

Virtual Worlds and Their Discontents: Precarious Sovereignty, Governmentality, and the Ideology of Play

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***Abstract:** In the following paper, I argue that much of the current scholarly discourse about virtual worlds fails to recognise the mode of governmentality that characterises these new social formations. Rather than to see them as analogous to societies in the real world, with their own cultures, economies, and political systems, I suggest to regard them as ‘social factories’ in which the social fabric is inextricably shot through with economic production. While the governmentalisation of the global economy, and the concomitant economisation of governments are processes which originate in the (increasingly virtualised) real world, they also result in a ‘naturalisation’ of virtual worlds, a tendency which also becomes obvious in the way virtual worlds are discussed in terms of ‘population’ and ‘territory’. At the same time, the integration of the economies of the real world with those of virtual worlds leads to similar results as the virtualisation of real-world economies, which is contingent upon the increasing valorisation of immaterial labour. In virtual worlds, the suffusion of governance with economic production thus leads to the formation of precarious forms of governmentality, which are veiled by a pertinent ideology of play. By de-ideologising the material processes of exploitation and accumulation that take place in virtual worlds, it is possible to recognise virtual worlds’ precarious sovereignty, and arrive at a conceptualisation of virtual worldliness that takes this precariousness into account.*

The Naturalisation of Virtual Worlds

In February 1996, science-fiction writer and activist John Perry Barlow penned “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” (Barlow, 1996). Speaking for the inhabitants of the “new home of Mind,” he exhorted the “[g]overnments of the industrial world” to keep out of Cyberspace, declaring it “independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us” and asserting that “Cyberspace does not lie within your borders”. In retrospect, Barlow’s utopian declaration appears naïve, and his flamboyant rhetoric may even invite ridicule. However, I think one should not be so quick to pass judgment on this document of the utopianism inspired by the first steps in virtuality. Rather, I would suggest that there is an important lesson to be learned from early cyber-utopians like Barlow, a lesson which is easily forgotten amidst the hype that surrounds the newest expansions of cyberspace.

Virtual worlds, also known as ‘synthetic worlds’ (Castronova, 2005) or massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), have been around, in some form or another, since the 1970s – if one regards Richard Bartle’s and Roy Trubshaw’s *MUD* (1978) as the first persistent, multi-user game – but only recently have they begun to attract media attention and develop mass appeal. While it is hard to account for the reasons of this development, it is relatively easy to pinpoint the online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), with more than 9 million players at the time of this writing, and the 3D social space *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003), which boasts a similar number of ‘residents’, as the main foci of the hype around virtual worlds which can be seen to have begun in the summer 2006.¹ At the same time, the claims made about these worlds are characterised by a naïveté and flamboyancy similar to that of Barlow’s Declaration.

¹ A search in the Lexis Nexis database conducted in August 2007 for articles in “Major World Publications” with “Second Life” or “World of Warcraft” in the headline resulted in 487 hits in the previous 5 years, 348 of which had appeared in the previous year. This suggests an almost tenfold increase in the number of articles on this topic between 2006 and 2007.

The common thread in these discourses of cyber-utopianism is a tendency to regard virtual space as lying ‘outside’ the territory of national states, and its ‘population’ as exempt from the legislation of national states. Simultaneously, virtual worlds are often implicitly or explicitly compared to sovereign states with their own laws, economy, culture, and institutions. Often the fact that these virtual spaces are games is de-emphasised in favour of highlighting the fact that they can be regarded as virtual societies. While it is undeniable that multi-user environments such as *Second Life* are markedly different from online role-playing games such as *EverQuest*, the fact remains that their ludic nature is put under erasure. This often goes hand in hand with an intentional or unintentional disregard for the technological underpinnings of these games, resulting in a sort of ‘naturalisation’ of virtual worlds.

Virtual Territories, Virtual Populations

This tendency to regard virtual worlds as self-enclosed entities can be seen as the result of the way they are represented in the academic as well as the popular discourse about them. Castronova, who must be credited with conducting the first large-scale study of virtual worlds from an economic point of view, is perhaps the most prominent scholar to propagate this view, by comparing the gross domestic product (GDP) of MMOGs such as *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive, 1999) to that of real-world countries (see Castronova, 2001). Like a number of other scholars, Castronova regards virtual worlds as a “frontier” (Castronova, 2005) and thus evokes the same metaphorical space as cyber-utopians like Barlow. More poignantly still, he references science-fiction writers such as William Gibson and Neal Stephenson, side by side with trans-humanist visionaries such as Ray Kurzweil and Hans Moravec, who advocate the ‘exodus’ of humanity into cyberspace, leaving their bodies behind in order to live eternally in some kind of electronic paradise.

This conceptualisation of virtual worlds as a frontier draws attention to the fact that it is becoming increasingly common to apply the two central concepts which are being used to determine the governmentality of nation-states – *population* and *territory*² – to virtual worlds. In this context, it is important to remember Michel Foucault’s (2000) assertion that “prior to the emergence of population, it was impossible to conceive of the art of government” (216) and Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004) hypothesis that in the shift from ‘primitive societies’ to State societies, “the territorial principle becomes dominant” (428). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) emphasise the central role of new technologies in the current transition from sovereign national states to an ‘imperial’ mode of government, and the concurrent process of deterritorialisation that dissolves the striated space of state-hood. As they point out, “[t]he deterritorialising capacities of communication are unique: communication is not satisfied by limiting or weakening modern territorial sovereignty; rather it attacks the very possibility of linking an order to a space” (347).

However, it would be too simplistic to disregard the transfer of these criteria to virtual worlds as merely an attempt to present online multi-player games as equal to national states in the real world – whichever agenda this may serve. In reality this transfer of nationhood is much more complicated, and requires a multi-perspectival approach. First of all, the governmentalisation of virtual worlds must be seen in the context of the economisation of all forms of government that informs the neo-liberal ideology but is in fact a symptom of a much larger transformation. Furthermore, it does not suffice to point to the fact that the ‘population’ and the ‘territory’ of virtual worlds are not real – as Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to the fact that the concepts of population and territory are always already virtual.

² Thus, for example, Lastowka and Hunter (2006) suggest the interest of law scholars in virtual worlds is primarily motivated by the “ever-increasing population” of virtual worlds, as well as the fact that the “economic boundaries between the real and the virtual world are not as distinct as they might appear” (16).

And finally, it is necessary to see the transposition of statehood into Cyberspace in the context of the loss of sovereignty that characterises contemporary processes of denationalisation.

The Ideology of Play

All of these processes cannot be understood, however, without taking into account the fact that current virtual worlds are still primarily ludic, and that this predisposes them to an ‘ideology of play’ that is growing increasingly pervasive in new media. For example, Nick Yee draws attention to the amount of labour involved in computer game play, pointing out that “[e]very day, many [MMORPG players] go to work and perform an assortment of clerical tasks, logistical planning and management in their offices, then they come home and do those very same things in MMORPGs” (69). Nick Dyer-Witheford (2002) depicts digital games production as characterised by a ‘work as play’ ethic, which involves “soft coercion, cool cooption and mystified exploitation, with long hours, physical and mental burn out, and chronic insecurity, organized outside of all established traditions of trades unionism and worker protection.” In my own work, I have referred to the work of digital game modification (‘modding’) as a form of precarious ‘playbour’ (Kücklich, 2005).

As these conceptualisations of play labour indicate, it is increasingly hard to distinguish the production from the consumption of digital games – and this is particularly obvious in the case of digital games. While Yee points out that “video games train us to become more industrious gameworkers” (2006: 70), veiling the laborious nature of gameplay behind an ideology of fun, Sal Humphreys’ (2004) critique goes even further than that. She asserts that in MMOGs “[p]layer activity is productive in a number of ways,” most of which fall under the category of immaterial or affective labour. Thus, she draws attention to the important role players of MMOGs fulfil by providing feedback and suggestions, creating ‘buzz’ on forums, blogs, and bulletin boards, participating in the game design, creating paratextual information relevant to the game, and by investing time and money in building a lively player community. This last point is especially relevant in the present context, insofar as the virtual nation-building must be seen as a direct result of players’ efforts to create communities that provide a measure of stability and security in virtual worlds.

Timothy Burke (2004) argues that guilds are “the central device of player governance in MMOGs” and draws attention to the fact that guilds are “persistent within the gameworld” (7). The persistence of guilds must be seen as one of the characteristics that enable them to act as structural units of governance. At the same time this persistence is by no means absolute, as nothing in the code of virtual worlds prevents guilds from disbanding. The ties that bind a guild together are rather economic in nature, as they “require players to voluntarily donate goods, services or currency” (ibid.), and players expect a ‘return on investment’ from their donations. As T.L. Taylor (2006) emphasises, the membership in guilds typically allows players to ‘level up’ more quickly, and to play more ‘efficiently’ – especially in what she calls the “high-end game” (44). She describes many of the structures of guilds as “mafia-like” – thus drawing attention to the large extent to which these governmental structures are suffused by the economic, and highlighting the way in which they function as a stand-in for families.

Bio-political Production in Virtual Worlds

Foucault discerns a shift in the role of the family in regard to population taking place in the 18th century. While the family served as a *model* of government previous to the organisation in a State society, it becomes an *instrument* once society enters this new mode of governmentality. In a similar way, one could argue, micro-organisational units such as guilds are becoming the primary means through which the ‘population’ of virtual worlds is governed. However, it must be remembered that Foucault sees the family primarily as an instrument for biopolitics, and he specifically draws attention to the role of the family in

promoting “marriages, vaccinations, and so on” (2000: 216). At the same time, biopolitics is now used in a much wider sense by writers such as Maurizio Lazzarato (2002), Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2005) and Hardt and Negri, a sense which is succinctly summed up in the latter’s definition of the biopolitical as a term that “indicates that the traditional distinctions between the economic, the political, the social, and the cultural become increasingly blurred” (2004: 109).

This means it is possible to draw a parallel from the way families became instruments of population management to the way player communities are used for the organisation of virtual worlds, and it is also possible to regard the labour of play labourers as a form of biopolitical labour which appears to fulfil primarily an economic function but which also creates social and cultural capital, as well as forms of political organisation, which in turn feed back into the business models of the providers of virtual worlds. This is also increasingly recognised in the emerging legal discourse about MMOGs. Writing in a collection about law and virtual worlds (Balkin & Noveck, 2006), virtual world designer Raph Koster (2006) argues that avatars, i.e. the representations of players in MMOGs, “are the manifestation of actual people in an online medium” and that these “avatars form a social contract with the community, forming a populace which may and must self-affirm and self-impose rights and concomitant restrictions upon their behaviour” (57).

The concept of the social contract is taken up by other contributors to the collection, most notably Jack Balkin (2006), who discusses the question how it is possible to balance the interests of law and liberty in virtual worlds, and who conceptualises the governance of virtual worlds as a collaboration between providers and players. Importantly, Balkin draws attention to the fact that the contractual relationship between players and providers exceeds that of a regular relationship between the provider of a service and a client, due to the “enormous power that platform owners wield over events in the game space, and their ability to see everything that goes on in that space,” which means that they have “abundant opportunity to abuse their authority” (88). Balkin argues that players in MMOGs should be protected by First Amendment rights, since virtual worlds can be seen as a medium for the communication of ideas, similar to literature, film, and the internet, thus drawing attention to the need for a form of governance in virtual worlds.

The Economisation of Governance

Governmental control thus appears to be motivated by the need to address the imbalance of power between providers and players in virtual worlds, but I think it is necessary to regard this matter from a different perspective. The crucial point of both Foucault’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s arguments is that economy is always a form of government, and thus it is possible to understand the consumer – or better yet, the ‘user’ – as the model of the subject in biopolitical formations in which the political is irrevocably interwoven with the economic. The government, on the other hand, can be seen as a provider of services, for which it is remunerated in the form of taxes. At the same time, the relationship between State and subject always exceeds the form of the trade, and invests itself with mythological, ideological, and historical signifiers. In virtual worlds, this mechanism is laid bare, and allows us to glimpse the mercantile roots of citizenship.

However, in virtual worlds, the subjects do not pay the government to deliver the goods – security, economic stability, etc. – but rather for the packaging of the goods in the form of mythology, ideology, and history. In a curious inversion of the way governmental business is

conducted in the real world,³ the actual ‘content’ of the social contract is a mere afterthought to its framing, and the power of virtual ‘governments’, i.e. providers, derives precisely from the absence of this content from the contractual relationship. From this perspective, it can be argued that the current situation is the result of an antagonistic relationship between players and providers that is motivated by what Ernesto Laclau (2006) calls an ‘empty signifier’. As he points out, “the antagonistic clash, which cannot be directly represented, can however be signified [...] through the production of an empty signifier” (108).

This results in an inherently unstable situation that could be characterised as a form of ‘precarious sovereignty’, a term used in political science to describe the inability of states to offer their citizens a bare minimum of services, whether in the areas of public and social security, health or the rule of law. It could be argued, of course, that in the current climate of neo-liberalism, privatisation is the main driver of the increasingly precarious sovereignty of national states, and which thus leaves real-world states in a similar situation as their virtual counterparts. This already draws attention to the fact that the economisation of government in national states and the governmentalisation of privately owned virtual spaces are two processes which work in conjunction to strip bare the mythological construct of nationality, and thus destabilise the notions of territory and population which are evoked so often in those contexts.

Precarious Sovereignty in Virtual Worlds

The degree to which the precariousness of virtual worlds is contingent upon the suffusion of governance by economic production is highlighted by the desperate measures taken by virtual world providers to control the rampant inflation that is the result of the activities of ‘gold farmers’ – economic mercenaries which are typically not part of the social structure of MMOGs but remain at the margins in order to be able to siphon off the surplus value generated by the labour of players within the game. In his article on gold farming in the *New York Times*, Julian Dibbell (2007) explains that every player in games like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) needs gold to “pay for the virtual gear to fight the monsters to earn the points to reach the next level” – thus highlighting the way in which the economic is intertwined with the social hierarchy of the game.

Dibbell goes on to point out that gold farming is a logical consequence of this ludic structure, insofar as “there are only two ways players can get as much of this virtual money as the game requires: they can spend hours collecting it or they can pay someone real money to do it for them.” The ‘farming’ of virtual gold on an ‘industrial’ scale – Dibbell estimates that the trade in virtual items is worth 1.8 million USD worldwide, and that there are 100,000 gold farmers in China alone – thus allows those players who cannot dedicate 20 hours and more to playing the game to develop their characters, and buy the items required to keep up with their peers. Unsurprisingly, the activity of gold farmers on such a scale quickly destabilises the economy of MMOGs and leads to a high inflation rate.

MMOG providers, chief among them Blizzard Entertainment, attempt to crack down on gold farming by banning the accounts of players suspected of being farmers, i.e. by curbing the population of virtual worlds. In March 2005, more than 1,000 *World of Warcraft* accounts were banned (see Bramwell, 2005); however, this was only the beginning. Blizzard continued to ban accounts of suspected farmers, pursuing an aggressive anti-inflation policy. In October 2006, Steven Davis of *Playnoevil.com* noted that after banning more than 160,000 accounts

³ It could be argued, however, that a similar inversion is taking place in the real world, where citizenship is becoming increasingly de-mythologised, de-ethicized, and decoupled from the State (see, e.g., Joppke, 2007; Sassen, 2003).

within a six-month period and removing more than 60 million units of gold from the game, Blizzard's policy finally "had an impact on the price of WOW gold – it looks like it has gone up [...] from \$0.16 per gold to over \$0.18 per gold" (Davis, 2006). The slightly sarcastic tone evident in this statement seems entirely appropriate in the light of the fact that the effort required to achieve this meagre result seems to be hugely disproportionate, as the negative effects from banning legitimate players suspected to be gold farmers is hard to measure and may actually outweigh the increase in the price of gold.

Blizzard's policy appears counter-productive, considering that inflation and the law of diminishing returns would eventually lead to the demise of gold farming, if the provider simply let things run their course. However, Blizzard's strategy makes sense from the point of view of players, for whom rampant inflation means that the treasure yielded by a dragon's lair loses value so quickly that it won't even buy a tankard of ale by the time they return to the village to celebrate their victory. Ironically, the precarious sovereignty of MMOG providers is the direct result of the thorough commodification of play in MMOGs, which also expresses itself in the economisation of governmental control. At the same time, the example of gold farming draws attention to the fact that this control is limited – particularly in regard to practices that take advantage of the susceptibility of virtual worlds to hyper-capitalist modes of exploitation through the mobilisation of immaterial labour.

Virtual Worlds as Social Factories

The example of gold farming also makes obvious that the populations of virtual worlds are involved in a mode of production that can be regarded as bio-political and multitudinous. Sal Humphries (2004) points out that in MMOGs, "player activity is productive in a number of ways", and she goes on to say that

players are also a source of feedback and suggestions; act as quasi bug-testers; are active on game bulletin boards; interact with developers vital to the developer in their ongoing production and design of the game; create websites with information and guides to the games, which also generate discussion and feedback. Finally there are the social and community investment of players that build important structural features such as the social networks found in guilds, and the long-term friendships and team-like relationships that lead to player retention in the game. (2-3)

This way of describing productive player activities is reminiscent of the way Hardt and Negri (2004) describe the biopolitical, or immaterial, mode of production: "Immaterial production [...], including the production of ideas, images, knowledges, communication, cooperation, and affective relations, tend to create not the means of social life, but *social life itself*" (146, emphasis in original).

At the same time, Humphries description of the productive processes in which MMOG players are involved, highlights the fact that this is a multitudinous mode of production, which cuts across differentiations between providers and players, paid employees of the games industry and providers of what Tiziana Terranova (2000) calls 'free labour'. It is recognised by a number of scholars that the creativity and unpaid labour of gamers is an important source of innovation for the digital games industry (see e.g. Dyer-Witheford, 2002; Kücklich, 2005; Postigo, 2003) – a fact that is particularly pronounced in virtual worlds.

It thus makes sense to conceptualise the producers of digital games – whether they are being paid or not, whether they are 'visible' or 'invisible', and whether their products are material or immaterial – as a multitude. The concept of the multitude is introduced by Virno (2004) by drawing on Spinoza's formulation that a multitude is a "plurality which exists as such" (21). He conceptualises the multitude as a manifestation of what Marx (1973) called the "general intellect," highlighting "the exterior, collective, social character which belongs to intellectual activity when this activity becomes [...] the true wellspring of wealth" (2004).

Conceptualising the production processes of MMOGs as multitudinous thus allow us to recognise that the production of wealth cannot be separated from what Hardt and Negri call ‘social life itself’. Biopolitical production, which includes illegitimate economic activities such as gold farming, is also what creates the social fabric of MMOGs, and thus creates the preconditions for governmentality in virtual worlds. Thus, the harnessing of the creative forces of the multitude, and the networking of labour-power, play and technology go hand in hand in order to create a ‘social factory’ (Tronti, 1971), where “the relationship between capitalist production and [...] society, between the factory and society, between society and the state, become more and more organic” (quoted in Cleaver, 1992).

Conclusion

I began this article with a nostalgic look back to early cyber-utopian visions of a virtual world that is entirely independent of the material foundations of real-world societies – a world with a non-existent territory and with a non-corporeal population. While the reality of contemporary virtual worlds is quite different from these vision, even a casual look at the scholarly discourse about virtual worlds reveals that it is still suffused to a large extent by the same rhetoric that informed the utopian visions of Cyberspace. Now as then, there is a tendency to regard virtual worlds as ‘outside’ the territory of the real world, as a frontier to be conquered and submitted to the rule of law.

At the same time it became obvious that the virtual constructs of population and territory are extended to virtual worlds in a way that mirrors the governmentalisation of European nation-states in the 18th century. This involves a naturalisation of the territory and population of virtual worlds, which is all too easily aligned with the ideology of play that pervades the field of digital games in general, and that of MMOGs in particular. This means that modes of biopolitical labour are represented as forms of play, and the creativity and innovativeness of players is harnessed for virtual nation-building. It is hardly surprising that this results in a form of precarious sovereignty.

In the final analysis, this allows us to regard virtual worlds as social factories, in which all of social life is part of economic production, and economic production is suffused by social life. The high networkedness of virtual worlds thus gives rise to a mode of production that can also be discerned in the real world, but which has not yet achieved a comparable level of integration between the economic, the social, the cultural, and the political. This conceptualisation draws attention to the fact that theories of immaterial production cannot only aid us in gaining a better understanding virtual worlds but also of the processes that transform the world we inhabit mentally, bodily, and territorially.

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