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Three Real Futures for Virtual Worlds

Tom Boellstorff
University of California, Irvine

Abstract

We are at a critical moment in the study of virtual worlds, where there is great need for theoretical work to clarify what research on virtual worlds can offer. In this article I seek to help set our theoretical affairs in order, with regard to the future of virtual worlds (and thus our research on virtual worlds). First, the false opposition between "virtual" and "real" fails to capture the many ways virtual worlds are real (and the many ways that not everything in the physical world is real). Second, virtual worlds are valuable to study regardless of their size; we should not mistake size for significance, and encourage study of larger and smaller virtual worlds. Third, virtual worlds share features with each other and with other online socialities, but also have specific aspects that differ; studying both these similarities and differences is valuable to comprehensive and comparative research.

1. Introduction

The editors of the *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* (hereafter *JVWR*) have done a great service by opening a conversation regarding possible futures for the scholarly study of virtual worlds. This welcome invitation underscores the importance of responding to changing realities, to ensure our work remains timely and relevant. Methods are part of this response, and methodology has been of great interest to me (e.g., Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor, 2012). However, central as well is theory: the frameworks that structure our analyses, and which if left unexamined can prejudice our research from the outset.

It is this question of setting theoretical affairs in order that is the focus of this short essay. In what follows I sketch out what I see as the three most important conceptual issues to keep in mind with regard to the futures of virtual worlds. In line with the "reflective paper" genre I keep my comments brief; when possible I cite publications in which I explore these issues in more depth. I will take the "call for papers" for this issue of *JVWR* as the primary text on which I will reflect (Sivan, 2015). I choose this example to keep my musings succinct, but also because it is precisely by engaging with eminent scholarship—whose work I deeply respect—that I can best illustrate some theoretical misunderstandings regarding virtual worlds.

2. First Future for Virtual Worlds: Real (Because They Already Are)

Without the slightest hesitation, I can emphatically state that the greatest conceptual danger to the future of virtual world scholarship is the persistent tendency to oppose "virtual" and "real." This extremely common and damaging practice can be found throughout scholarship on virtual worlds (and digital culture more generally). It appears in the call for papers for this special issue in phrases like "the possible futures of both worlds (real and virtual)" (Sivan, 2015). This problem is so pervasive and severe that I have devoted an entire article to it (Boellstorff, in press); here, I summarize some key points I raise in that article and encourage readers to consult that article if interested in a more detailed discussion.

One reason the false opposition between "real" and "virtual" is detrimental is that it obscures all of the ways in which the virtual is in fact real. As authors of *JVWR* articles have noted in great detail over the past decade, you can educate someone in a virtual world and that knowledge transfers into the physical world; you can fall in love in a virtual world and those emotions can have consequences in the physical world, and so on. As with any other aspect of digital culture, from email to social network sites and online games, reality is not unique to either the virtual or the physical. Although virtual world residents sometimes colloquially use the phrase "in real life," they usually mean roleplaying or gaming, not that virtual worlds themselves cannot be real. Assuming that virtual worlds are not real undermines our scholarly work on them: why bother studying virtual worlds if they are not real? At a theoretical level, speaking of "real and virtual worlds" assumes from the outset precisely that which should be the focus of study. When are virtual worlds real? How is this reality constructed and experienced and what consequences can it hold for physical-world identities and communities?

But the false opposition between "real" and "virtual" is, if anything, more damaging in the other direction. Embedded in phrases like "the real and virtual worlds" (Sivan, 2015) is not just the assumption that the virtual is not real. The phrase also contains the assumption that everything physical is, by definition, real. But depending on your definition of "real," many physical things are unreal, from dressing up for Halloween to playing a game or dreaming a dream.

What is so problematic is that in many discussions of virtual worlds (and other online phenomena), the term "real" is never defined; it is simply assumed to be the same thing as "physical" or "offline." Now, sometimes synonyms are good: for instance, I often treat "virtual," "digital," and "online" as rough equivalents, for variety in prose and because the phenomena they refer to typically are identical or substantially overlap. However, sometimes synonyms can be misleading, and that is most definitely the case with the conflation of "physical" and "real."

To be avoided at all costs is the placing of "real" and "virtual" on a single continuum, with "real" at one end and "virtual" at the other. We see this, for instance, in phrases like "the virtual is becoming the real and the real is becoming the virtual" (Sivan, 2015). This is simply not true. Instead, we need something along the lines of what I term here the "virtual reality matrix" (Figure 1; modified from Boellstorff, in press).

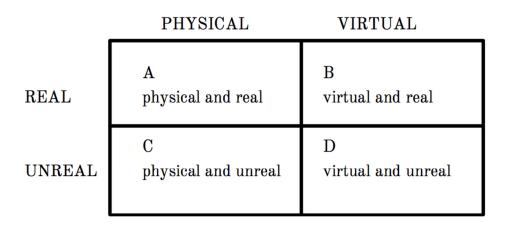|	PHYSICAL	VIRTUAL
REAL	A physical and real	B virtual and real
UNREAL	C physical and unreal	D virtual and unreal

Figure 1: the Virtual Reality Matrix.

Phrases like "the virtual is becoming the real and the real is becoming the virtual," and indeed all of the instances where we refer to "virtual worlds" and then the "real world," assume that A and D are the only possible relationships between reality/unreality on the one hand, and physical/virtual on the other. We thereby miss the bigger picture of how virtuality and reality can intersect in multiple ways, impoverishing the theoretical frameworks that shape our research agendas, methodologies, and justifications for relevance. It is unsurprising that we would feel anxiety about the value of studying virtual worlds if we assume, from the outset and without a shred of supporting evidence, that they are not "real." Far more effective to build on the massive empirical dataset showing that virtual worlds can be real in many ways and craft our concepts to reflect that "reality." The fault lies not in the virtual worlds, but in our selves. The future of virtual worlds is real.

3. Second Future for Virtual Worlds: Significant (Separate from Size or Novelty)

The study of digital culture, including but not limited to virtual worlds, remains hobbled by narrow definitions of significance. These definitions are contaminated by the hype of the technology sector and confuse significance with novelty and size. The call for papers for this special issue correctly notes that at present, "Facebook has more than 1.35 billion monthly active users" (Sivan, 2015). This is impressive and Facebook is certainly worthy of sustained scholarly study. But one thing I bring from my home discipline of anthropology is an appreciation for the value of studying all sizes of social phenomena. Ethnographers do not just spend time in China and India: some of the most important ethnographic work comes from the study of communities with only a few hundred members. I also have a background in linguistics; weak indeed would be our understanding of language if limited to English, Spanish, and other numerically dominant tongues. Some of our most important insights regarding what is linguistically possible come from the study of languages with only a few hundred speakers.

In addition to my work in virtual worlds, I have conducted research in Indonesia since 1992. I have never had anyone question my continuing interest in Indonesia because of those decades of engagement (or because that archipelago's social history goes back for millennia). Yet too often we find scholars questioning the further study of things like Facebook, World of Warcraft, or Second Life because they have existed for many years. There is a real danger here in conflating the "trending" with the "significant." Journalists tend to focus on the novel, on the new—that is what

makes it "news," after all. Social science research sometimes focuses on the novel as well, but central to what we have to offer is a more long-term attention to social phenomena. This permits a body of scholarship to emerge where debate and collaboration can lead to new insights. It allows for comparative and generalizing analyses, as well as exploring diachronic change.

The obsession with prediction and "futures" is a striking feature of internet scholarship and is reflected in the Call for Papers for this issue. The problem is that there is no way to study the future (see Boellstorff, 2014). We can make predictions based on current knowledge, but the data in question comes from the present and the past. And in the present, virtual worlds remain a flourishing genre of online sociality. There are literally thousands of virtual worlds; some of the larger ones, like Minecraft, are increasingly held out as holding transformative potential for domains like education (Ito, 2015). But regardless of their size or novelty, virtual worlds are part of the spectrum of possibility for digital culture, and so are extremely worthy of study. The future of virtual worlds is significant.

4. Third Future for Virtual Worlds: Specific (While Interlinked)

When we study any aspect of the human condition, we find both sameness and difference. Indeed, specifying and elucidating relationships of sameness and difference is often the ultimate goal of analysis and has been central to many of the great philosophical debates of the past two centuries. For instance, we have long known that all human cultures have some kind of institutional structure for kinship, and we often speak of "marriage" as a cross-cultural phenomenon while remaining aware of the highly varied forms it can take. All humans eat but the growing of food, the details of cuisine, and the social patterns of dining differ radically over time and place.

When we turn to digital cultures, we also find both similitude and difference; defining these is not only in the eye of the beholder in a certain sense, but is also central to the study of digital culture itself. Many social formations online have some kind of "friending," of marking membership in social networks or categories of familiarity and intimacy. Many social formations online have some kind of distinction between core content and commentary or response.

It is not difficult to think of many other universal or near-universal features of digital culture, but of course it is also quite easy to think of differences. Some social formations online are games; others include game-like elements to some extent, while still others lack them altogether. Some social formations online involve avatar embodiments; others involve textual profiles, or no form of identity-marking at all. Some social formations online are asynchronous (like email), others synchronous (like a Skype call), and still others have both asynchronous and synchronous aspects. Some social phenomena online are media; others are not. The notion of "digital media" is often overgeneralized to the point that "online" and "media" are treated as synonyms, but this is not accurate. In fact virtual worlds are an excellent example of online social formations that are not media. They can have media within them (virtual newspapers, streaming music or video, etc.), but they do not mediate between places; they are places in their own right. There is thus no way to define virtual worlds as "media" without also defining Los Angeles, a cornfield, or a living room as "media," such that the term would lose all meaning because it referenced everything.

One reason virtual worlds will remain an important topic of study into the future is the specificity they offer. They are prime examples of placemaking online (and thus counterexamples to the overuse of "media"). They are fertile contexts for exploring questions of embodiment, and often for questions of building, crafting, and making. Many of these features of virtual worlds overlap with other online social phenomena, and gaining a better understanding of virtual worlds will thus continue to have comparative value for theorizing the range of digital cultures. The future of virtual worlds is specific.

5. Conclusion: Futures of the Journal of Virtual Worlds Research

Through these reflections, I hope to have indicated some important issues for considering the future of virtual worlds—as well as key topics for current research. To conclude, I will briefly consider how *JWVR* can play an important role in these futures of virtual worlds.

From 2007 to 2012, I was Editor-in-Chief of *American Anthropologist*, the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association, and have sat (and continue to sit) on the editorial boards of many journals. I thus have an appreciation for the value of generalist journals that bring together many subfields of inquiry (like *American Anthropologist*, which publishes everything from ethnography to archaeology to primatology). I also have an appreciation for specialist journals that focus on particular subfields or topics (in the world of anthropology, these include *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, and *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*).

Both generalist and specialist journals have value in any scholarly ecosystem, and I think of the future of *JVWR* should be considered in that light. There currently exist many generalist journals in the study of online social phenomena (e.g., *New Media and Society,* the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, First Monday*). There are also some specialist journals in this domain (e.g., *Games and Culture*). In considering the future of *JVWR*, I would caution against a mission creep that would move too far from the topic of virtual worlds. For instance, virtual reality can combine with virtual worlds, but they are not the same thing; you can have one without the other, and there is a need for more scholarship on how virtual reality might shape virtual world socialities. It is precisely in building a scholarly community and body of mutually engaged work that, in my view, *JVWR* can contribute to broader conversations and ensure a flourishing future.

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