

Virtual worlds – media, entertainment, narrative: a radical shift from passive to interactive?

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It's a real pleasure to have been asked to speak today alongside my friend, colleague and fellow sufferer as an avid Spurs supporter, David Triesman. That's probably more information than you really needed. But it is true to say that David and I, working as we do in the Palace of Westminster, almost certainly know more about virtual world's than anyone else here this morning!

Since first achieving consciousness, humankind has lived at least partially in a 'virtual world'. Children have

always played in a continually shifting place between reality and imagination (and we'll discuss children and their virtual worlds a little later).

Since the earliest cave drawings, authors and painters, and even film producers, have sought to create unreal or surreal worlds to stir up the imaginations of those with more limited visions.

Throughout history, we have used the time we spend (day-dreaming they used to call it) to amaze, to inspire, to frighten and to connect; and so it's no surprise that we should use the incredible new capacities of technology to build more immersive and compelling virtual worlds than have ever previously been possible.

These 'personal' virtual worlds were very different to those that have brought us all here today.

And, of course, trying to define exactly what is or isn't a 'virtual world' is far from straightforward.

Rather than attempt to count angels dancing on pinheads, for the next few minutes, when I use the phrase 'virtual world', I'll be referring to a computer-generated place (or space) accessible to more than one person at a time; with a life beyond any one person's ability visit to it.

Persistent, shared worlds that are accessed through a computer or a mobile device: these are the object of all the activities and discussions you will be having over the next two days – along with how to survive as a business-minded creator, or indeed a resident of these worlds.

Having set out my stall, I have in essence just two things to say this morning. One of them will not be new to anyone here. The other is probably equally familiar, but it's possibly at risk of being forgotten.

The first thing I want to talk about is the shift in people's relationship with media from a passive to an interactive role. The second, and for me the more interesting, is the reason for that shift.

By the time television had been around for as long as virtual worlds have now been, we'd seen the first toothpaste commercial, the first soap opera, children's programming, a coronation, a world war and 'time travel' – in terms of the shift from live to recorded programmes.

We're fortunate not to have witnessed a third world war in our virtual worlds, but all of the other benchmarks have been reached – even, I am told, the coronation of Anshe Chung as the Queen of Second Life.

We've seen commercials adding a new dimension to online games, the rise of the 'machinima' series, worlds designed for children, and, yes, perhaps even time travel - certainly if you have an avatar on a US server, and a computer in Europe.

But of course in many ways these worlds offer much more than television: the opportunity to write the story for oneself; the chance to create the world in which the story unfolds; the ability to play, explore and bend the narrative.

Unlike most of human behaviour, TV is essentially passive. Virtual world's parallel the majority of human experience by being 'interactive'. This is a huge difference. It used to be thought that, as online games grew in popularity and sophistication, there would be a natural convergence with television. The production values and writing skills of television when combined with the networking and freedom of games would, it was believed, produce a new form of entertainment. Well, there has been a degree of convergence. But it's not been between television and online games; between a passive media and an interactive medium. Instead it's been a convergence between many different forms of interactive media.

Multiplayer games and web-based 'casual' games are merging to create virtual worlds with a broader appeal than was ever before possible – I was recently told that the huge success of Kart Rider in Korea has encouraged many creators to move away from the traditional swords-and-quests model to explore new and far more accessible worlds.

Social networking sites are certainly becoming more playful – look at the ways people attempt to move their pictures to the top of Flickr's "Interestingness" scale. At the same time, three-dimensional immersive worlds are becoming that much more social; with many focussing as much on helping people make connections between each other, as they do on setting 'game tasks' to complete. We've even reached a point at which 'World of Warcraft' has been declared 'the new golf' - for technology-focussed net-workers! And there are worlds, such as 'There' or 'Second Life', in which no set game goals exist - the aim being simply to 'exist'. Nothing odd about that – it's been the primary objective of tribal societies down through the millennia. To some extent, it might be fairer to say that virtual worlds are moving from 'games' to simply 'venues and opportunities', places where those that inhabit them have many different reasons for being there. So the boundaries between different online worlds are blurring and the point I want to make here is not that games are changing – of course they are. The point is that all of these areas of convergence are between interactive media, not between passive and interactive media as we used to think likely.

The games industry has tended to see itself as the younger brother of the broadcast industry, not yet mature, and lacking much of the confidence of film and television.

That was certainly the case when I was trying, a decade ago, to negotiate the games industry into BAFTA. The degree of suspicion on both sides was nothing short of remarkable!

In this last quarter of 2007, it's the broadcast media that, to me at least, are beginning to look incomplete. It should certainly be worried at its failure to more fully engage with virtual worlds.

Research from Screen Digest last March suggests that just the online gaming market – only one kind of virtual world, remember – was worth \$1 billion in 2006, and will be worth \$1.5 billion by 2011.

Not only is the market growing, but it is growing at the expense of, or 'cannibalising' the more traditional media.

Online games have a tendency to replace television in peoples' media diet - they choose engaging with other people over just watching with them. Certainly, the old idea of interactivity being merely an add-on or extension, a bonus grafted onto existing broadcast media, seems quaint now: in fairness it's probably more true for people who have grown up with the expectation of being able to interact with their media and who feel that broadcast is only 'half a format'. Their default expectation is for at least some form of interactivity. So I hope I've made the case that interactivity is important – maybe even fundamental to the expectations of a growing number of people.

But virtual worlds are not just about interactivity – they are places, alternative universes offering the opportunity to do and see things that seldom if ever exist in the so-called 'real' world. What fuels this appetite for interactivity; this desire to inhabit, even briefly, another reality? There's probably as many motivations for choosing to spend time in virtual worlds as there people who choose to do so, so I'm not going to even attempt any form of comprehensive answer. Instead, here are three qualities of virtual worlds that I think draw people to them. Firstly, players or visitors in virtual worlds have 'agency'. They have a real 'say' in what happens - and when. Whether it's choosing one road over another, customising an avatar, building a team or deciding who to trade with; the narrative that unfolds as a result is something the player built, not something that was imposed – frequently without explanation.

The chance to make your own choices as a player is partly what gives these worlds their immersive quality: you can make decisions and see, and more importantly, have to deal with the consequences. You are even left to wonder what would have happened if you'd done things differently.

Secondly, in many virtual worlds players have the opportunity to help create the conditions, or rules under which they will 'play'. Sometimes, this is through a conversation with the developers, outside the world. At other times it's though importing work done outside the virtual world. In a few (and growing) cases, players can create content directly within the virtual world. In almost every virtual world players have the opportunity to change the way their avatar appears, to create a customized 'look' for themselves. Allowing players to build at least part of the world helps them view it as theirs, a place they've put their time and imagination into; and as Electronic Arts have learned from the Sims Online; and Linden Lab know from Second Life, allowing people the chance to indulge the basic urge to create can make a real difference to the way they feel about and respond to a virtual place.

Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, people get to interact with other people. For the most part we remain a gregarious species. Talking, and sharing experiences is an entirely natural thing for us to do. The chance to compete against, or work with avatars that you know have real people behind them, changes the whole character of participation: whether you're trying to sell them an item you've made, or congratulating them on 'levelling up', most things on offer in virtual worlds make little sense when done alone.

These three qualities together contribute to the most remarkable feature of virtual worlds: the fact that they have so much meaning for their players. The relationships that grow and develop between players, the frustrations and boredoms, the shared achievements: these are all hugely important to those who play.

Of course the graphics, and the game-play, and the exchange rate between game currency and the dollar are all important. But they aren't the sum of what gives these worlds meaning, and I would suggest that it is the twin qualities of having what I described as 'agency', and building relationships, that make these worlds meaningful for the people who spend hours, if not days of their lives in them. It's a rosy picture, isn't it? A world free of couch potatoes, actively engaged in co-developing their own personal version of paradise. Of course, everyone here will be well aware that I'm painting a thoroughly incomplete picture. There are many challenges to face in virtual worlds, some imported from the real world, and others that are entirely home-grown.

Some of these challenges receive more attention than others, but that is not necessarily an indication of their importance. Perhaps the most widely-discussed and visible challenge we face is the question of addiction. Why wouldn't a 'personal paradise' become addictive in today's ever-more stressful world? First of all, it should be said that this is a familiar debate. I'm old enough to remember a similar trajectory of public furore over cinema, television, videos, games consoles and the web; so you shouldn't imagine that virtual worlds are in any way being singled out for special treatment! And, of course, addictive behaviour can raise its head in just about any area of life – there is no reason why a specific component of 'new media' should be any different.

Nonetheless this has been one of the more polarising debates in this domain; with advocates of extreme play being sometimes guilty of taking knee-jerk and demonstrably irresponsible positions; effectively denying the possibility that any such problem could exist.

Whilst on the other side are those equally irresponsibly exaggerating the capacity of new media to negatively affect peoples' lives. I'm not going to dwell on the issue of addiction: it's a complex and difficult subject to do justice to – certainly in the time we have available this morning – except to offer, as an example of the current state of play in this debate, the recent work of Dr Charlton and his colleagues at the University of Bolton.

Looking at this area his team found that, while some kinds of online game can contribute to an adverse effect on some young people's social lives; online gaming in general is almost certainly not as addictive as is sometimes reported.

This is exactly the kind of nuanced, informed and intelligent contribution that the industry would do well to engage with - and support.

While it is perhaps unreasonable to hold the industry accountable for the complex set of factors that can lead to addictive behaviour, it is not unreasonable to expect the industry, in its own interests to seek to mitigate any risks identified by this kind of detailed research.

Another area that is increasingly making itself felt is the possibility of further regulation. Virtual worlds raise any number of difficult philosophical questions – but many of these are far from academic.

Deciding whether virtual money is real enough to tax; or virtual objects real enough to own; or what kind of rights or culpabilities avatars have – these are all questions that have genuine implications right across this growing industry. But of course translating any answers to these questions into policy and action is an incredibly difficult process, and one that's likely to have an enormous impact on the inhabitants of virtual worlds. The interests of developers and users may not be all that easily reconciled. For example, how can developers encourage player-created content while still retaining control of their brand? And on a global level, governments are beginning to wake up to the potential miss-use of virtual worlds for money laundering.

Creating the investigatory and legislative framework necessary to address this and other forms of cyber-crime is going to require a great deal of sophistication. These are to some extent relatively new problems, and it's encouraging to see the industry moving to address them before they turn critical. But there are older issues that still remain. One of the most fundamental of these, as with any activity on the internet, is identity. How can people form trusting relationships with other people 'online'? How can companies running virtual worlds trust their customers? Already, we see those running online games trying to establish methods of dealing with antisocial behaviour that balance the rights of individual players – customers – with the need to retain control and manage accounts. Sometimes, this balance has not been maintained: not every approach tried so far has been correct, or even successful.

What is encouraging however is that the major companies in this space are learning to engage their customers in a dialogue, attempting to negotiate an approach that achieves at least some kind of balance. But the relationship between players is perhaps more problematic with regard to identity and trust than that between companies and their customers.

And of course, increasingly, the relationships between players might include relationships between companies and clients. How do you build trust if you are selling clothes for avatars in Second Life, or offering virtual weapons on eBay? When spending time in virtual worlds was undertaken by an early hard core of tech-savvy explorers, it was perhaps acceptable to expect them to work out their own codes and

norms of behaviour, negotiating for themselves the tensions between the risks and benefits of anonymity. But in a growing market, the issue of online safety becomes ever more important. How do we help people to protect themselves from identity theft, or bullying, in virtual worlds? As the number of virtual worlds designed for children increases, it becomes imperative that we resolve at least some of these issues.

From Habbo Hotel and Whyville, through Be-Bratz and Barbie, to Second Life's Teen Grid and the BBC's new Adventure Rock, there are now sufficient virtual worlds for us to consider them as much a part of the marketplace as the more familiar adult genres.

Of course, each of these worlds are very different, with different aims and activities built into them – there is no such thing as a “children's virtual world”, any more than there is single type of experience for adults. One thing they do all seem to have in common is an understanding that their highest priority lies in respect for children's privacy and security; with an abundance of information for parents, and guides for young people on the best ways to ‘stay safe online’. But is this enough? Is it sufficient, to shelter children from inappropriate speech and to keep their email addresses safe?

I'd like, in closing, to ask all of you to consider something much tougher to define than “security” or “privacy” but, to my mind, much more important. Virtual worlds can be many things. They are places where what people can build and create is only limited by their imagination. But they are also places where social capital is created and exchanged. In fact, in worlds made from pixels and light, social capital might be the only real thing available. In all these virtual worlds, people share and confirm certain values, ways of establishing trust and behaving towards each other.

This is, to me, something of immense importance, something upon which the whole edifice of buying and selling currency, of trading loot and building teams, eventually comes to rest. There are an increasing number of virtual worlds specifically created by toy manufacturers to promote their products, with incentives for children to spend money on branded peripherals and special offers. Are we absolutely sure this is the very best we can offer young people? Do we really want them to think of themselves as little more than consumers? Might we not prefer to build worlds that encourage those same values and skills we would wish to see in the real world?

There is a growing body of research to support the notion that just by learning to survive and succeed in these virtual worlds, children are learning the sorts of skills and competencies that educators right across the world are keen to develop; in order to equip our young people for the challenges of the future. Solving complex problems with other players may well prove to be one of the best ways to develop the kind of social skills necessary to navigate their way through the 21st century.

What's certain is that understanding the many factors that influence outcomes in virtual worlds is a skill that is just as vital for coping with, and contributing to our increasingly complex, rapidly changing, social environment.

So the challenge ahead of us is this – to ensure that virtual worlds are increasingly places for people to do things that offer meaning to their lives.

In doing this, we need always to remember that, at their best, human beings are essentially 'social creatures'; it's our job to ensure that remains the case.

Thank you very much for listening to me.

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