Virtual Realities, Real Problems:
The Evolving Politics of MMOGs

Markus Sharaput
(sharaput@lakeheadu.com)
Department of Politics, Lakehead University (Thunder Bay)

And

Noah Zerbe
(noah.zerbe@humbold.edu)
Department of Politics, Humboldt State University (California)

Submitted to
CPSA Annual Conference
Political Economy Session
May 17, 2010

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Abstract

Over the past several years, massively multiplayer online games, or MMOGs, have risen dramatically in popularity. While the fields of economics and law have been quick to provide a substantive analysis of the economic and legal implications of these new virtual worlds, these new realms have been largely ignored in the discipline of political science. We argue that scholars of political science, political economy, and international relations have important contributions to make to this new field of study. Specifically, we outline four areas where scholars of politics can contribute to this emerging field: the state-legal interactions implicit in the development of virtual worlds, the emerging power relations and systems of governance, through an analysis of the transgressive politics within and against the game environments, and finally as tools for modelling and testing theory.

Introduction

Over the past several years, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) have garnered increasing attention from legal, economic, and sociological theorists, and even a cursory examination suggests why. MMOGs exhibit several characteristics making them important objects of social study. First, the scale of participation is staggering. A recent estimate places the number of active subscribers to MMOGs (defined as those currently paying monthly subscription fees) worldwide at over 100 million, with an estimated annual economic value of U.S. $1.3 billion (Luse, 2004: 1). Some of the most popular MMOGs have as many as 7-10 million active users. In Korea, a hotbed of MMOG participation, two-fifths of the population spend more time playing a single MMOG than they do watching television. The convertibility of in-game resources to real-world dollars has allowed economists like Edward Castronova to calculate GDP values for some MMOGs. For example, in 2001, Everquest—a predecessor to World of Warcraft—had an estimated GDP of $135 million ($2,266 per capita), a figure which places the virtual world slightly ahead of Bulgaria and only slightly behind Russia (Castronova, 2001: 32). This same convertibility has led legal experts to investigate implications of MMOGs for intellectual property, taxation, and human rights issues (Lastowka and Hunter, 2004a and 2004b; Jenkins, 2004; Faifield, 2005). Despite the evident applicability of political theory and concepts to these emergent environments, the response of political analysts to the phenomena can best be described as anemic.

In this paper, we lay the foundation for an analysis of MMOGs from the perspective of political science. Specifically, we contend that an analysis of the political dynamics of virtual worlds (and of the intersection of virtual worlds and real worlds) represents an important area for future research. The growing influence of these virtual pocket societies has attracted attention from economic (Castronova, 2001; Dibbell, 2006), sociological (Yee, 2006), and legal (Johnson, 2004) scholars. Timmothy Burke, one of the few political scientists exploring this phenomenon, has focused on the implications of virtual worlds for national sovereignty (Burke, 2004).

This paper intends to focus greater attention on the political dynamics of MMOGs by laying out a range of possible vectors of study through which scholars of political science can shed light on these emergent socio-political forms. More concretely, the paper suggests that there are four main avenues of approach. First, it suggests that MMOGs can be addressed in terms of state-legal interactions. Second, MMOGs present an opportunity to observe and explain a set of emerging power relations and governance systems. Third, MMOGs provide an opportunity to analyze a series of transgressive politics, directed both against existing political systems and the game environment itself. And finally, MMOGs can be approached as socio-political modeling tools for testing political theory. Before turning to the specific questions at hand, however, we will briefly outline the nature and scope of the virtual worlds of the MMOGs themselves.

The Worlds of MMOGs

Massively multiplayer online games consist of persistent, computer-generated environments in which large numbers of human participants interact. Early examples of the phenomena were text-based, but increasingly sophisticated graphics technologies allow current examples to present a highly rendered virtual world. The numbers involved are surprising for those unfamiliar with these environments. One popular MMOG, World

of Warcraft, has over eight million registered users, although this population is distributed across multiple servers, each of which replicates the game environment. Large MMOGs often have continent-scale environments, taking hours or days of real-world time to traverse on foot.

Within these environments, players act through avatars, animated characters representing their in-game persona. Avatars move, speak, and interact with both AI-driven non-player characters and the avatars of other human users, pursuing goals consistent with the world theme. Warcraft players, for example, adventure, both singly and in groups, achieving quests, gathering treasure, and developing skills through practice, such as hunting, cooking, or the manufacture of items. The experience of World of Warcraft has been equated by at least one author as equivalent to the Jungian "Hero's Journey" (Lederman, 2007: 1626). The immediacy of these environments is difficult to relate to someone who hasn't played in them. In a 2006 study, Yee gathered survey data indicating that over a seven-day period, 27% of respondents indicated that their most positive experience had occurred in-game, and 33% indicated their most negative experience had. Developing an avatar, colloquially referred to as "leveling-up" and involving accruing additional power, gear, and abilities, represents hundreds of hours of effort, and is an intensely social pastime. Most games require players to cooperate at varying degrees of coordination to achieve goals, and most players develop stable relationships with other players in-game (Yee, 2006).[1]

What distinguishes MMOGs from more traditional computer games is their inter-activity and persistence. When a player logs off, the world continues on without them; other players continue to interact with each other and the environment. World persistence permits the development of an in-game economy, and in some MMOGs, these economies are highly developed. Larger cities in World of Warcraft, for example, contain auction houses where player can buy and sell items for a small fee. Informal markets also exist, and town squares are a reliable site to encounter other players looking to sell services for a fee. The currency of many MMOGs is traded (legitimately or illegitimately) for real world currencies through eBay, IGE.com, and other online brokers in a phenomenon known as real money trading (RMT). The economic value of RMT is considerable. In 2005, the estimated value of these transactions was U.S. $880 million (Starodoumov, 2005: 3), despite the fact that most of these trades are legally prohibited by mandatory end user license agreements (EULAs) packaged with the game.[2] Indeed, there exists a growing community that derive their primary source of income from dealing in such goods (Dibbell, 2006), and at least one North American company has employed individuals to game (in Mexico) in order to sell the proceeds on line.

Adding another layer of complexity to the picture, wage differentials between first world and third world workers have led to the establishment of a small but growing trade in specialized goods. In a forthcoming documentary film entitled *Gold Farmers*, Ge (forthcoming) explores the lives of "Chinese gold farmers," Chinese workers who are

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[1] Anecdotal evidence suggests that players take their play very seriously. Many players describe the games as "addictive," and World of Warcraft is often referred to informally as "Warcrack."

[2] The EULA for Everquest II, for example, prohibits players from "acquir[ing] or obtain[ing] an intellectual property or other rights, including any right of exploitation, of any kind in or to…the Game, including, without limitation, in any artwork, music, character(s), item(s), coin(s) or other material or property" and states that players "may not buy, sell, or auction (or host or facilitate the ability to allow others to buy, sell, or auction) any Game account, characters, items, coin or copyrighted material" (Sony, n.d.).

paid to play games like Warcraft in order to develop powerful characters, find rare items, and horde currency, all of which can then be sold to western consumers. In some ways, this phenomenon simply follows the traditional model of comparative advantage in which high-wage countries outsource labor-intensive production activities to lower wage countries. Dibbell (2007) offers a concise summary of the economic model at play:

> At the end of each shift, Li [the gold farmer] reports the night's haul to his supervisor, and at the end of the week, he, like his nine co-workers, will be paid in full. For every 100 gold coins he gathers, Li makes 10 Yuan, or about $1.25, earning an effective wage of 30 cents an hour, more or less. The boss, in turn, sells those same coins to an online retailer, who will sell them to the final customer (an American or European player) for as much as $20. The small commercial space Li and his colleagues work in—two rooms, one for the workers and another for the supervisor—along with a rudimentary workers' dorm, a half-hour's bus ride away, are the entire physical plant of this modest $80,000-a-year business. It is estimated that there are thousands of businesses like it all over China, neither owned nor operated by the game companies from which they make their money. Collectively they employ an estimated 100,000 workers, who produce the bulk of all the goods in what has become a $1.8 billion worldwide trade in virtual items.

The operation of such gold farmers has become a controversial component of MMOGs. Game companies have attempted to prevent such operations, fearing that they could destabilize the virtual economy or undermine the game experience. The presence of gold farmers has also become a focalpoint for in-game tensions which echo the racist anti-immigrant rhetoric of the 19th century (calling, as Yee notes, for the "extermination" of gold farmers, who are described as "rats" or "vermin").[3] But the virtual economies have become increasingly tied into the global market for currency trading. After the company that owns the World of Warcraft banned more than 50,000 accounts which they believed were used for gold farming, the market for gold coins tightened and the exchange rate increased from a low of 6 cents per gold in the spring of 2006 to a high of 35 cents in January 2007 (Dibbell, 2007).

Towards a Research Program for Political Scientists

What makes these environments interesting to scholars is the scale of social interaction. MMOGs consist of self-contained societies, with their own rules and customs.[4] These societies interact with more conventional forms, presenting problems of regulation for states. At the same time, they evolve their own internal systems of governance in the face of efforts to subvert or transgress those systems, and offer the

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[3] Some of this resentment may also stem from the price differentials between servers. A study jointly performed by the University of Sheffield and the authors of www.gamerprice.com suggests a significant gold premium for buyers on North American servers, in contrast to European and particularly, Asian competitors. See SoW Gold Price Research (2007).

[4] In Castronova's (2001: 20) study, 20 percent of respondents said they "live in Norrath [the virtual world of Everquest] but travel outside of it regularly", while 22 percent of respondents expressed the desire to spend all their time there. A full 40 percent indicated that if a sufficient wage were available in Norrath, they would quit their job or studies on Earth.

opportunity to model real-world behaviour in miniature. All of these problems can be productively addressed by political analysts.

The most obvious point of entry for political scholars are the potential legal and regulatory interactions between MMOGs and the state. These include such issues as defining and regulating virtual property, especially in terms of interactions between it and intellectual property. The legal questions, particularly those arising from intellectual property issues (c.f., MacInnes, 2006; Klang: 2004; Grimmelmann, 2006) and taxation (c.f., Terando, et al., 2008; Mennecke, et al., 2007; Lederman, 2007) have already begun to receive significant attention from legal scholars. In addition, regulatory systems are increasingly confronted by problems of expression and free speech (Ondrekja, 2004b), and of the notional limits of sovereignty in virtual environments (Burke, 2004). A critical factor cutting across these issues is the viability of the border between the virtual and the real in formulating policy.

Property

At first glance, issues of property regulation would seem to be the simplest entry into the interaction between MMOG and states. That in-game items possess economic value is well-established fact; items can be purchased in-game for currencies convertible to real-world equivalents, and virtual items are sold for real world currencies through on-line mechanisms on a daily basis.[5] Issues emerge, however, in the interaction between intellectual property rights and property rights, and the issue of taxation. A common feature across most MORGs is the end user license agreement (EULA), which typically restricts the rights of players to any claim of ownership regarding items they obtain or create in-game. The validity of these EULAs is predicated on intellectual property claims made by game designers to the environment of the MMOG. Although specifics vary form jurisdiction to jurisdiction, these claims can be equated to those made for other software or digital media. While I can certainly alienate the cd or software I have purchased, the original designer or distributor retains the rights to the data contained on it. Similar claims are made by designers of MMOGs; anything produced in the game environment is a simple extension of the design code of the game, and is thus the property of the designer. In practice, the rights of designers have been enforced both through limited IP licenses such as EULAs and through chattel laws.

There has been a surge of cases worldwide in which MMOG players have asserted property claims, including a successful suit in South Korea against the designers of Lineage (the most popular MMOG in Korea at the time) for property loss when the servers housing Lineage data were hacked. A number of authors have noted the sense of property entitlement implicit in the items players acquire in game (c.f., Lastowka and Hunter, 2004a and 2004b; Luse, 2004; Balkin, 2004; Fairfield, 2005; Fairfield and

[5] Until 2007, eBay was the common nexus for sale of in-game items and currency. In January 2007, eBay began to aggressively delete the accounts of users trading in such items, citing existing policy for the sale of digital goods. EBay only permits the sale of such good in cases where the seller has an unambiguous claim to that property; the legal ambiguity surrounding virtual property was the ostensible issue prompting the move to delete accounts. Rather than having any real negative impact on scale, consensus in the MMOG community seems to be that the main effect of this move has been to decentralize the sale of in-game goods. The decentralization involved, coupled with the tendency of game companies to pursue legal action against large, persistent item traders, has made it difficult to generate data to support or deny this consensus (Hecht, 2007).

Castronova, 2007; Castronova, 2001; Dibble: 2006). These claims are based on three core arguments: first, that these items, although intangible and ultimately expressed as digital code, represent real and distinct form of property; second, that this form of property is not adequately addressed by existing law;[6] and third, that the time and effort expended in acquiring these items in game gives players a legitimate claim to the property produced, insofar as the game play represents value-added activity in which players do not sell their time.

When one speaks of virtual property, the discussion is almost necessarily surreal. One is, after all, discussing fantasy weapons, spaceships, or real estate whose only existence is inscribed in the form of electronic code stored on a server system. The intangibility or these items, however, in no way reduces their utility or reality within their context of use. Nor does it eliminate their exchange value outside the game. "Gear"—particularly rare and powerful gear—is a core goal of many MMOGs, is often an important marker of in-game social status for the wielder, and has a significant game effect, magnifying an avatar's capabilities. At the upper levels of avatar progression, once it has reached the maximum limit for level advancement, the acquisition of increasingly powerful gear represents the only way to improve a character's abilities. Fairfield (2005) has argued for the reality of virtual environments, noting that in these environments there is the impression of space. He argues that "we use the term cyberspace not because we are bad analogists, but because many online resources mimic physical properties. For example, a chat room is, in many ways, similar to a conference room; a URL is similar to real estate in the real world. This type of code is ubiquitous and important. It forms much of the structure of the internet" (1052-3). Complex, self-enforcing systems for the distribution of such property have emerged among players (Fairfield and Castronova, 2007), and it has already garnered attention from tax authorities (Lederman, 2007).

The idea that virtual property represents a different category that cannot be adequately addressed by existing property regulation has been advanced by Fairfield (2005), who notes that unlike existing code, virtual property is persistent, interactive, and rivalrous; the property continues to exist regardless of the participation of the player, other players interact with the property in the same way the owner does, and only one user can employ the property at a given time. Fairfield suggests this presents significant problems for dealing with virtual property either in terms of intellectual property or in terms of traditional chattels, because both fail to take into account the layered formation of the internet, in which "the physical computers and connections that are the backbone of the net form the basis for internet communication; layered on top of that are the transfer protocols that enable communications between computers; layered on top of that is the basic code that creates a website or a virtual world; layered on top of that is the intellectual property that inheres in the content of the website or virtual world; and layered on top of that are the creations of the environment users" (Fairfield, 2005: 1076). Chattel rights (for example to the servers housing the data) and IP rights (to the software facilitating operation in the virtual environment) can both produce an anti-commons in

[6] Taiwan recognized virtual property as a distinct category of property in 2001, and has developed supplementary regulation to protect it. Both China and South Korea, although lacking a distinct legal framework, aggressively pursue instances of virtual property theft and fraud in an effort to attract the growing economic flow that MMOGs represent.

which the potential of the "commons" is under-used or undeveloped because of the horizontal control exerted by partial owners. The use of EULAs to restrict the property rights of game players through contract licenses is one such example of an anti-commons. Fairfield suggests that organizing property law around the level of code, and recognizing that persistent, interdependent, and rivalrous property sustained by code constitutes a form distinct from other code, allows for the emergence of a property regime which will facilitate the development potential that MMOGs and virtual property represent.

The final argument dealing with issues of virtual property is the labour contributed by players themselves. This can range from the hours or days spent raiding in World of Warcraft to acquire high-end gear,[7] to environments such as the Sims Online or Second Life in which much of the physical environment, along with items, have been actively generated by players. This leads to a general impression that "if I make it, it's mine"—an attitude dating back to, and causing conflict in, some of the earliest antecedents of MMOGs, such as multi-user domains (MUDs) (Lastowka and Hunter, 2004a: 36-37). The argument that labour—particularly value-adding labour—give one a claim to ownership dates back to Locke's Second Treatise of Government, originally published in 1690, and raises the question of how much of the value of an item is added through the player's time and effort.

This issue is further complicated by the fact that traditional theories of property are predicated on some association of value and scarcity. The reason labour adds value—and provides a claim to ownership—is that the end product would not exist without the contributed labour. However, this argument becomes difficult to advance in the context of a MMOG because all scarcity within that environment is an artificial construction. Once the code for an item exists, there is no barrier to an infinite replication of the item represented by the code. In Warcraft, the Hunter's elite weapon, the Telescopic Sharprifle, is valuable and rare not only because of the effort involved in obtaining it, but also because the game code provides for it being rare and difficult to obtain.[8] As Fairfield and Castronova (2007) point out, in leveling / advancement games like the World of Warcraft, artificial scarcity and deliberate inefficiency are fun; they are, in fact, the point of the game. The value of items is represented not only by the time and effort spent by players to acquire items, but also by the time and effort spent by game designers in creating environments where it is possible to spend time and effort in order to acquire rare and desirable items.

Many of the issues raised by MMOGs have parallels for other forms of emergent property, notably genetic information and its medical and biotechnological applications. Attempts to commodify and alienate traditional knowledge (Farhat, 2008; McManis, 2007; von Lewinski, 2007) consist of similar struggles between existing property / IP regulation and emerging claims to informational / intangible forms of property.

MMOGs also present emerging problems for other forms of regulation, notably issues of expression and free speech. A critical question is whether the environments

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[7] High-level raids can take hours or days to complete. At the end of the raid, one can predictably expect the drop of one highly-desirable item, in addition to sundry other goods. These items tend, however, to be class-specific; with extreme utility to one type of player but only limited utility to another. The net effect is that a player can expect to run the same raid a number of times in order to acquire the sought-after item, potentially representing several hundred hours of play.

[8] The item is also "soulbound", i.e., is only obtainable through raiding, and cannot be used by another player once another has equipped it, thus increasing its rarity even further.

expressed through MMOGs should be regulated by the same restrictions as other social environments. There is a clean divide between those who advocate for such regulation and those who suggest that MMOGs should not be subject to the rules applied in material environments. Those who suggest MMOGs should be regulated base their claims on the assertion that MMOGs are a simple extension of existing social environments. The implication is both the protection of free speech, and the restriction of aggressive or abusive speech.[9] Those who argue against the application of "real-world" regulation point to the deliberate artificiality of the environment and the need to create a distinction between the social rules of that environment and the real world. Castronova has advocated a "right to play" movement, in which virtual environments such as MMOGs would be exempted from real world regulation specifically to foster play environments (Castronova, 2004).

Issues of state interactions with MMOGs and other virtual environments boil down to whether such environments constitute a distinct case, requiring state intervention to establish distinct rules and regulation. It also raises issues of international cooperation. Property, especially intellectual property, is increasingly a coordinated framework. The World Trade Organization's Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) Agreement, for example, represented an effort to establish a common global framework for intellectual property, greatly expanding on the (much more circumscribed) efforts of the World Intellectual Property Organization. Establishing rules for virtual property will require a similarly significant effort an international coordination of regulation. Given the variety of existing regimes governing such issues, other issues raised by MMOGs, such as those of expression, present a different but equally important problem for coordination.

Governance

Governance, both of MMOGs by game designers and in MMOGs by players, represents a second area of enquiry. To some extent, we have already touched on issues of governance, in terms of loot allocation systems and gender dynamics, but the topic deserves an independent focus. The discussion also complements discussions of state (government) interactions with MMOGs. While government attention to MMOGs is still in a nascent stage, governance, the process of government in the absence of the state, is well established. Conflicts over whether MMOG environments should be governed through private mechanisms (i.e., by designers) or democratically (by players) are recurring, and internal governance through both formal (a couple of games have established elected Players Councils) and informal (through guilds, raiding groups, etc.) are a common feature.

[9] There are significant gender dynamics present in MMOGs. Female avatars tend to sell for less than male avatars of equivalent capabilities (Yee, 2006; Castronova, 2003). Female avatars also tend to attract more positive attention (free gifts, invitations to join groups) and negative attention (sexual harassment, deliberate snubbing or devaluing of contributions) than male avatars (Yee, 2006; Lastowka and Hunter: 2004a; Castronova, 2001; Fairfield and Castronova, 2007). One female player noted she now plays only in PvP environments (in which avatars can attack and damage one another), in order to deal with these issues. "If they really start harassing you ... killing them a few times tends to stop it short" (in Lastowka and Hunter, 2004a: 67). One line of enquiry might explore the impact of relative anonymity in fostering these attitudes.

Issues of governance in MMOGs are dominated by the absence of the state. Governance is generally understood as government without the state, but is discussed in the context of a state-ordered world. In the MMOG world, there is no state. While there have been attempts to discuss law and governance as if some other actor assumed the role of the state (Burke, 2004; Balkin, 2004), the fact remains that no equivalent to a sovereign state exists within MMOG environments. Part of what makes this important is the absence of distinction between natural and state law. In a MMOG environment, code serves the role of both; what it is possible and what is permissible are more or less the same. No equivalent to the state, which regulates behavior via authoritative norms, exists.

Due to this absence, debates over (and the practice of) governance in MMOG environments are dominated by two key cleavages. The first cleavage centers on the question of whether governance should be exerted from an internal or external framework; the second is whether governance should operate as a function of place or of community. The divergence between internal and external approaches to governance is related to issues of state-MMOG interaction. Legal restrictions (particularly on players via mechanisms such as EULAs) are a primary element of external governance of in-game behaviour. However, game designers may also directly impose limits on in-game behaviour through code. Behaviour deemed undesirable can be eliminated from games simply by removing the code mechanisms which make it possible. These limits represent externally-imposed governance on in-game behaviour.

Internal arguments about the governance of MMOGs focus less on extra-environmental instruments and more on the specific nature of the internal environment, and the demands created in order to sustain that specificity. Ironically, this often leads advocates of (for want of a better term) "designers' rights" to articulate a position based in both internal and external governance mechanisms. In an effort to protect their vision of what their MMOG environment should be, designers tend to argue for external governance regarding issues of property (especially the conversion of in-game property to real-world assets), while simultaneously advocating internal governance in the areas of free expression and human rights (Grimmelman, 2006). Indeed, it is common for game designers and their advocates to press for a different set of rules for "in-game" behaviour consistent with the theme of the game environment (Castronova, 2004).

The internal-external issue presents an interesting inversion of discussions of sovereignty and the state border. From the outside, viewed as a proprietary assembly of code, a MMOG is an artifact suitable for—and subject to—regulation by the state. From the inside, a MMOG is a distinct environment, with its own socio-political codes and mores, which are not subject to—and cannot be regulated by—the authority of the state. Fruitful comparisons of the border between the virtual and the real world, as well as comparative studies of the impact of sovereignty on ordered spaces, could easily be undertaken in this area. Critiques of this bordered approach have already emerged, echoing equivalent work by theorists such as Walker (1993), which challenge the durability, or even existence, of the virtual / real border and the role it plays (Lehdonvitra, 2008).

Another point of divergence centers on the question of whether governance should be informed by the idea of MMOGs as places or communities. The place approach is related to debates about internal and external governance. In this approach,

MMOGs are understood as environments separated from the real world. The most common articulation of this approach is a reification of the virtual in contrast to the real. Some analysts have approached the question of MMOGs in terms of Huizinga's "magic circle", in which the territory of the game space is distinguished by a boundary denoting a different set of rules and social expectations (Castronova, 2006; Taylor, 2006). The magic circle concept is notable because of its spatial orientation. Associated with such defined spaces as a sports field (baseball diamond, boxing ring, etc.), the concept has been applied to MMOGs and other virtual environments to distinguish them from other forms of online communication like message boards. For advocates of the position, it articulates MMOGs as not only a different kind of environment in this world, but as another world altogether. MMOG environments should not be subject to regulation in terms of speech or expression not only because they are a different kind of place, but because they are places outside the space of the state. This articulation of MMOGs has connections to those who argue in favour of a hyper-globalization model, and theorists such as Castells (1996) who point to the emergence of new forms of socio-political organization and spatial ordering.

Both Lehdonvirta (2008) and Grimmelman (2006) have argued against the spatial model when examining governance in MMOGs. Lehdonvirta points out that (much as with the state border) the delineation between MMOG-based virtual environments and the real world is less clear than proponents would suggest. Most MMOGs consist of more than the in-game environment. Discussion forums, for example, form a significant part of the game community, but are clearly demarcated form the in-game environment. Critics also point to the fact that in-game environments are less distinct than proponents would suggest (in terms of patterns of discourse and economic activity, for example), and the blurring of market boundaries between the virtual and the real.

Both Lehdonvirta and Grimmelman suggest a more effective approach to understanding governance in MMOGs is to approach them on a social / community basis. Lehdonvirta's argument is part of a larger critique of the magic circle argument. For her, MMOGs, like other sports and games, are not some sort of hermetically sealed environment, but rather represent a different sort of social space, bound by a distinct rule set. She adopts a Straussian definition of community based on shared activity and discourse; for her, it is the social interactions which define the space, rather than the boundary around it (Lehdonvirta, 2008). Although Grimmelman does not explicitly adopt a Straussian approach (his concern is more with a potential legal orientation toward MMOGs), he does adopt a similar community-based approach. For Grimmelman, virtual worlds "deserve deference because they are real communities with real values for real people" (Grimmelman, 2006: 11). Governance of these environments needs to recognize the overlap between internal and external mechanisms and adopt a principle of comity, in which the distinctive internal orientations and traditions are recognized by the external governing body (whether the game designer or the state).

The shift from place to community can serve to ameliorate barriers to successful governance that are evident in place-based approaches. The community of a game encompasses both the players active within it, and the designers who shape it, and can incorporate both mechanical elements of government (such as code-based restrictions on action) and spontaneous, organic governance behaviour that emerges in the game. There is a growing body of literature that deals with "virtual crime" within MMOG

communities, and the difficulty of external regulators to apply real-world standard of behaviour to MMOG environments. These conflicts are not uncommon. Thief is an accepted game profession in a number of fantasy-based MMOGs, and the potential theft of goods is implicit within the game. In EVE Online, a fast-growing new science fiction MMOG, one of the primary means of support within the game is piracy.

Community-based governance theorists have argued that in the context of MMOGs, "crime" can be defined as a violation of social norms that undermines enjoyment of the game / environment. In the language of gamers, this is termed "griefing", and is a well-understood concept, despite the fact that it is context dependant and that the meaning can change within a context over time (Grimmelman, 2004: 167). In EVE Online, for example, while it can be irritating for a player to have their ship ambushed and destroyed by another player, this behaviour does not constitute "griefing," insofar as it is an accepted facet of game play. In fact, excessive or inappropriate responses to such behaviour are far more likely to attract the "griefing" label.[10] Given this definition of crime, the critical remaining questions are how norms are aggregated form the individual to the social level, and what mechanisms can be employed to discourage transgressive behaviour.

In this context, the realist-liberal debate in international relations is telling. Realist IR approaches traditionally assume an anarchic environment. One can argue that given the absence of an evident sovereign, Player vs. Player (PvP) environment[11] in MMOGs operate along a similar principle. Yet while realist scholars assume this leads to a self-help environment, in MMOGs it typically leads to cooperation. In the face of an anarchic environment, in-game cooperation emerges through player-created and negotiated mechanisms, such as guilds. This represents important mechanisms for both individual survival and collective improvement. Indeed, in most MMOGs, the intermediary between individual and collective norms are collective associations, typically imbued with limited powers by game code, which organize groups to achieve in-game goals. They are commonly known as guilds, but have other names depending on the game context (in EVE Online, for example, they are known as corporations). Guilds are the primary locus for organizing groups in the game environment, both to reach goals otherwise unattainable and to exert a controlling influence on other players in the environment. Some guilds become large and powerful enough to become micro-governments and arbiters of disputes, at least at the level of an individual server.

In the context of a MMOG, efforts to regulate crime are hampered by a more limited range of instruments than those available to ex-MMOG equivalents. While, for example, most guilds can muster the resources to kill an avatar, death in most MMOGs is at worst a temporary inconvenience, representing a loss of invested time. A more effective disincentive to crime is an organized effort to inhibit the game-play of the criminal; in essence, counter-griefing. Guilds with a sufficient number of powerful members can coordinate to block access to key sites within the game, or kill an avatar

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[10] As evidenced in the following amusing, if profane, example: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ns9oAGnK9CU.

[11] Player vs. Player (PvP) environments are defined as those in which players can fight (and potentially kill) other playersl characters. This is contrasted with Player vs. Environment (PvE) settings, in which players cannot fight other players' characters but can interact with them to defeat challenges presented by the game environment. By extention, PvE settings generally present a much less anarchic environment.

with such regularity that game-play becomes pointless. There exists a fundamental limit to such counter-griefing, however. The criminal in question has the option to leave the MMOG environment, either by transferring to another server, or by leaving the game entirely. Clever griefers can simply log-out, and then re-enter with a different avatar; since MMOG players can only recognize avatars, not account holders, there is no way for a group mobilized against avatar "A" to know that avatar "B" is the same quarry in a different disguise.

Given these limitations, governance within MMOGs tends to focus more on what Prince, drawing on Doern, (2008) refers to as soft instruments, using exhortation and informational tools to regulate behaviour both within guilds and within the environments in which guilds operate (Prince: 2008). The unique opportunities and challenges that MMOGs present for governance, both in terms of the available tools and the patterns of behaviour being regulated, make them a fertile ground of investigation.

The issue of crime and governance in MMOGs raises another point of entry for political analysis, the issue of transgressive politics, and strategies of resistance to both the mandates of game designers and the efforts of guilds and collective associations to establish socio-political norms in-game. MMOGs as designed and controllable socio-political environments, offer a unique opportunity to study political theories, as well as to study contingent and transgressive responses to efforts at social planning. Flanagan (2003) has noted the long association of play and transgressive behaviour. Mischief, as any two-year old can tell you, is fun, and even when presented with a toy or game designed for a particular purpose, there is a delight in developing new and unexpected applications.

The designed nature of MMOGs thus presents an analyst with opportunities to model and study particular social and economic environments, as well as the chance to study divergences from expectations. The design of MMOGs is a multi-million dollar endeavor, costing U.S. $5-7 million per game to design, but they have already been adopted as social modeling tools. The US army uses MMOGs both to simulate the Baghdad combat environment, and as a recruitment tool. Second Life and the Sims Online have both experimented with different economic models (central planning and a free market) in order to determine play outcomes. In fact, the shift from a planned to a free market in Second Life was the direct result of an in-game revolt by players, who subverted the economy to the point that game designers had to respond. MMOGs have also been sites of political protest, and even sites for the emergence of something similar to early concentrations of sovereignty. In the 0.0 security sectors of EVE Online, where aggressive behaviour is completely unregulated by code-based mechanisms, there exist pocket fiefdoms in which powerful players and player associations regulate the permissible levels and targets of violence, a pattern of organization with stark similarity to Weberian definitions of the state and neatly paralleling Tilly's (1985) observations regarding the emergence of the Westphalian state.

There exists at least one preliminary effort to use a MMOG as a tool for political modeling. AgoraXchange is being designed a tool for modeling political institutions which organize society. Stevens (2004) has discussed agoraXchange an opportunity to break free from evolutionary models of intuitional design and move toward a more aesthetic vision of desired and desirable institutions. The potential of MMOGs for modeling has also been explored by economic (Ondrekja, 2004a; 2004b) and legal

(Bradley and Froomkin, 2004) theorists. There is a clear association in the existing literature between studies which explore the planning / design potential of MMOGs and those exploring transgressive action within them. Iterative design improvements (across game "generations") in MMOG design often emerge from the lessons learned through transgressive player behaviour, particularly in terms of player vs. player aggression, economic modeling in-game, and the degree of environmental control players can exert. Both Ondrejka and Bradley and Froomkin note design lessons in later MMOGs such as World of Warcraft, which stem directly from unanticipated player action in earlier MMOGs like Ultima Online and Everquest. The fact that game designers pay attention to these lessons is indicated by the growing success of such games. Everquest drew attention when its subscriber pool reached a quarter million. World of Warcraft's subscriber pool recently broke the 8 million mark. It seems only a matter of time before this iterative learning process is noted by academic analysts.

Conclusion

Massively multiplayer online games are growing in significance. As rates of participation rates continue to increase, so too does the political and economic importance of the virtual worlds they embody. MMOGs represent a new kind of social environment, one not limited by location or place, and far more immersive than predecessors. They have also attracted attention from academics for their economic, social and legal implications. Since society, economy, and law all impinge on politics, it seems necessary that some attention be paid to them by political analysts.

The appeal of MMOGs for political analysts goes beyond a simple game of "catch-up", however. Despite the popularity of discussions of globalization, knowledge economies, or virtual environments, there exist few concrete examples of fundamentally different examples of each – global economic flows, the economic value of knowledge, and "worlds of imagination" have existed for centuries, if not millennia. But MMOGs hold out the prospect of something legitimately new. They allow human beings to interact in politically and economically significant ways not previously been possible. The iterative development of the games, both in terms of technology and game architecture, coupled with their growing popularity and durability, suggest that these new forms of interaction are more than a simple flash in a pan.

MMOGs offer political analysts the opportunity to observe emerging social forms. The rules for MMOG environments are fundamentally different, and are still subject to negotiation and inquiry. This paper lays out three areas where such inquiry could begin. MMOGs present a distinct locus for the study of emerging property and political economy relations. They offer a controllable environment with emerging, evolving, and contested methods of governance. Finally, they present a unique prospect for both modeling theories of political behavior and studying transgressive movements. While the authors intend to pursue a research agenda of their own, they hope that growing familiarity with MMOGs with inspire other researchers to pursue parallel vectors of enquiry.

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