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Culture and Practice:
What We Do, Not Just Where We Are

By Cristopher Paul, Seattle University

This is a brief essay, we call "think-pieces", designed to stimulate a discussion on a particular topic. For this series of essays we propose the following question:

"In thinking about the spaces of virtual worlds, and the practices we witness within them, how can we define what counts as culture? Can we see any common cultural trends emerging in different virtual worlds, or are practices as disparate as the worlds and groups we find within them?"

Abstract

Arguing that culture is shaped by location and practice, this essay advocates the study of common practices across virtual worlds to better understand how shared practices constitute cultures spanning multiple worlds. Connections among worlds are growing, as world designers borrow from similar influences and player bases gain experience with multiple worlds, leading to cultures potentially defined by the practices they share, rather than the worlds they inhabit.

Keywords: practice; culture; location.

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One of the key pieces of culture is what people 'do.' Shared practices and meanings help solidify cultural practices and develop common symbols and structures with which to interpret surrounding stimuli. Historically, culture has been shaped by common location, as location dictated with whom we could communicate, but increased mobility and changing communication technologies have altered the importance of location for both communication and culture. As observed years ago by J.C.R. Licklider and Robert Taylor (1968), online communication increases the importance of common interest and decreases the role of geographic co-location in the development of communities (pp. 37-38). However, contemporary games research often reintroduces the role of geography in the formation of culture by analyzing single games in our research. By doing so, we risk capturing only part of what constitutes culture in virtual worlds and stand to miss insights that are tied to practices across worlds.

Tracking the practices within games, rather than the practice of a game, requires a shift in how the culture of gaming is generally approached in academic literature. If games are considered as platforms for cultural development, rather than cultures in their own right, researchers can begin to chart the behaviors that can be found across platforms, while enhancing attempts to look at particular worlds in isolation. This offers an additional benefit of focusing on the multiple discrete groups of people within given worlds that may be missed in an attempt to develop a totalizing view of a world, focusing instead on grounded practice that can be followed across multiple worlds.

The idea of emphasizing the role of practice over location and the interrelations among worlds is tied to virtual worlds in three crucial ways. First, game designers clearly lift and borrow from each other in an attempt to improve their worlds. The debut of achievements in World of Warcraft borrowed heavily from Xbox Live, among other inspirations and the history of virtual worlds is littered with examples of how the development of worlds is shaped by external elements, from Snow Crash's Metaverse and Second Life to DIKU MUD and Everquest (Accardo, 2008). Beyond design, there are also examples of how members of virtual worlds are fluid and often choose to move from place to place. The concept of 'churn' in virtual worlds is predicated on the notion that players move from one game to another, which can be seen in guilds that move from game to game together and in the influence of one world on another. Notably, one measure of participation in online worlds in 2008 showed the impact the debut of new worlds can have on old ones, especially if both worlds pursue similar types of game play, as in the case of Age of Conan and Warhammer Online (Zenke, 2008). Finally, there are some examples in the academic literature that emphasize the role of common practice in virtual worlds. Richard Bartle and Nick Yee's work on player typologies are examples of how practices within games can be a key factor in how people engage the worlds in which they inhabit. Celia Pearce's work on the Uru diaspora also demonstrates movement from world to world and also the importance of shared beliefs and practices in building and maintaining cultures. Given this backdrop, both offline and online examples can make the case for the importance of practice in the consideration of what constitutes culture.

The importance of both practice and location in constructing culture can be clearly seen offline. My partner's family is of Norwegian descent and upholding aspects of their cultural tradition is quite important to them. They make traditional Norwegian food at holidays and 'being Norwegian' has so infused who they are that my partner grew up not seasoning food, as they believed proper Norwegians ate food without spices. Upon visiting Norway, her Norwegian relatives informed us that they not only use spices, but they rarely cook the traditional food that is part of the U.S. based relatives holiday festivities. Summing up the difference, one of her relatives observed that the U.S. relatives were far more concerned with being properly Norwegian and upholding traditions than the family that still lived in Norway. Quite simply, the Norwegianess of one who lives in Oslo is far less likely to be questioned than one who lives in Minneapolis. As a result, those in Minneapolis, in an effort to hold on to their culture, must consistently enact what it is to be Norwegian. For both, what counts as culture is very much shaped by both practice and location.

These offline lessons are instructive in moving to consider what counts as culture in virtual worlds. To date, virtual world research often focuses on investigating the practices of a given world, which is a necessary step to understanding the culture(s) in question, but is only reflective of part of what constitutes culture. I believe that studying a particular world is like location in offline space, a part of the picture that requires the triangulation of charting practice across worlds. A crucial new step in understanding culture in virtual worlds is looking at how location impacts the meaning and understanding of those practices, just as it does for people offline as they move from one place to another.

I suspect that there is room for substantial insight about the culture of virtual worlds to be found if we trace player behavior across these worlds. This could be done by following groups of people from world to world (as in the case of Pearce), it could be done by tracking groups of similarly motivated players (along the lines of the Bartle/Yee typologies), or it could also be done by tracking certain player behaviors across worlds to discuss how particular practices helped establish elements of emergent cultures in multiple virtual worlds. As world designers borrow from each other, especially from other worlds, this aspect of culture stands to become even more important to analyze. Tracing what brings people together, like player-versus-player (http://www.pvpsource.com/; http://www.warpvp.com/), forums for general game discussion hosted outside of the game publisher (http://elitistjerks.com; http://www.eq2flames.com/), or understanding in-world markets (http://www.thewoweconomist.com/; http://myeve.eve-online.com/ingameboard.asp?a=channel&channelID=3515), across platforms offers the opportunity to get a different kind of insight into what constitutes culture in virtual worlds, one based on practice. In this case, I think the next step in understanding what constitutes culture in virtual worlds requires us to look at what inhabitants do, so we can understand whether or not we can both spice our food and retain our Norwegianess.

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