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## **Editor’s Corner**

### **Culture and virtual worlds:** *The not-quite-new experiences we study*

By Mark Bell, Telecommunications program, Indiana University and  
Mia Consalvo, School of Media Arts & Studies, Ohio University

As a reader of this issue of JVWR, you should have an interest in virtual worlds as well as some experience with a few, even if an exact definition of what constitutes a virtual world or how to differentiate various types of virtual worlds still proves elusive to you. Popular media outlets as well as academics from multiple disciplinary homes have been rumbling about the topic for some time now, but virtual world spaces that contain millions of people globally are just now becoming a sustained subject of the studious eye of academic research. The JVWR is a part of that process, aiming to lead that study and offer vigorous, sustained discussions about how to best understand and study what we witness both on and offline in relation to virtual worlds. But this is not process that needs to begin completely afresh.

Susan Herring (2004), CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) scholar at Indiana University, reminds us to ask two questions of new communications technologies: first, is it actually new and second, does it impact communication, society and culture? It is easy to be swayed by the notion that because virtual worlds are bright and shiny they are in fact “new.” Yet as we know, virtual worlds of the textual sort existed many years before 3D graphical versions like Second Life became popular, and literary theorists would remind us that “virtual worlds” are hardly limited to electronic media--they may be found in books, films, and other artistic realms as well. While it is important and useful to define what virtual worlds are now, as this journal is in the process of doing, we need to remind ourselves of the articulations contemporary virtual worlds share with past versions. We do this to ensure we do not keep reinventing research

agendas and explorations of the newest practices, as if they had no legitimate historical precedents.

It is also easy to assume that the culture virtual worlds appear to have is different or unique, either in relation to the "real world" or in relation to other virtual worlds. Yet, to fall back on such assumptions as a starting point for studying virtual worlds risks oversimplifying the questions we ask, as well as relying on false binaries such as "online/offline" that do no justice to the lived complexities of individuals and groups in virtual as well as physical spaces. Instead, we should seek to explore virtual worlds as starting points, as contingent spaces. We can examine them for their reliance on traditional cultural norms and practices, their challenges to such elements, and how they grow and evolve relative to the daily lives of their inhabitants. In every way, virtual worlds are constituted by multiple cultures, culture that is ordinary, and everyday culture that is evolving, confusing, challenging, dangerous, and exhilarating.

The study of culture, even before computers and electronics became involved, had a long and varied history. From Margret Mead's journeys to Samoa to Foucault's dissection of the power structures of the penal system, much thought, research, and analysis has focused on investigating, describing, and trying to understand culture. All of that work should not be forgotten when the world being studied shifts from atoms to bits. Just because virtual world interaction is mediated by avatars does not mean research is free to ignore the paths laid by those who have gone before. Clearly this is part of Tom Boellstorff's message in referencing Mead in his recent book *Coming of age in Second Life*.

Scholars in fields including communication and media studies, anthropology, sociology, and law, among many others, have begun the work of trying out various methodological approaches to studying virtual worlds, modifying, adapting, and being willing to try entirely new approaches as well. Further, there remain valuable past theories and methods for understanding culture that have yet to be applied to virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are comprised of people, and people are a requirement for culture to exist. Exploring methods used to study culture in other contexts may be well (and possibly better) suited for the study of cultures in virtual worlds.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, we must attend to rigor in our research. Just as popular media accounts sensationalize certain elements of virtual worlds, so too virtual world researchers often work in isolation in their departments, being the one who must continually explain to colleagues that this research is not just "playing games" but instead a careful, well-conceptualized and planned mode of inquiry. Such work is essential not only for the advancement of knowledge, but also for the future of the entire field. For this reason, the virtual worlds researcher need to be extra diligent, thoughtful, and creative. This means research should be performed in the most exacting manner to ensure the messages we are trying to get across are not hampered by poor craftsmanship. Research requires a justifiable methodological approach behind it whether it is about the Horde culture in World of Warcraft or a newly discovered Amazon tribe.

This call to use tried and true methods in a rigorous manner is a show of respect to the virtual worlds we have spent time with and perhaps grown connected to in a deep emotional manner. The stories and data gathered from the inhabitants of virtual worlds deserve the best in terms of the work centered on them. By doing the best research, we honor to their experiences and insights.

In the end, this is a very new field with lots of stumbling down paths yet to happen. Missteps may happen, but we need to be overcome them with solid work and discussion to add to the field and ensure this area of research continues to yield insights into culture and how it is lived, appreciated, created, and transformed across and within virtual and physical worlds.

## **Bibliography**

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