

The American dream

Narratives Of Space And Place In Second Life

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Abstract

Second Life is one of the most complex virtual worlds available due to one of its main components – user-generated content. In Second Life players are active contributors to in-world development, and only 1% of the contents available were created by Linden Lab; players are not only contributing to space, but also to its social development. Some researchers suggest that Second Life’s development history reflect California’s one; not only because Linden Lab is a Californian company, but mainly because Second Life is announced as “your world, your imagination”, reflecting at the same time the “Californian ideology” (Barbrook and Cameron, 2001; Boellstorff, 2008) and the chasing for the *American dream*. The aim of this paper is to verify if Second Life’s development may be considered a remix of the chasing of *American dream* by understanding how users are taking advantage of the building tools available, creating their own virtual places and fulfilling their own wishes. To accomplish this goal a qualitative methodology was used based on a multimodal netnographic research (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010). The data collection methods were auto-netnography (Kedzior and Kozinets, 2009) and detailed observational data collection of 64 in-world locations.

Keywords: virtual worlds, space, place, remix platforms

Introduction

Through the last decade online games and social platforms became very popular and contributed to internet development. Virtual worlds or massive multiplayer online social games conquered a high number of users – in 2007 the number of users of these virtual environments was between 20 and 30 million but it was expected that this number would grow rapidly (Castronova, 2007), and it did, according to Kzero's¹ last report the number of registered accounts in virtual worlds in 2011 first quarter exceeded one billion – 1,185,000 registered accounts².

Virtual worlds are from two main types – game and non-game based. Game-based virtual worlds invite players to take part in a predetermined narrative. The player is invited to choose an avatar that will represent him in the virtual environment. Usually there is a set of avatars' types that represent the different characters of the fictional world³; each type having their own skills. These game-worlds may be developed under different themes, but fantasy scenarios where players have to fulfill different quests and defeat monsters seem to be one of the favorites⁴. While logged into these virtual environments players embody the chosen role interacting with other players and with non-player characters. Non-game ones, on the other hand, have no conducting narrative; they are just settings for virtual interaction. Non-game based virtual worlds offer a virtual space where players can build their own narratives and set the goals for being in-world. These narratives are built through the interaction with other avatars and with the setting. The majority of these multiuser virtual environments (game and non-game based) are open-ended; the game does not have a determined finish line, the world exists while users inhabit it and/or until the business owner turns the servers off.

The majority of non-game based virtual worlds are sandbox games – “authoring environments within which players can define their own goals and write their own stories” (Jenkins, 2007: 59). There is one sandbox game that takes this definition further and offers their players the opportunity to take part not only in world’s history but also in its geographical development – Second Life.

In the first quarter 2011 Second Life counted with 25 million registered users⁵, and it still is one of the most complex virtual worlds available (Boellstorff, 2008; Johnson, 2010). One of its main components is user-generated content: within this gamespace players are active contributors to in-world development, and only 1% of the contents available were created by Linden Lab (Ondrejka, 2006: 163); players are not only contributing to space construction – buildings, green spaces and general surroundings, but also to its social development – institutions and groups that will contribute to in-world’s economy, culture, identity or hierarchical organization. Beside this, there are more four characteristics that make this multiuser virtual environment an interesting object of study: all the avatars existent in-world are playing characters controlled by human beings in real time; intellectual property – meaning that avatars own everything they create; it has its own micro-currency – Linden Dollar, that may be exchanged for ‘real value currencies’ through Linden Lab’s exchange platform – LindeX; and all players have access to simple building tools and to Linden Scripting Language, which are the ‘ingredients’ to create objects (animated or not) in this virtual world.

Due to the fact that Second Life development is being based in user-generated content some researchers suggest that its development history reflect California’s one; not only because Linden Lab is a Californian company, but mainly because Second Life is announced as “your

world, your imagination”, reflecting not only the “Californian ideology” (Barbrook and Cameron, 2001; Boelstorff, 2008), but also the chasing for the *American dream* (Adams, 2001). The amount of time and effort players invest in Second Life may be measured by its complexity. Beautiful, interesting and harmonious destinations are available throughout this virtual world. As in California’s case, players are transforming Second Life’s empty land into a vibrant set of locations. Players are transforming virtual space into virtual places through new narratives of space and place.

The aim of this paper is to verify if Second Life’s development may be considered a remix of the chasing of *American dream*. To accomplish this goal we will analyze several in-world locations in order to see how users are taking advantage of the building tools available, creating their own virtual places and fulfilling their own wishes. And as in the California case, some of them are even thriving. A qualitative methodology was used based on a multimodal netnographic research (Kozinets, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010). The data collection methods used were auto-netnography (Kedzior and Kozinets, 2009) and detailed observational data collection of sixty four in-world locations. Our netnographic research was designed as an interactive model⁶ (Maxwell, 2002) and our data analyzed through an inductive approach⁷.

In order to fulfill the established goal, we will start by analyzing Second Life’s development history and the transformation of virtual empty land into virtual shared places; on the second section we will see how territory is perceived and experienced by analyzing the role of the tools for land exploration; and on the third one we will see how users’ spatial appropriation of the virtual world may be considered a remix of a first life cultural narrative concerning the centrality of property for achieving a better life and the possibility of success.

Second Life development history – turning space into places

By the time Second Life was launched the gamespace area was very limited (see Figure 1); there were only two main zones: Mainland and Outlands, and a lot of virtual space to be bought and explored. By that time Linden Lab managed the continents and created some locations within them, but there were already available user-generated places like Americana, Gibson or Lusk. If we look to a 2009⁸ version of Second Life world map (see Figure 2) the growth of the territory is evident, by that time Linden Lab managed more continental areas – a total of nine, but the geography of this virtual world was now characterized by the amount of islands that populated its sea. While Mainland territories are still managed by Linden Lab, islands are managed by private owners – individual or collective ones. And it is through the analysis of private propriety that we can see how empty space is being transformed into inviting places. In order to understand the urban development of this virtual world, we need to define the concepts of space and place once “space and place have become totemic concepts for those exploring social, cultural, economic and political relations” (Hubbard and Kitchin, 2010: 2).

Space, representational spaces and places. According to Yi-Fu Tuan (2001) both space and place result from our experience as human beings and the negotiation we make with the surrounding environment. Henri Lefebvre (1991) suggests that space is produced through a ‘conceptual triad’: spatial practice, representations of space and representational space. The representational space emerges from the relationship we establish between spatial practice and representations of space; it emerges from our experiences. Tuan on the other hand presents space as being more abstract than place: “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we

get to know it better and endow it with value.” (2001: 6). Michel de Certeau considers that is difficult for space to be abstract and suggests that “space is a practiced place” (de Certeau, 1994: 117), and it takes shape when we move between places – “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements” (*ibidem*). Place is then defined by the experience of those who inhabit it (Hubbard & Kitchin: 2010). The transformation of space into place occurs through its organization (order) (de Certeau, 1994); when space becomes structured emotions tend to be attached to it, it gains meaning (Tuan, 2001; Bardzell and Odom, 2008).

Following the ideas proposed by Lefebvre (1991), Tuan (2001) and de Certeau (1994) we may consider space as pre-ordered, “situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts” (de Certeau, 1994: 117); representational spaces as the result of a more personal relationship with space – like an in-between stage, between the ‘pre-ordered’ space and ‘ordered’ places; and places as the realization of the lived experience within the representational space – the lived experiences give us the opportunity to control and appropriate space. These three categories may also be applied to virtual environments, and they will help us better understand the relationship players develop with the gamespace.

The transformation of space into place within 3D game environments is almost inevitable. Due to the sense of being there – immersion, we tend to attribute meaning to the different locations we visit. Following de Certeau proposal we may understand the constitution of virtual space as the result of joining human creativity, technology and the desire of space control, nevertheless the emergent ‘cybernetic society’ in Second Life is not “self-moving and technocratic” (*ibid.*: 136), it is a creative and participative one. Because of this particular

characteristic we consider that in this virtual world both space and place are culturally produced through player generated space narratives – possible through the use of design and technology to “contrive and control a space for utterly free and self-governing action” (Malaby, 2009: 2). It is the relationship one establishes with the virtual space and places that will define our ‘story’ within this alternative sphere. While in the virtual world we feel free to explore, socialize and build, but in spite of being considered as an almost free space, Second Life is controlled by Linden Lab; players feel free but is the company that controls the main power – the platform’s code and servers’ control. The awareness of this control is not always present, because the actions of the ‘ruling class’ (the ‘Lindens’⁹) are not always evident, and due to the world’s size we do not come across ‘Lindens’ often.

When the first ‘settlers’ arrived at Second Life they found an almost empty land that offered them the opportunity to own and manage it; after eight years the result is a virtual space organized in a network of places and representational spaces. Due to the possibility offered to players to have an active role in gamespace development, Second Life is an interesting repository of user-generated content. It is remarkable how the transformation of space into place reveals players preferences regarding the places they want to live in and/or spend time in. Within this virtual environment we can find almost everything, from underwater bars, skyboxes (floating houses), or idyllic fantastic environments, to recreations of real life places.

Virtual places’ typologies. According to Champion and Dave (2007) there are three types of virtual places one can create in virtual environments; players establish different relationships with each of them. We will characterize them in order to understand the nature of places created in Second Life. ‘Spatial Visualization Virtual Environments’ are those that

represent only spatial configurations and allow users to interact with objects. The second type is ‘Activity-based’ – users may accomplish tasks through the interaction with gamespace. The third type is the ‘Hermeneutic’, these environments require “the ability to personalize and communicate individual perceptions through artifacts” (*ibid.*: 342); in them the player feels at home. It is difficult to feel emotionally attached to a virtual place in the same way we do in first life and this characteristic makes hermeneutic virtual environments difficult to create (Champion & Dave, 2007). In order to understand the nature of Second Life environment we need to consider the possibility of a ‘mild hermeneutic immersion’ category (Champion & Dave, 2007: 342): players establish a close relationship with the virtual territory, they are owners of the majority of in-world contents, but due to the fact that the majority of locations were created by users it is difficult to ensure a homogeneous degree of quality in all available places. And not having a shared conducive narrative result in a slower immersion process; immersion in Second Life occurs through the engagement with other players but also with territory; it occurs when we are able to interact in a dynamic and memorable way with the virtual environment.

In the subsequent section we will characterize the different tools available within this gamespace that allow players to perceive space and at the same time are the main ‘means of transportation’ that take them to the different representational spaces and places available in-world.

Exploring the co-created territory

As it happens in first life, mapping the territory is a way to control and perceive it; mapping and cartography allow the emergence of a ‘planetary consciousness’ (Pratt, 1992), and

“provide the very conditions of possibility for the world we inhabit and the subjects we become” (Pickles, 2004: 5). In Second Life there are two types of maps – world-map and mini-map, and both are valuable tools for in-world orientation. Mini-map gives us access to a compressed visualization of the area where we are; it is useful if we want to have notion of the surroundings and allow us to locate other avatars. Avatars are represented by green dots and besides recognizing where we can find the higher concentration of them, through the mini-map we can teleport to the available nearest location. This functionality is very important because the most popular destinations use to be those most requested by users; people tend to prefer going where they can find other avatars, once the possibility of interaction and socialization increases.

Regarding the world-map tool, this gives us a representation of the world as a whole in an aerial top-down perspective. The player may decide on the perspective zoom degree, the minimum zoom show the world as a whole (the world is so wide that in order to recognize the whole map we need to scroll horizontally), and the maximum is region centered perspective, where it is possible to see region’s topography, areas and number and location of visitors (through the same system of ‘green dots’). There are some features incorporated in world-map like direct teleportation for chosen places, ‘filters’ to control the visible information and destinations’ search engine. Both mapping tools beside the traditional representation of territory, play also the role of ‘wayfinding’ (Pile and Thrift, 1995), as they contribute to the process of “visiting in turn all, or most, of the positions one takes to constitute the field... [covering] descriptively as much of the terrain as possible, exploring it on foot rather than looking down at it from an airplane” (Mathy, 1993: 15 *apud* Pile & Thrift, 1995: 1). They allow us to move within different regions and toward different destinations.

While space is perceived through the maps, place is perceived through exploration. Due to world's dimension and topography is difficult to explore it 'by foot', or even flying. The majority of territories are islands and to cross the virtual sea we would need a fast boat and a good orienteering. The easiest ways to find places in this virtual environment is through the official destination guide (available in and out-world), the platform's search engine or through directly clicking in a world-map's location. Only the first two options give us direct access to complementary information about the chosen site, but all use teleportation to transport players to the chosen destination.

The described tools play a very important role in the relationship established with territory; mapping is a way for Second Life users perceive the virtual world as a whole and to materialize it despite its digital condition. Additionally to its role as "geographical conquest of 'empty space'" (Gil and Duarte, 2011: 1), mapping also attenuates the 'dematerialization' of space that occurs through the use of teleportation as primary mean of transportation. Once "[teleportation is a] figurative negation of real space" (Aarseth, 2007: 45), and is a functionality that may contribute to a non-perception of space.

In Second Life virtual space is, then, being transformed into virtual places. Players invest in land and take advantage of the built-in tools to develop the territory, and at the same time to perceive it as a whole. In the following section, we will explore this virtual world as a remix platform, where cultural narratives are being constructed both individually and collectively. We want to understand if the effort made by players to transform 'empty' land into a prosperous one may be considered a remix of the *American dream*.

Remixing the *American dream*

United States of America (USA) are seen as the land of opportunity since the first migration waves to this country in the 18th century. The independence from the British Crown allowed the settlement of a free country where “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (*The Declaration of Independence*, 1776); and ever since migration waves having USA as destiny transformed this country in what we know today. These immigrants share a common goal since the 18th century until nowadays: they are chasing the *American dream*. Even having only been defined in the 20th century by James Truslow Adams (1931/2001), the *American dream* is part of America’s national narratives, and even of Western cultural ones. USA represents freedom, and the possibility of success once everybody have the opportunity to make individual choices without the prior restrictions that limited people according to their class, caste, religion, race, or ethnicity.

In the second half of the 20th century the *American dream* contributed to the rise of a new paradigm that is seen by some researchers as one of the major influences for the emergence of virtual worlds – the Californian ideology (Barbrook & Cameron, 2001; Boellstorff, 2008). The Californian ideology emerges from the particular culture of this state – the mix between the Silicon Valley ideology with the bohemian lifestyle of San Francisco. It is based on the principle of the emancipator potential of new information technologies (Barbrook & Cameron, 2001: 364): in cyberspace everybody will be both hip and rich. The new spatial dimension made available through the internet is seen as the new land of opportunity and virtual entrepreneurship may be the answer to the chasing of the *American dream* in the 21st century.

Being the Californian ideology a first life narrative from Second Life “hometown” it is reflected in the “modus operandi” of this virtual world. As in the *American dream* the possibility of prosperity through freedom, propriety, and civil rights is a major characteristic that contributed to the fast settlement of this virtual environment.

Through the analysis of the data collected we realized that avatars have a close relationship with territory; owning land is really a major feature of Second Life. Throughout the world is possible to admire user-generated places, and the majority of them are very complex – they are compound of different elements (natural or architectonic) and ‘decorated’ with many objects. It is rare to find a ‘simple’ place that does not offer a minimum level of interactivity to the visitor. Places seem built not only to entertain, but to make visitors comfortable and connected with the virtual place. Some of them were even constructed to transport the visitors to fantasy realms; they look dreamily real. Our experience was that the more interactive and complex a space was the more people seem to consider them as places and to spend more hours there. The majority of the visited places were owned and managed by groups of residents and reflected the groups’ purposes – for instance, Artropolis (see Figure 3) is owned by a community of artists and is a village constituted by ateliers of different Second Life artists, where we can find different exhibitions; Luskwood (see Figure 4) by a community of furies that manage a social area settled within a natural environment; Epiphany Island (see Figure 5) by an Anglican community offers a place for worship and reflection; La France Pittoresque (see Figure 6) is managed by the French community in Second Life and offers a social place where French is the main language and predominant cultural frame; or Avilion Mist (see Figure 7) owned by a role-

play community inspired by medieval fantasy and that offer to visitors a thematic commercial space and a role-play gamespace.

Another interesting aspect that we noticed through our observation is that design of in-world places seems to follow some real life rules. Despite the fact within Second Life we are in a dimension free from the majority of real life constrictions, we tend to design spaces that reflect our real life needs. Almost all places we visited and explored were decorated with harmonious objects and offered comfort to its visitants: for example, is usual to find sitting places from different types throughout the world; avatars build houses with kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms and bathrooms as they need to fulfill the same needs; public places offer many different activities and ways of interaction – we can go shopping, to a concert or to a bar, is only a matter of choosing what we want to do, then to check the possibilities with the platform search engine, to choose a destination and teleport. Teleportation, as seen, is the main mean of transportation within Second Life. Cars, planes, and all type of transportation means we can imagine are also available, but due to world's growth it is almost impossible to travel from one side to the other by other mean than teleportation. Some places even offer teleportation to their sub-places; but during our observation this seemed not a very popular option, since we saw only few people using it. Teleportation is often used to move between different regions and locations, but less used to go from one sub-place to another; avatars tend to prefer to fly (when allowed) or walk; in locations with larger areas public transportation is sometimes the choice – amongst the most common free-public transportation are trams and bicycles. Using other means than teleportation to explore a particular location is the way avatars have to perceive, feel connected with the digital territory, and to understand it as a network of places and representational spaces.

Conclusions

Our analysis of Second Life geographical development helped us to realize that we can understand this virtual world as a remix platform. Lawrence Lessig conceptualized remix as “the mix [that] provides new creative work” (Lessig, 2008: 69), in Second Life virtual space is being transformed into virtual places through the mix of simulations of real world with fantasy. The remix of popular cultural narratives are transforming Second Life into a very complex virtual world, where cultural narratives are being constructed both individually and collectively. The effort made by players to transform ‘empty’ land into a prosperous one may be considered a remix of the *American dream*: “The *American dream* is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. [...] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” (Adams, 2001: 414-5).

Second Life is seen by its residents as a new land of opportunity – for \$10/month we can have and manage a reasonable plot of land, where we can build whatever we wish. Besides the freedom regarding in-world territory, within this virtual world we can be whoever we want and we are able to pursuit our dreams and eventually have a prosperous second life. Second Life is, then, a remix platform that allows us to mix fiction and reality and to develop new cultural narratives based on the motto: ‘Your life, your imagination’; and this offer may be understood as

a remix of the classic *American dream* and its transformation into an *international American dream* (Meadows, 2008: 117).

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Footnotes

¹ Kzero is a consulting company specialized in virtual worlds, virtual goods, augmented reality and social gaming. One of Kzero's outputs are the reports regarding virtual worlds' growth, the main results of these reports are published also in company's site and blog – www.kzero.co.uk and www.kzero.co.uk/blog/.

² Report results available at <http://www.kzero.co.uk/blog/?p=4599>.

³ In the majority of games despite having to choose a standard initial appearance, once logged in the avatar is customizable.

⁴ World of Warcraft is the most popular game-based virtual world with over 12 million subscribers worldwide (<http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20101007005648/en>).

⁵ According to Kzero - <http://www.kzero.co.uk/blog/?p=4599> (June 3, 2011).

⁶ A research design that has “an interconnected and flexible structure” (Maxwell, 2002: 3).

⁷ “The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies.” (Thomas, 2006: 237).

⁸ We chose to show a 2009 map because it is difficult to reproduce a more actual version due to world's territory growth.

⁹ The representatives of Linden Lab in the virtual environment – the most important figure is Governor Linden, the virtual materialization of company's ruling power; there are also representatives of Linden Lab staff, and those are all the avatars whose last name is Linden.

¹⁰ Objects and avatars are animated through programming codes; these scripts may be for getting our avatar dancing a specific dance or song; or may add interactivity to objects.

Figure 3 Artropolis



Figure 4 Luskwood



Figure 5 Epiphany Island



Figure 6 La France Pittoresque



Figure 7 Avilion Mist

