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Contriving Constraints

The Gameness of *Second Life* and the Persistence of Scarcity

Innovations Case Discussion: Second Life

Cory Ondrejka's case study of *Second Life* is a rich account both of what makes *Second Life* (SL hereafter) distinctive and of those possibilities that it may fairly be said to herald for the coming (arrived?) era of virtual worlds. There is little doubt that there is cause for excitement given the ways in which, as Ondrejka describes, virtual worlds seem at once to combine the vast advantages of dramatic reductions in material costs that digital technologies have brought with an increasing bandwidth for social interaction and collaborative creation, all within a persistent environment that allows all-important opportunities for failures as well as lasting successes.

Somewhat ambitiously (maybe more than somewhat), Ondrejka takes inspiration from these features of virtual worlds that he has identified to lodge a broad critique not only at citizenship, as conventionally understood, but geography itself, which comes in his account to represent the essential hurdle to innovation and progress for humanity at large. I share wholeheartedly in the idea that these spaces represent something of vast importance for innovation in the digital age, and one of my aims in what follows is to fill in some of the connections that Ondrejka's account at times skips or even discounts, such as what games have to do with SL and the "playfulness" that Ondrejka finds there, and how the reduction in material costs reconfigures resources within virtual worlds. But it is also true that in some all too familiar ways SL and virtual worlds generally do not, and perhaps cannot or even should not, overcome some of the constraints within which human collaboration and creativity take place, and therefore we may find that the collapse of geography, were it even possible, may not quite eliminate innovation's obstacles.

THE GAMENESS OF SECOND LIFE

In Ondrejka's opinion, SL is a creation to be contrasted with games, often in fundamental ways. But in downplaying this connection (one which, understandably,

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may grow out of a concern to differentiate SL from virtual worlds that are foundationally games), Ondrejka shuts down a number of avenues by which to account for some of the most important characteristics of *Second Life* as he describes them. Computer games pioneered the avatar and, more importantly, a particular interface for its mastery, one that by convention involves the combined use of a QWERTY keyboard for movement and a mouse for adjusting view angles and interacting with objects/other avatars. Alongside this development came a number of other features of 3-D online environments and the objects within them, specifically the physics by which these objects and avatars interact, as well as the idea of persistence, whereby user actions can make durable (if limited) changes to the game world.

What drove this innovation in computer games? All games make performative demands upon their players—actions they must master (along with guesses they must successfully make) in order to accomplish game objectives. This is one respect in which games are open-ended in a way quite similar to *Second Life*—in practice within them, in any given moment, things may turn out one way or the other; they are, in a word, *contingent*. This performative contingency of avatars—the never-perfect mastery of a body analog through a refined interface of fine-motor skills—is a crucial part of SL, and something that helps us to account for why it feels like "play" or a "game" to many of its users. This is because *it is possible to fail*, and to fail quite visibly and in multiple ways, when acting within *Second Life*. This contingent performance begins with mastery of one's avatar, often in view of others. What is more, and unlike many other domains of online interaction, such as those that are primarily text-based, the scope for failure is much wider, containing text performance (in chat, IM) along with avatar presentation and competence. In its physics, avatar affordances, and persistence, SL therefore owes an enormous amount to computer games. This helps us understand the importance of failure as well as the foundations of trust for SL and its prospects for innovation.

Ondrejka rightly recognizes that a broad opportunity for failure is important for SL, as such failure at relatively low cost is a necessary condition for innovation. But we can see more clearly that at root this open-endedness is inextricably linked to the experience of being in SL as someone who must perform through an avatar, and aware that one might fail in doing so, even in very mundane ways (such as accidentally toggling off while flying, leading to an embarrassing fall, complete with an animation of limbs flailing). It then takes but a moment to see that, in many of the other actions one takes in SL, one is similarly called upon to perform in what feels like a social game. One of my first tasks as a new user, after all, is to "make" myself—shape my avatar via a complex set of "tools" for managing everything from my jaw width to my waist height, knowing all the while that this will be my presentation of self to others in SL, with all the judgments of competence that may entail.

There is thus urgency to much of the performance in SL, quite similar to that which characterizes language immersion. A user is driven to master movement,

chat, building, flying, and other skills to a great extent because of the game-like contestation over performance that characterizes games, in a contrived fashion, and everyday life, in a boundless fashion. SL, while "boundless" in its open-endedness the same way that other aspects of life are (there are no shared and established game objectives), is more like the former in one important respect: it is an environment that is subject to the contrivance of its makers, who have leveraged all of these elements from games to make something that can so effectively begin to approach the texture of everyday life.

This performative and social, game-like quality to SL not only forms the foundation of its scope for failure and success, but also points the way toward a better understanding of the bases of trust. As current research on online games has shown, collaborative action in urgent conditions is highly generative of trust and belonging. And this, after all, does not really surprise us. As Ondrejka suggests, teams build trust through a combination of interaction that is sufficiently high in bandwidth and oriented toward a common objective. This is something that many games (those which allow for teamwork) are contrived to accomplish, and the lesson to take from them, again, is that a sufficient scope for social action, beyond the textual or aural, becomes fertile ground for social bonds *because* of the broad range of small to large acts of coordination (of bodies, of avatars), any one of which may succeed or fail. Much like a dance, then, avatar-mediated interaction can become a source of trust that builds over time, not simply because of the prospects for successful coordination, but because of the multiple small moments of success and failure, and not just with direct reference to the explicit aim at hand. Ondrejka understands that this process is happening, and that it is crucial for understanding what virtual worlds make possible (p. 28):

> By creating a culture of shared creativity, *Second Life* allows residents to learn from the examples of others, to situate their goals and desires within the contexts created by others.

But even here the claim is actually too limited. We must see the mutual coordination of performance in SL as going all the way down, to the most mundane practices of managing avatar distance, sight lines, posture, and the like. It is through this emergent practice, as an arena where some are masters and some are learning, that trust is generated.

CAPITAL IN PLAY

Being and acting in SL thus feels like play, and this helps us to understand a crucial point about what is at stake in virtual worlds. Ondrejka identifies the play-like quality of SL when he writes (p. 32), "The safety that comes with mentally classifying an activity as play leads to a free exploration of design space." While it is instructive that users often report their actions in SL as play, it is too much of a leap (and one that obscures some important features of virtual worlds) to account for users' incentive to explore by reference to a lack of stakes (safety). This is because

while there are understandable reasons why we might look at virtual worlds and see them as places that have so radically reduced certain kinds of costs that they are effectively consequence-free (and that it therefore accounts for why people do creative things there), this is an error. Instead we should be ready to look more closely and recognize how the stakes in virtual worlds are not eliminated but instead radically *reconfigured* as compared to most offline domains, and it is this realignment of resources and constraints that may account for the remarkable emergent effects that virtual worlds have generated.

Ondrejka's case study is deeply (and usefully) informed by attention to a core insight about virtual worlds: they transform and vastly reduce material costs, those associated with production and distribution in the market. But there is always a temptation, upon seeing the ways in which virtual worlds seem to collapse geography, to make two errors. The first is to see this reduction as removing constraints altogether—the radical reduction in material costs can lead us to think that we are in a "zero marginal cost environment" or a "post-scarcity economy" (p. 44). The second is to take this reduction of constraint and its remarkable effects as confirmation that constraint of any kind (such as the geographic) is an impediment to human innovation. An answer to this second, and larger, issue is one that very probably lies outside the scope of this response, but here I would like to address more directly the question of economy, cost, and scarcity.

We are in the habit of thinking of the economy as constituted and bounded by the market—more specifically, by market transactions. This is the result of many decades of academic treatment of the market as set apart from other aspects of our lives, with their other kinds of human commerce and exchange. But scholarship has slowly come to reflect more closely the human experience of the economy and has developed a picture of it that incorporates not only the ways material resources (cash, commodities) accumulate and move about through market exchange, but also through other kinds of human exchange, such as reciprocity, the source of social capital (trust), and learning, the source of cultural capital (competencies). What is more, and as most social actors recognize, we frequently parlay these kinds of resources one into the other. As examples, we may invest market capital in learning (tuition), or social capital to find a job, or cultural competence to establish networks of reciprocity (through hosting a dinner party, for example).

What does this mean for virtual worlds? The first thing we must notice is that their structural characteristics of persistence and open-endedness (contingency) make the accumulation of all these forms of capital just as possible within them as they are elsewhere. All of these resources accumulate over time; human effort congeals in these various kinds of capital that then become the resources available to us as we seek to accomplish our daily objectives. Goods (with vastly reduced production and distribution costs of course), human relationships, and skills all can be created and obtained in virtual worlds as a result of the expending of effort over time. Ondrejka is thus correct in a broad sense when he writes that time continues to be a scarce resource for people engaged in virtual worlds, but an understanding of virtual world economies requires that we keep a more fine-grained level of

analysis at hand, to see what more specific scarcities persist, however reconfigured. When we do this, we see immediately that trust and competence continue to be scarce commodities. Establishing and maintaining a network of trust and obligation does not become a trivial exercise because many of the material costs of communication are lowered. Similarly, gaining competencies that can be applied toward innovation is also not a costless (or even near-costless) transaction. This is because reciprocity and learning, as forms of human exchange, have always required time in a way that isolated market transactions, over and done with as they often aspire to be, do not.

What this means for virtual worlds is that, while Ondrejka rightly shows enthusiasm for the vast reductions in the costs associated with (offline) geography, it is overreaching to see this as creating a landscape that is essentially unconstrained. Instead, we may be better able to account for the excitement that is sparked by these worlds by seeing them as radically reconfiguring the relationships between these kinds of resources. It may be that it is more accurate to say that, over much of human history, market capital has dominated other forms of human exchange precisely because of the high costs of producing and transporting material gods, and that therefore virtual worlds bring this situation more into balance (at least for those with the material resources to access them!) by elevating the impact of reciprocity and learning, so that all these forms of exchange are on a par with each other.

WHITHER CITIZENSHIP?

Ondrejka is correct, in my view, in seeing that the implications for this reconfiguration of constraints are broad, and I applaud his aim of taking the implications of virtual worlds for innovation beyond the market and into the political domain. Innovation, after all, is something that we must be prepared to recognize in any sphere of human action, and citizenship is certainly a high-stakes category for such rethinking. I would first note, however, that Ondrejka overstates the relationship between the nation-state and geography. While it is absolutely inarguable that the relationship of states to territory is a core aspect of how states initially formed, and then continued to develop, to draw this connection too deeply obscures other developments in the state, both in the past and presently.

The nation-state itself contains the clues and contradictions to help us understand this. Forged through the linkage of a bureaucratic apparatus and a defining ideology, nation-states were (and to a great extent still are) about creating legitimate rule over a populace (and territory) through appeals to certain putatively shared interests and characteristics. Amongst these is territory, of course, but nationalism relies just as much on claims about shared language, cultural practice, and kinship as it does upon shared territory. This is key, because over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries movements to create new states became more and more initiated and defined by claims of ethnic (from the Greek *ethnos*, or nation) commonality, ones that often then had to confront and resolve (sometimes quite par-

tially) geographic *dis*continuity, or even diasporic circumstances, with this national interest. In much the same way that gerrymandered political districts come less and less to resemble any "natural" demarcation of a geographic landscape, so too did nationalist movements of recent memory become less and less driven by common geographic interests. Thus, Ondrejka's characterization of "the rise of geographic— often presented as ethnic—nationalism" (p. 44) must stand as a significant, if not dangerous, oversimplification.

And this is important not simply because of the need to see the nation-state in all of its historical nuance. It is also important because at this very moment nation-states, often through and in response to the innovative actions of their transnational citizens, are already confronting the flexible characteristics of citizenship and forging new kinds of citizenship to fit the rapid changes in technology, transportation, business, and political regimes, a need that Ondrejka identifies but seems to suggest awaits the development of virtual worlds to get off the ground. There is no doubt in my mind that virtual worlds will play a significant role in the rise of new forms of citizenship, but Aihwa Ong (1998) and other anthropologists have already begun to document the emergent accommodations, evasions, and categories that nation-states and their citizens are forging in the context of what she calls "flexible citizenship." Whether it is transnational Chinese cultural elites, who creatively claim and negotiated multiple citizenship and quasi-citizenship claims (vis-à-vis Hong Kong, for example); Mexican villagers, spread across California, Mexico, and other locations, who manage their kinship and other social ties across a discontinuous geographic circuit through innovative uses of technology and transport; or Latin American countries which are beginning to serve their diasporic communities through web-based services (including absentee voting), virtual citizenship is already happening. Ondrejka is right that our current array of political categories is insufficient, but it is insufficient not only because of what may come about through the use of virtual worlds tomorrow, but also because of the innovative practices of people around the world who are making do today.

There is no reason to believe that the role that virtual worlds like *Second Life* will play in the economic, political, and cultural innovation will be anything short of monumental, but it is imperative that we keep in view the ways in which such spaces, while transforming how many resources for us are arrayed and available, do not fundamentally remove from human experience the kinds of human exchange that inevitably produce both possibilities and constraints, and we must be ready to see how the accumulation of interests, along with attendant and counter-to-innovation practices of exclusion, may nonetheless appear within them, no matter the promise of geography's wane.

References

Ong, Aihwa (1998). *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.