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Community, Frame of Reference, and Boundary: Three Sociological Concepts and their Relevance for Virtual Worlds Research

Abstract

Virtual-worlds research is a dynamic and growing interdisciplinary area in the social sciences and humanities. Sociological theory can play an important role in how virtual worlds are conceptualized and studied. Drawing on data from ethnographic projects on two distinct types of virtual worlds, an asynchronous text-based internet forum and a massively-multiplayer online game, I consider what social and cultural similarities these two types of virtual worlds have with one another, despite their radically different forms and functions. My comparative analysis is framed in terms of three questions. First, are virtual worlds temporary and/or intentional communities? Second, what are the frames of reference through which virtual-world communities are built? Third, how do boundaries function in virtual worlds? My discussion suggests some of the common social and cultural features of virtual worlds.

Keywords

Massively-multiplayer online game (MMO); Online community; Straight edge; Subculture; Videogame; World of Warcraft.

At the turn of the millennium, tens of millions of people watched "The Matrix*"* films and were fascinated by their images suggesting a future in which human beings would become entombed in a digitally-mediated world. Such ideas have not been limited to the Wachowski brothers' imaginations, though their films seem to have brought those ideas into the popular imagination like nothing before them. In fact, they drew from decades of science fiction work within which the concept of virtual worlds developed. William Gibson's (1984) "Neuromancer" gave birth to the now ubiquitous term "cyberspace" within a dystopian future where "virtual reality" and "real life" overlapped significantly in people's lives (see also Mortensen 2007). "Neuromancer", "The Matrix" and other such works illustrated a relatively bleak technological future for humankind that played on fears that perennially circulate in popular culture via stories of "internet addiction" and the alleged relationships between video games and violence, among others (see Williams 2007).

Despite the dystopian imagery of "The Matrix", none of us yet live full-time in virtual worlds, nor do most of us experience significant negative effects from our time spent online. People around the world do, however, move regularly into and through digital environments and participate in communities of a thousand kinds. A number of loosely-related technologies—websites, chat rooms, internet forums, instant messaging, online game worlds, mobile phones and text/audio/video-messaging— are the media through which these virtual worlds are constructed. Digital environments have not yet reached the sophistication of Star Trek's "holodecks," where people immerse themselves in computer-simulated realities that the human mind cannot distinguish from obdurate reality. But new media visionaries such as Will Wright, creator of "the Sims" games, believe that we are already creating "possibility spaces"—digital spaces that share a basic, well-defined structure, yet allow users to carve unique paths through them (Wright 2006). From this perspective, such virtual worlds are socially shaped and therefore deserve serious attention by sociologists.

As part of a new generation of sociological research on online environments, this article considers the roles of digital technology and culture in building and sustaining the interpersonal networks that structure virtual world formations. In what follows, I first (re)consider the idea of virtual worlds as communities. I then rely on my involvement in long-term ethnographic studies on two different kinds of virtual worlds—subcultural internet forums and massively-multiplayer online games (MMOs)—to discuss the relevance of the community concept, the cultural frames of reference that shape participation, and the function of socio-cultural boundaries. My goal is to provide a useful platform from which future sociological research on virtual worlds may be launched.

Virtual Worlds and Community Types

Since the 1980s a growing number of scholars have given serious attention to the form, function, content, and meaning of virtual worlds. One of the first sociological concepts used to describe them was "community," as we see in Howard Rheingold often-cited remark that "words on a screen are quite capable of…creating a community from a collection of strangers" (Rheingold 1987). His statement was simultaneously simple and profound, and digital communities became quickly distinguished in the literature from their more traditional counterparts (see Etzioni and Etzioni 1999). Distinctions were most often described in terms of propinquity, which emphasizes the source of, or reason for, a community. Classic social theorists such as Tönnies (1988[1887]) posited that communities were rooted in extended kinship systems, shared land and culture (ethnicity, religion, language, and so on). Communities from this perspective were seen as a social force that affected other social relations. Digital communities on the other hand have, from the start, been framed as consequences of intentional social interaction. From this perspective, it is not the community into which a person is born that shapes her outlook on life, but rather her outlook on life that shapes the communities in which she is likely to participate (e.g. Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). This more recent conceptualization of community is by no means new. Sociologists in the 1960s-1970s began using the term "intentional community" to describe new social collectivities such as hippie communes and nudist colonies that were geared toward living in harmony with others who shared a moral outlook on life (e.g. Bourvard 1975).

The idea of virtual worlds as intentional communities seems to be a move in the right direction because the idea of intentionality highlights that individuals choose their communities. Yet it still leaves something to be desired, primarily because most

studies of intentional communities still assume the idea of propinquity as well as the existence of a normative morality. That looks something like this: people, dissatisfied with what mainstream society offers them, remove themselves to a remote or isolated location where they can experience "authenticity" via a community of similarly-minded others. Some virtual worlds can be usefully framed in this way while others cannot. A more recent concept still, "temporary intentional community" provides even more specificity when trying to make sense of how people congregate in the 21st century. Temporary intentional communities refer to groups of people who are brought together by shared interests and/or beliefs for specified amounts of time, after which they return to their own separate lives, usually embedded in mainstream culture. Some examples of this line of research include participation in annual festivals like Burning Man, in volunteer groups that respond to national emergencies or in Rainbow Family tribal gatherings (Gardner 2007; Niman 2007). In each of these cases, we find people who do not necessarily know or keep in regular contact with each other, yet meet to share in mutual fellowship either regularly or intermittently. Could or should virtual worlds be conceptualized as digital temporary intentional communities?

The task of considering virtual worlds as any kind of community remains problematic because the concept of "virtual community" has had its share of ups and downs over the years. According to past research, virtual communities are comprised of people who may not share local space, but who share a specific set of interests and who interact with each other through new media technologies. Rheingold's research, for example, suggested that virtual communities are built on "sufficient human feeling" which promotes the construction of new identities (which is a basic assumption of intentional communities as well). Meanwhile, dystopian pundits such as Sarder (2000) argue that virtual communities offer no useful identities. Rather, they are stripped of the ethical dimensions of traditional organic communities and result in vacuous spaces where users care for nothing but themselves. Besides these debates, we must contend with the sociological meaning(s) of the "virtual" and what it represents. Hand and Moore (2006) demonstrate its polysemic nature by citing contradictory statements by two cultural theorists:

> "The virtual is real but not concrete" (Shields 2003:2)
> "The virtual is precisely not the real…" (Haraway 1992:325)

Is the virtual an *alternative* to the real, the *opposite* of the real, or *is it* real…or something else entirely? One way past this conundrum is to conceptualize "virtual worlds" and "communities" separately. Castronova (2005: 4) defines virtual worlds as "crafted places inside computers that are designed to accommodate large numbers of people." His definition is technologically oriented and implies a connotation between virtual and computerized. I prefer this line of reasoning because it allows community to remain a sociological concept that emphasizes relations among people, without constraining how those relations are mediated.

Internet Forums and MMOs

My own experience studying virtual worlds comes in two forms. The first is through three years of participant observation in an asynchronous internet forum dedicated to the straightedge youth subculture. "Straight edge" was originally a schism of punk, a collective reaction to the sexism, drug-abuse and nihilism that characterized many punk communities in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The

straightedge normative system was constructed through a subcultural rejection of alcohol and drugs, as well as promiscuous sexual activity. Straightedge youths believe that such indulgent behaviors dull the senses and dumb people down. Through an abstinent lifestyle, they strive to create a better world through a do-it-yourself ethic of self-empowerment as well as through collective identification and community.

As with many other place-based communities, straight edge made its way onto Usenet in the 1980s. Its address was *alt.punk.straight-edge*.[1] Populated by early adopters of computer-mediated communication, Usenet functioned as a means of bringing geographically dispersed people together online. Few records of this early digital straightedge community remain on public servers, but its members also participated in several related Usenet communities, including *alt.music.hardcore*, *alt.lifestyle.substance-free*, and *alt.skate-board* (Norved n.d.). Participants shared an interest in straightedge music and culture and, as a second function, the Usenet community served as a knowledge-base for subcultural participants and curious visitors alike. The community was a collective effort, as described in Norved's introduction:

> This [FAQ] aims to provide information about being straight-edge. The information…is believed to be close to the truth but there is no guarantee given. If you know better, contribute your wisdom! (no page - website)

Hundreds of people sent thousands of messages to each other explaining their own understandings of straightedge ideology and practice. Although Usenet communities had largely died out by the late 1990s, its general purpose persists in dozens of online straightedge bulletin boards and forums around the world.

My research data come from a straightedge internet forum (SIF) that started in the late 1990s. It is one of many internet sites explicitly dedicated to providing an online community presence for members of the straightedge subculture. Since I first logged on in 2000, SIF has remained active, with thousands of current and past participants from North America, Europe and Austral-Asia. Anyone with an internet connection and computer can access the site and registering is both free and anonymous—a person may either log in as a "guest" or choose a username and password. Once logged in, participants see a list of conversations, arranged chronologically, with titles that summarize what each conversation is about. Unlike chatrooms, people interacting in forums need not be digitally co-present to interact. Rather, a user can click a conversation link, read what other participants have posted on the topic, and then may reply if they want to add something to the conversation. One may reply one minute or one year after the last comment was posted. Many conversations are about participants' everyday lives, such as "So I saw this documentary today about the dangers of alcohol…," but more often conversation are constructed in terms of question-answer: "I have a friend who wants us to have sex. If we are close but not a 'couple', would this break my edge?" The conversations represent straightedge in a very real way. People tend to take other's opinions seriously and collectively construct a straightedge ideology and identity. It is through such interaction that straight edge as a virtual world comes into existence (Williams 2007).

My other long-term research interest has been in MMOs, and in particular "World of Warcraft" (WoW), in which I have also been a participant observer for approximately three years. MMOs are video games played entirely online by players whose computers link to a remote server through an internet connection. Most

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[1] For a practical history of Usenet, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usenet

popular MMOs today are based on fantasy and science fiction genres and are direct descendents of early text-based digital role-playing games called multi-user domains/dungeons or MUDs (Mortensen 2006). "Ultima Online" was the first remarkable example of the graphical MMO genre, but "Lineage" and now WoW appear to have attracted the largest numbers of players. A player installs the game software on her computer, which then functions as the portal for online play. Once a player logs into a game server, she becomes synchronously co-present in a shared game space with all the other players on the server. The game world has a geographical design with players spanning hundreds of "square miles" of territory (see Castronova 2005, chapter 1 for a good lay-introduction to MMO design and play).

The most significant aspect of MMOs for this discussion is their social character. Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) provide a cogent overview of the genre:

> Technically, [MMOs] are the latest step in a progression of social games that originated with paper-and-pencil fantasy games (e.g. "Dungeons and Dragons" [Gygax and Arneson 1973]) and later migrated to computers, first as mainframe text-based multi-user dungeons - MUDs (Trubshaw and Bartle 1978) and later as the high-end 3-D digital worlds of today (Koster 2002). The virtual worlds that today's MMO players routinely plug in and inhabit are persistent social and material worlds, loosely structured by open-ended narratives, where players are largely free to do as they please, to slay ogres, siege castles, etc. They are known for their peculiar combination of designed "escapist fantasy" and emergent "social realism" (Kolbert 2001).... The online gaming industry continues to prosper, with over nine million subscribers worldwide (Woodcock 2006). MMOs are played heavily (average time spent in-game is 20 hours per week [Yee 2002]) and often with friends and relatives (Yee 2006). (no page – online journal)

In short, MMOs have taken digitally-mediated sociality and sociability to new levels. Players can play with or without the help of others, but they can never really play alone. Further, there are definite benefits to playing *with* other people. For example, players regularly find themselves forced to work together, for protection and support, in order to achieve difficult in-game goals. Someone playing a warrior-type character will benefit from the life-giving support of a healer, while healers benefit from the protective strength of warriors. As long as players share common goals and perform complementary roles, some form of community seems certain to emerge.

In some ways, the two virtual worlds I have described could not be more different. SIF is limited to text and is asynchronous, meaning that users are not necessarily aware of other user's real-time presence, while WoW features synchronicity and visual co-presence—you must physically see other players' characters running around with you in real time in order to progress through the virtual world. SIF is a normative space, complete with gatekeepers and expectations attached to user's offline behavior in addition to their behavior online. WoW, on the other hand, is leisure-based with a very different culture, where many players do not even think to ask who another player is in "real life," and there are few expectations for offline behavior.

Participants in both communities use a digital interface as both a *means* and an *end* to intentional community building. Many straightedgers use SIF as a means of keeping up with events in other areas (e.g. what bands are on tour), while others rely on the internet as their sole access to a straightedge community (Williams 2006). For WoW players, the digital technology primarily represents an object of collective

interest, i.e., it is a fantasy game to play and enjoy. At the same time, it is a medium through which players interact and thus build/maintain community. There are many examples of player groups (e.g. guilds) that move from game to game together, practicing that community through a series of fantasy worlds. Similarly, SIF users sometimes become face-to-face friends or bands link up online and then go on tour together, thereby building/maintaining community as well.

In what space remains, I want to consider some of the similarities between these digital spaces as digital, temporary and intentional communities. My purpose here is to drawn attention to some meso-level processes that affect both, and therefore perhaps many other virtual worlds as well.

Pertinent Questions regarding Communities in Virtual Worlds

Question One: Are virtual worlds temporary and/or intentional communities?

I will start with intentionality because it is easily handled when discussing digital "communities." Once we remove the idea of propinquity from the definition of community, it becomes obvious that almost any conceivable online community is comprised of individuals who intend to participate it in. None of us participate in what we would call online communities because we "have to." Some of us may have to work together online as part of teams, but teams and communities are not synonymous. In other words, all virtual worlds are populated by intentional actors. Likewise, all communities are temporary in one way or another (i.e. nothing lasts forever). When I first started researching SIF in 2000, there were a few hundred registered members. By 2003 there were more than 1,200. That number, along with the interactions taking place among participants, suggested to me a critical mass of participants necessary to support a community in Rheingold's (1993) sense of the term. But what does "registered member" mean? It means that a person clicked the "register" link and then chose a username and password. Nothing else is required, and thus it is difficult to accept the idea that "membership" alone counts for much. I was able to track registered member's activity on the forum and found that, of the 1,200, a quarter of them had posted one message or less. Further, there is nothing to prevent an individual from registering multiple times under multiple names. If a person posts sometimes as "charlie" and sometimes as "edge4life" and does not tell other members that they are both *the same person*, then the community at large will recognize two members. If that member decides to quit posting as "edge4life" then other members might experience a loss of community, although she/he remains in the forum as "charlie."

Choosing how we measure participation goes a long way in shaping how temporary they appear. Looking at the growth of "registered" populations of SIF and WoW, neither appears necessarily temporary—they both are very active digital spaces that have only grown since being created. Steady growth like this suggests that both digital communities could survive indefinitely. There are however several processes that indicate their temporary nature, two of which affect both communities: a significant turn-over rate and the limitations on time spent online. Youth culture scholars have for some time studied the shifting terrain of subcultural life. Bennett (1999: 600, 614) for example expanded Maffesoli's concept of "neo-tribes" to describe the nature of young people's participation in postmodern communities, describing them as "groupings which…are better understood as a series of temporal gatherings characterized by fluid boundaries and floating memberships" based on "the shifting nature of youth's musical and stylistic preferences and the essential

fluidity of youth cultural groups". Certainly his ideas can be transplanted to make sense of SIF as a temporary community. During my research, I watched hundreds of forum members come and go, often over the course of only days or weeks. I emailed some of them to ask why they had quit posting messages. A regular reply suggested that they hadn't found what they were looking for in the forums, or they felt marginalized by other forum members, or they just got bored with it. The anonymity associated with participation—where one may be known only by a self-selected username—made it very easy for individuals to come and go from SIF as they pleased.

Server crashes were perhaps the other most salient aspect of the straightedge community's temporariness online. Between 2000 and 2003, host servers crashed three times—each time all posts and membership records were lost and the community had to start from scratch. Each crash resulted in new people (or at least new usernames) emerging as core members and some long-time members not re-registering. The dynamics of the forum changed over time as well because each crash erased the textual history of the community. Having no collective written history to draw upon, new members regularly started new conversations about the same limited range of topics. For example, many threads could be reduced to questions about straightedge norms, such as "Can I be straightedge an drink caffeine," or "If I love my girlfriend and we have sex, can I still be straightedge?" Probably half the discussions I read on any given day on the forum represented some version of these basic normative concerns. These topics, sometimes "beat to death" in previous iterations of the forum as one of my interviewees put it, annoyed many long-time users, who came to see the forums as little more than boring Q&A sessions about the basic assumptions underlying straightedge subculture rather than a community built upon "sufficient human feeling" (Rheingold 1993:5).

Blizzard Entertainment, who produces WoW, advertises their game and its players as a community. The community exists in two distinct digital forms: in-game as people playing together (which I will focus on in this chapter), and out-of-game, where people meet online to share in the production of WoW culture (see www.worldofwarcraft.com/community/). The WoW community also experiences a high turn-over rate, but for quite different reasons than the straightedge forum. First, while SIF is free, WoW requires a 13-15 USD monthly subscription fee, depending on the subscription plan. Second, the game is not only socially oriented, but achievement-oriented as well. Once players have achieved their in-game goals, they are less likely to continue to participate[2]. Game designers recognize the limited economic potential of this model and are constantly developing new content, releasing it slowly enough that players are not overwhelmed, but not so slowly that the subscription base decreases sharply. Third, WoW is in constant competition with other MMOs and other game platforms. Many players prefer moving from one game to the next every few months rather than remaining in one gameworld for too long.

Among both SIF and WoW communities, long-term members regularly find that changes in their offline lives—school, work, personal relationships, as well as goals and interests—affect their desire and/or ability to continue participating in the virtual world with the same intensity. Among SIF participants, this can be explained by the youth-oriented nature of the subculture. Many participants are teenagers for whom the straightedge label functions as an important social identity as they negotiate the

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[2] Literally half an hour after I wrote this sentence, a colleague called to tell me his teenage son had just cancelled his WoW account the night before. I knew that his son had logged more than 1,100 hours of gameplay in WoW over the previous year (an average of about twenty-three hours per week) and so I asked why. He said he'd done everything he needed to do there, so he and his friends are all moving on to a newer game

pitfalls of teenage life. Presented with tobacco, alcohol, drugs and sexuality in their everyday lives, many kids use the forum as a site for practicing a presentation of the abstinent self. Over time, most become comfortable enough with their decisions to abstain that they no longer need the community-support offered in the virtual world. MMO players, on the other hand, sometimes find themselves battling what some scholars have called "addiction" (Kelly 2005; Young 1999). For both achievement-oriented and social-oriented reason, players are rewarded for staying online. However, gameplay for some reaches the point where other personal and social obligations suffer significantly. Once these obligations weigh on the player sufficiently, all but the most hardcore cut back or cut off gameplay altogether.

Intentional but temporary participation in online communities may last for minutes, days, or years. Many people who spend time online come in contact with people from around the world with whom they share moral or leisure interests. Yet the chances are relatively low that a person will become a permanent (i.e. life-long) member of any particular virtual world. She or he might become an active participant for ten days or for ten years, but even core members drift in and out of participation. This is true in SIF and in WoW. Many youths treat the straightedge subculture as an identity fad, discarding the label when it no longer works for them, while most gameplayers share their allegiances among many different games, moving from one to the next along with their shifting interests and friendship networks.

Question Two: What are the frames of reference through which virtual-world communities are built?

Regardless of how temporary each virtual world might be for its participants, we need to understand how and why people intentionally engage in community-building in the first place. In order for a community to exist at the most basic level, participants must interact with each other in meaningful ways. Albert Cohen (1955) and Herbert Blumer (1969) noted that people regularly align their actions with one another in order to satisfy even the most basic of human needs. The recurrent and often mundane practice of aligning actions becomes, at a meso-level, the collective actions that are evident in most communities. In order to align actions and thus build community, people must share a "frame of reference": a social lens made of preconceptions, stereotypes and values that structures how people see the world around them (Cohen 1955). The more intensely people interact, the more salient a shared frame of reference is likely to become. Frames of reference do not proscribe attitudes or behavior, but rather socialize individuals to accept certain sets of best practices. In my research on SIF and WoW, I noticed several different frames of reference: shared norms, interests and goals; guidelines for reciprocity; and a shared sense of identity.

Whether in an internet forum or an MMO, individuals come together because of shared interests and/or goals. For SIF participants, the interest is the lifestyle norms and identity associated with the subculture, while the goal is either to expand their social networks within the subculture or to collect/share knowledge of lifestyle norms. A significant amount of interaction on SIF relates directly to subcultural norms and behaviors. One participant posted the following message: "A few guys at my school pick on me all the time because I don't smoke pot. Has anyone else had this problem?" The question not only begs for practical advice to solve the problem, but also provides the opportunity for members to discuss shared values and beliefs about drug-use. As participants discuss such topics, they actively construct a collective frame of reference and, over time, a set of topics emerge as central to the

community. The interests and goals that bring WoW players together are not too different. Two motives I hear players express when explaining how they got involved in the game are the fun associated with playing with friends and exploring new leisure content. Like SIF members, WoW players ground their communal experiences in shared interests or a shared lifestyle with other virtual world users.

Social interaction is an explicit desire for users of both spaces, as is the development of a status-identity. In both virtual worlds, users must learn to align their personal interests and goals with other members' in order to maximize the pleasure associated with participation. Reciprocity—the bits of culture that members share with one another such as emotional support, favors, economic exchange, and so on—is a basic dimension of both digital communities. For straightedge kids, reciprocity is grounded in ideology. SIF is a space where members share stories about their everyday lives, ask for others' opinions about what is appropriate straightedge behavior, and support one another in times of need. When a participant complains online about being picked on at school, other SIF members offer coping strategies or methods for dealing with it. In short, SIF forum is a space for sharing strategies for living.

For WoW players, there is relatively less ideological reciprocity (though I would not say it is entirely absent from the game). Instead, WoW players mutually benefit from working together to complete quests or kill enemies. MMOs are designed to become more difficult as players advance through the game content and, quite literally, the game designers force players to band together under certain circumstances. If a player needs to journey between two distant areas of the virtual world, she may publicly request that either a high level character escort her (usually in exchange for gold or items), or try to assemble a party of players to trek together. Such groupings are oftentimes *ad hoc* affairs. Players band together because everybody benefits, and when the immediate goal has been reached the party disbands, most likely never to reform. Taking an example from another popular MMO, "Guild Wars*"*, one of the first quests requires that a player invite another player to form a party for the express purpose of walking outside the city gates. Once outside, the players meet a non-player character, who rewards them for having ventured outside as a team.

One may ask how this fits with the notion of community? Does one straightedge kid posting a story online about being picked on at school really constitute a moment in the process of making community? Likewise, when a player in WoW sends the message "lfg SM" (shorthand for "looking for group to complete quests in the Scarlet Monastery") and a group invites her to play with them for an hour or two, is there really community being created? Singled out and isolated as individual instances, such examples seem tenuous. Further, such fragile and momentary social ties may be seen as "merely virtual," lacking any "real" substance. If a young person asks for advice online about what to do when he gets picked on at school, he must still face the bullies alone the next day. As for WoW players, no matter how much gold they earn or how quickly their characters gain experience, nothing has necessarily improved in their offline lives. But when we consider that these interactional moments occur millions of times every day in thousands of virtual worlds around the globe, the concept of community becomes more tenable (see Denzin 1999). And when I ask the participants of either virtual world about the meaning of such relations, I have found that these temporary forms of communities are often very meaningful to them.

Question Three: How do boundaries function in virtual-worlds?

As mentioned previously, a third frame of reference in virtual worlds is based on shared identity. Identity is a tricky concept that is utilized in a number of ways, so here I rely on a cultural sociological approach to studying identity in terms of "boundaries." By looking at the boundaries that community members construct through interaction, we get a sense of how they see themselves in contrast to "outsiders" on the one hand, and how they internally differentiate among themselves on the other. Studying both aspects of identity work is a particularly useful and interesting exercise because there remains widespread debate about the production and consequences of identities and boundaries in digital spaces.

To talk about virtual world boundaries, we can frame SIF and WoW as examples of symbolic communities—communities characterized by "indirect relationships mediated by information technology" (Lamont and Molnar 2002: 182) where participants may be "linked primarily by common identities but minimally by networks of directly interpersonal relationships" (Anderson 1983:96). Symbolic communities are now more common than ever, though neither of the virtual worlds I studied should be characterized as *merely* symbolic (where symbolic connotes insubstantiality). I use the term symbolic here to emphasize the meanings that people attribute to their participation in digital formations and how these meanings result in a shared sense of "we-ness." Using symbolic in this way allows us to focus on how meanings are created, activated and diffused among community members, rather than on some vague, ephemeral sense of a shared something (be it a straightedge or gamer identity, or whatever).

Etymologically, the idea of community is very near the idea of commitment. In turn, commitment is often seen as an important measure of status-identity within a community. Many people in SIF are active members of face-to-face straightedge scenes, but the forums also receive visits from subcultural tourists—individuals who participate in the virtual world but whose commitment to an overarching lifestyle is less than that of "hard core" members. Due to the high turn-over rate of participants in SIF, it can be difficult to distinguish tourists from more active straightedge scene members. This difficulty, combined with the high value that many young people attach to a subcultural identity, results in forum participants regularly constructing boundaries that differentiated "authentic" from "inauthentic" members (Williams 2006). The varying levels of commitment among forum members highlight the tenuous nature of the community, especially when people who self-identify as non-straightedge work to construct boundaries that place themselves inside the virtual world community (Williams and Copes 2005). Similar boundaries between "power gamers" and casual gamers have also been studied among MMO players (see Taylor 2006), where the level of commitment required for the former gives them a shared sense of status vis-à-vis players who may not be "serious enough." Some players take their role-identities (e.g. melee combat or healer), social-identities (e.g. Horde or Alliance) and personal-identities (e.g. elite or casual-player) very seriously because it locates their social position within the virtual world's community.

Community boundaries are most often visible in digital spaces through language use. Several researchers have demonstrated how text is used to divide people online (Kelly 2005; Taylor 2005). One way to frame language use is with what Thornton (1995) calls the *embodied* and *objectified* forms of subcultural capital. Embodied subcultural capital refers to the knowledge and skills that individuals utilize to express their positions as core community members. WoW players show their status through

expressed knowledge about game-relevant argot (i.e. "leetspeak"), multiple character classes and character-builds, high-level areas of the gameworld, and the value of rare and unique in-game items. When inexperienced players ask "dumb" questions about these topics, more advanced players sometimes demean them as a means of status differentiation. Similar processes occur in SIF, for example when core community members tell new participants that anyone who is not "really" straightedge should not post in the forum.

Objectified subcultural capital, on the other hand, refers to the accoutrements (in these cases digital objects) that individuals use to publicly display their community commitment and/or status-identity. In SIF, such displays are most evident in the choice of usernames, avatars and signature files (Williams 2003). The username "edge4life," for example displays a certain commitment to the subculture that "charlie" does not. Signature files might include references to what band a person plays in, or some other marker of distinction. In WoW, players' status is objectified through armor, hit points, weapons and damage statistics, as well as through military-like titles and affiliations, which float above characters' heads during gameplay. Game designers understand the attraction of visibly displaying one's status in the game. Therefore, rarer items are made to appear more obvious when worn by characters. At level 12 running around with simple leather pants, a shirt and a short sword, I feel less significant than a level-80 character who travels around replete in colorful, pulsating gear with a brilliant nimbus surrounding her and an impressive dragon to ride.

These displays of subcultural capital (embodied and objectified), when combined with the concepts of commitment and status-identity, give us some important insight into community boundaries in virtual worlds. Certainly these boundaries are salient to users—subcultural forum participants and MMO players have each told me that higher-status members of each virtual world can make life difficult for more casual participants. But how permeable are these boundaries? Research on SIF suggests that the boundaries are quite permeable in terms of how people may potentially cross them, but are strategically used in rigid ways by individuals in identity-making processes. As for MMOs, some research has shown how significant effort must be put into achieving high-status boundaries (Silverman 2006). Yet such boundaries may easily dissolve in a virtual world where there is no one-to-one relation between player and character. Among at least one local group of WoW players I studied, players regularly use each other's characters. One player who may have an obligation to an in-game group of friends to participate in a raiding party may ask a real life friend to sign on her account and play in her stead. If that character's performance is recognized by other players as particularly praiseworthy, who receives the subsequent status: the player or the character? Finally, what happens when people leave one virtual world for a newer, hipper one? As the nature of the boundary between life online and offline shifts, there are likely to be numerous effects on both the form and function of virtual worlds.

Conclusions

In this article, I have preliminarily sketched out answers to three sociological questions related to two types of virtual worlds. The first virtual world was a normative community comprised of participants in the straightedge youth subculture. The second was the leisure-based world made up of players of the massively-multiplayer online game "World of Warcraft". The community concept itself remains vague to some extent because there are multiple ways of understanding it. The traditional

definition of community highlights propinquity. People who maintain close relations with others within a bounded physical space, who interact regularly and who share culture are said to constitute an "organic" form of community (Tönnies 1988[1887]). This kind of community was allegedly on the decline during the second half of the 20ᵗʰ century, and depending on one's perspective new media technologies have either helped correct (technotopian) or exacerbate (dystopian) that decline. I briefly introduced to the idea of symbolic community in the previous section. Symbolic community, also called "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), was originally based on the idea that people need not share geographical space or even a direct knowledge of others to share community. Rather, people come to share a collective definition of specific symbols (e.g. a flag, song lyrics, an image, a ritual) through which they construct a shared sense of identity and we-ness. In this version of community, people need not ever meet to share a sense of community, so long as they imagine that the community exists. Increasingly, virtual world-builders are working to ensure their worlds provide just that.

Virtual worlds also exemplify "discursive environments": miniature social worlds that encapsulate the day-to-day, ongoing concerns of people (Gubrium and Holstein 2001). Our homes, workplaces, and leisure spaces are all characterized by unique forms of discourse and interaction. Within each environment, we work together with others to solve personal and social problems. The types of discursive environments have increased exponentially in recent decades with the growth of information and communication technologies, giving many of us a plethora of new sites for building meaningful communities and selves. Internet forums and MMOs are but two of the most recent and they give us insight into the future significance of virtual worlds for the 21ˢᵗ century.

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