took place, with a surge in activity from February 2008. In April 2008, however, the family had to leave their land and start all over in a new place (this was due to the shutdown of the larger area their land belonged to). This did not dispirit the family. On the contrary, the building project was recast on an even grander scale with much hard work ahead.

The financial situation changes, and so does the social scaffolding of the project (the specific social structures steering the building project). Friendships cool off; neighbours come and go. Through all this inside and outside change, the overall goals of the users' "second lives" remain stable; or, their goals remain *in place*, i.e., intimately linked to specific places. As the leader of the group expresses these goals, they are "[to search] for a home" and "keeping my family together" (June 2007).

The builders pour vast resources of time, money (costs are shared) and creativity (the design workload is shared) into the building. The building (the *thing*) is intended as a home, and this goal was to some degree reached early on. But still the building (the *activity*) goes on with no final end in sight, underlining how building and dwelling intertwine. Constantly building (for) a home strengthens the users' sense of online dwelling.

Conclusion

It is time, perhaps, to become fascinated with the old, rather than with the new. Since the 1980s, a fascination with digital technology, especially with the fluidity of the digital, have fuelled speculations as to how human culture will be radically transformed (cf. notions of "Cyberspace" and "Virtual Reality"); even humanity itself would be subject to radical transformation (cf. the notion of "cyborgs"), or so it was speculated. Today, it is fascinating to see how "old" human experiences (sex, violence, dwelling) make themselves felt on new, digital and online conditions. When it comes to online worlds, understanding the basic, human urge to dwell is a highly relevant challenge for academia. Media scholars can meet this challenge by leaving cyborg speculations behind, and move closer to ethnography and architecture.

Heidegger, Martin. 1971. "Building Dwelling Thinking." In *Poetry. Language, Thought*. New York: Harper Collins.

Markham, Annette N. 1998. *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2002. "Beyond Myth and Metaphor: Narrative in Digital Media." In *Poetics Today* 23 (4). Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 581-609.