Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as "Third Places"

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This article examines the form and function of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) in terms of social engagement. Combining conclusions from media effects research informed by the communication effects literature with those from ethnographic research informed by a sociocultural perspective on cognition and learning, we present a shared theoretical framework for understanding (a) the extent to which such virtual worlds are structurally similar to "third places" (Oldenburg, 1999) for informal sociability, and (b) their potential function in terms of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Our conclusion is that by providing spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function as one form of a new "third place" for informal sociability. Participation in such virtual "third places" appears particularly well suited to the formation of bridging social capital—social relationships that, while not usually providing deep emotional support, typically function to expose the individual to a diversity of worldviews.

Introduction

Media scholars have become increasingly concerned with the possible negative social and civic impacts brought on by the diffusion of both traditional media like television and cable and new media such as videogames and the Internet. This concern is perhaps best known as the "bowling alone" hypothesis (Putnam, 2000), which suggests that media are displacing crucial civic and social institutions. According to Putnam, time spent with relatively passive and disengaging media has come at the expense of time spent on vital community-building activities. While few dispute Putnam's richly detailed evidence of the general decline of civic and social life in America during the rise of television, some scholars have argued that online, Internet-based media are exceptions. The evidence to date is mixed (Smith & Kollock,

1999), with some scholars arguing that the Internet's capacity for connecting people across time and space fosters the formation of social networks and personal communities (Wellman & Gullia, 1999) and bridges class and racial gaps (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004), and other scholars arguing that the Internet functions as a displacer (Nie & Erbring, 2002; Nie & Hillygus, 2002) enabling little more than "pseudo communities" (Beniger, 1987; Postman, 1992).

A core problem on both sides of the debate is an underlying assumption that all Internet use is more or less equivalent (Bakardjieva, 2005). Online technologies enable a broad range of activities: searching information, visiting chat rooms, downloading music files, corresponding with friends and family by email, browsing political blogs, playing in 3-D virtual worlds, and others. It would be more plausible and empirically rigorous, then, to consider how specific forms of Internet activity impact civic and social engagement as a result of their particular underlying social architectures (Lessig, 1999)—their designed-in, code-based structures that afford some forms of social interaction and constrain others. In this way, we might determine what underlying variables are involved in each activity (Evelund, 2003) before drawing conclusions about the effects of online media as a whole.

In this article, we examine the effects on social engagement of one particular increasingly popular online activity: large, collaborative online videogames called "massively multiplayer online games" (MMOs). Our collaboration on this project is somewhat novel, combining conclusions from two different lines of MMO research conducted from two different perspectives—one from a media effects approach, the other from a sociocultural perspective on cognition and learning. Our joint product represents the culmination of these two lines of inquiry in terms of (a) the extent to which such spaces are structurally similar to "third places" (Oldenburg, 1999) for informal sociability (Bruckman & Resnick, 1995), and (b) their potential function in terms of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Despite differing theoretical and methodological vantage points, our conclusions are remarkably similar: By providing spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function as one form of a new "third place" for informal sociability much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old. Moreover, participation in such virtual "third places" appears particularly well suited to the formation of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000), social relationships that, while not providing deep emotional support per se, typically function to expose the individual to a diversity of worldviews. In this article, we present our shared theoretical framework of third places and social capital, highlighting the consistent trends observed across two distinct sets of data gathered through two separate lines of inquiry.

Understanding MMOs

MMOs are graphical two-dimensional (2-D) or three-dimensional (3-D) videogames played online, allowing individuals, through their self-created digital characters or "avatars," to interact not only with the gaming software but with other players. Aesthetically, they are part of the long history of alternative worlds found in science

fiction and fantasy literature (e.g., *The Hobbit*, Tolkien, 1938). Technically, they are the latest step in a progression of social games that originated with paper-and-pencil fantasy games (e.g., *Dungeons and Dragons,* Gygax & Arneson, 1973) and later migrated to computers, first as mainframe text-based multi-user dungeons (MUDs) (Trubshaw & 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): In a setting of wizards and elves, dwarfs and knights, people save for homes, create basket indices of the trading market, build relationships of status and solidarity, and worry about crime. 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).

Divergent Research, Convergent Findings
The goal of this article is to present a theoretical framework for understanding the social form and function of MMOs based on conclusions from two research projects: one an examination of the media effects of MMOs, the other an ethnographic study of cognition and culture in such contexts. Both projects used a mixed-methods approach; however, the former leaned toward quantitative data collection and analysis while the latter leaned toward qualitative. Although grounded in different theoretical perspectives and research traditions, the conclusions of both studies were remarkably aligned. Thus, we took it upon ourselves to collaborate in the development of a theoretical framework that might encompass and elucidate the findings of both. Despite the seeming novelty of such an enterprise, cross-disciplinary collaboration is frequently advocated in academic research generally (Lewis, 1997; Stake, 1995), and in games research specifically (Williams, 2005), under the assumption that the most fruitful advances are sometimes made when congruent findings are discovered through disparate means (Kuhn, 1961).

The first project was a traditional effects study of MMOs focused on issues of social capital and displacement that examined questions raised by Putnam, Nie, Wellman, and others that sought to discover whether the MMOs *Asheron's Call I* and *II* added to or subtracted from players' overall social capital. The methods used were a combination of survey research and experimental design, with first-time MMO players given a free copy of the game or placed in a control group that did not play the game (Williams, in press). Seven hundred and fifty participants populated the two groups. The changes among the treatment group players were contrasted between the two groups and presented statistically to demonstrate the "effects" of game play vs. no game play.

This statistical evidence was buttressed by a complementary participant observation phase during which the investigator played the game and conducted 30

random interviews with other players over a period of one year. In semi-structured interviews, players were asked about their motivations for playing, their in-game social networks, and about their life outside the game. The investigator sampled players in central city locations and in remote wilderness areas across all of the games' experience levels and kept field notes to inform the subsequent survey and experimental work. Unlike the survey data, these interviews were not intended to be representative, but rather to discover trends and norms that could be compared and contrasted with the quantitative data and that could help fashion appropriate survey questions. Nevertheless, these observations squared with the survey results and with the results of the second project detailed below.

The second project, a qualitative study of cognition and learning in MMOs (Steinkuehler, 2005), consisted of a two-year ethnography of the MMO *Lineage* (first I, then II) conducted from a sociocultural perspective (Gee, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The goal of this project was to explicate the kinds of social and intellectual activities in which gamers routinely participate, including individual and collaborative problem solving, identity construction, apprenticeship, and literacy practices. Cognitive ethnography (Hutchins, 1995) was chosen as the primary research methodology as a way to tease out what happens in the virtual setting of the game and how the people involved consider their own activities, the activities of others, and the contexts in which those activities takes place (Steinkuehler, Black, & Clinton, 2005). This "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) included 24 months of participant observation in the game (eight months averaging eight to 12 hours of gameplay daily, the remaining months averaging 20-40 hours per week); several thousand lines of recorded and transcribed observations of naturally occurring game play (digital screenshot images, video recordings, and fieldnotes); and collections of game-related player communications with informants including posts to official (NCSoft sponsored) and unofficial discussion boards (on guild and fan websites), chatroom transcripts, instant message conversations, and emails. Also considered were community documents from the *Lineage* fandom network (i.e., materials either linked directly to the corporate sponsored website or within the set of game-related sites that contained more internal links among them than external links beyond them; Barabási, 2003) including guild and fan websites, fan fictions, and community-written player manuals and guidebooks.

As part of the second project, repeated unstructured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a snowball sample (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1986) of 16 key informants throughout the course of the investigation, with interviews lasting one hour on average, resulting in roughly 100 hours of recorded dialogue (either IM transcript or audio recording). Additional interviews were not recorded but used as a basis for fieldnotes, fact checking, triangulation of data, and verification of major themes. The data were organized using NUD*IST and NVivo qualitative data analysis software to identify major themes (e.g., learning through apprenticeship), and were coded inductively in the second year of the study in order to identify major patterns within those themes (e.g., scaffolding strategies). Discourse analysis (Gee,

1999) was used throughout the investigation as the fundamental basis for analysis in order to tease out how the underlying assumptions or "cultural models" (Holland & Quinn, 1987) participants held about the virtual social and material world were created, maintained, and transformed by specific individuals and social groups whose ways of being in the world underwrite them.

In combination, these two empirical studies provide a reasonable level of generalizability (random assignment to condition in the first study) and contextualization (ethnographic description of existing in-game social networks and practices in the second). The two franchises investigated, *Lineage I* and *II* and *Asheron's Call I* and *II*, represent a fairly mainstream portion of the fantasy-based MMO market: All four titles involved players assuming the roles of archetypal medieval fighter types, social architectures which reward players for cooperation and the formation of long-term player groups or "guilds." The *Lineage* series is a highly successful franchise in South Korea, with moderate U.S. success; the *Asheron's Call* series was moderately successful in the U.S., but not abroad. The combined data corpus provided a range of in-game contexts for observation while exhibiting consistency in design features across all four.

Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Form and Function of MMOs

MMOs as Third Places

While the virtual worlds of MMOs continue to rise in popularity (Woodcock, 2006), civic culture in the physical, offline world appears to have decreased (Putnam, 2000). In his seminal text, Oldenburg (1999) documents the decline in brick-and-mortar "third places" in America where individuals can gather to socialize informally beyond the workplace and home. The effects are negative for both individuals and communities: "The essential group experience is being replaced by the exaggerated self-consciousness of individuals. American lifestyles, for all the material acquisition and the seeking after comforts and pleasures, are plagued by boredom, loneliness, alienation" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 13). Recent national survey data appear to corroborate this assertion, with census data indicating that television claims more than half of American leisure time, while only three-quarters of an hour per day is spent socializing in or outside of the home (Longley, 2004).

In what ways might MMOs function as new third places for informal sociability? By providing spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace (or school) and home, such virtual environments have the potential to function as new (albeit digitally mediated) third places similar to pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts. MMOs are social environments in that successful play often requires collaboration, albeit not uniformly: Recent evidence suggests that some people enjoy playing alone or in a "pseudo-social" fashion (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). Therefore, in this section we analyze the structural form of MMOs that warrants this "third place" assertion. With this argument in place, we then unpack the function of such spaces in terms of social capital in the next section. To begin, we

compare the properties of MMOs to Oldenburg's (1999) eight defining characteristics of third places (see Table 1), and discuss how such virtual spaces satisfy each of the eight criteria in turn.

I. Neutral Ground

First and foremost, third places are defined as neutral grounds where individuals can enter and leave as they see fit without having to ask permission or receive an invitation (as one might in a private space) and without having to "play host" for anyone else. Compare, for example, weekday attendance at the workplace to happy hour attendance at the neighborhood tavern. The former is a second place, marked by financial obligation and rules that structure who is expected to be where and for how long; the latter is a third place, marked by relative freedom of movement. *Asheron's Call* and *Lineage* are neutral grounds in the sense that there is no default obligation to play. To oblige any one person to play requires that explicit agreements be entered into by parties (much like making arrangements for a recreational team sport), since the default assumption is that no one person is compelled to participate legally, financially, or otherwise. Unless one transforms the virtual world of the game into a workplace (e.g., by taking on gainful employment as a virtual currency "farmer" for example, Dibbell, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006a) or enters into such agreement, no one person is obligated to log in. Moreover, social mores in the game support general freedom of movement: Although standard salutations and farewells

Table 1 Oldenburg's (1999) eight characteristics of "third places"

Characteristic	Definition
Neutral Ground	Third places are neutral grounds where individuals are free to come and go as they please with little obligation or entanglements with other participants.
Leveler	Third places are spaces in which an individual's rank and status in the workplace or society at large are of no import. Acceptance and participation is not contingent on any prerequisites, requirements, roles, duties, or proof of membership.
Conversation is Main Activity	In third places, conversation is a main focus of activity in which playfulness and wit are collectively valued.
Accessibility & Accommodation	Third places must be easy to access and are accommodating to those who frequent them.
The Regulars	Third places include a cadre of regulars who attract newcomers and give the space its characteristic mood.
A Low Profile	Third places are characteristically homely and without pretension.
The Mood is Playful	The general mood in third places is playful and marked by frivolity, verbal word play, and wit.
A Home Away from Home	Third places are home-like in terms of Seamon's (1979) five defining traits: rootedness, feelings of possession, spiritual regeneration, feelings of being at ease, and warmth.

are used, sudden appearances and departures are rarely noteworthy events (see Figure 5 for an example) (Cherny, 1999). Claiming third places as "neutral ground" goes somewhat beyond this, however. It is to also claim the absence of "entangling obligations," which in turn affords relatively equitable and informal social interactions. As Sennett (1977) states, "people can be sociable only when they have some protection from each other" (p. 311). How might this broader claim about the nature of third places compare with the virtual worlds of MMOs?

In online worlds, interaction is mediated by the virtual avatars of the individuals who inhabit them. These avatars bear no discernable relationship to one's offline identity, unless one chooses to render one's own character so identifiable, for example, by using one's given name instead of a pseudonym (a rare practice) or sharing personal information about one's offline personae with others within the game. This anonymity provides a safe haven beyond the reach of work and home that allows individuals to engage with others socially without entangling obligations and repercussions; it is the so-called "magic circle" of the game (Huizinga, 1949). The question of "entangling obligation," therefore, is principally relevant only to the extent that the real life personas *are* actually known by the other participants. According to Yee (2006), such cases are fairly common: 25% of players game with a romantic partner and 19% with a family member. One might conclude, then, that entangling obligations reemerge within such contexts and the function of MMOs as third places is thwarted. However, Yee's (2006) interviews also reveal that individuals who game with romantic partners or family find that such joint engagement in the "other world" of MMOs allows them to redefine the nature and boundaries of their offline relationships, often in more equitable terms than what may be possible in day-to-day offline life. For example, in regard to gaming with her daughter, one interviewee remarks,

> I think it has enhanced our relationship, we both treat each other more like equals and partners in our private life. It is much easier to talk to her now and I have found her talking to me about much more of her life and ideas. (Yee, 2006)

Thus, in cases in which real life identities are known, it seems that the relationships that play-partners have with one another offline are often "leveled" within the online world.

II. Leveler

A second and related criterion for third places is that an individual's rank and status in the home, workplace, or society are of no importance (Oldenburg, 1999). Again, much like the world of sport (Huizenga, 1949), the boundary of the game world creates a sense of moratorium from everyday roles (Meyrowitz, 1985) as evidenced in the interview excerpt above. Consider, in addition, the interview excerpt shown in Figure 1.[1]

Here, a renowned guild leader in *Lineage I* explains how avatar-mediated social interaction enables her to play a leader in the virtual world in ways she is typically unable (or, more accurately, not allowed) to in "real life." This sense of moratorium
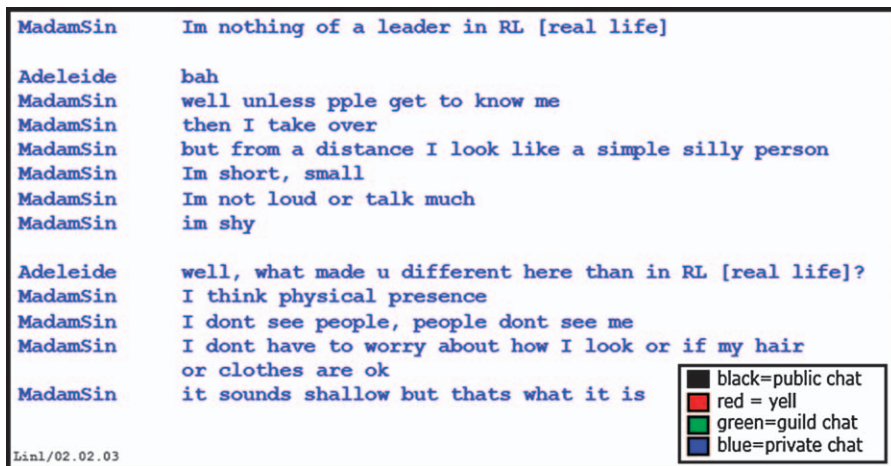
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MadamSin      Im nothing of a leader in RL [real life]

Adeleide      bah
MadamSin      well unless pple get to know me
MadamSin      then I take over
MadamSin      but from a distance I look like a simple silly person
MadamSin      Im short, small
MadamSin      Im not loud or talk much
MadamSin      im shy

Adeleide      well, what made u different here than in RL [real life]?
MadamSin      I think physical presence
MadamSin      I dont see people, people dont see me
MadamSin      I dont have to worry about how I look or if my hair
              or clothes are ok
MadamSin      it sounds shallow but thats what it is
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black=public chat
red = yell
green=guild chat
blue=private chat

Lin1/02.02.03

Figure 1 Excerpt from an in-game interview with a renowned guild leader in *Lineage I* illustrating how avatar-mediated social interaction can foster a more level playing field

from stratified daily social life enables MMOs to function as kind of level playing field and, in part, may explain some of their popular appeal: Like sports, MMOs appeal to people in part because they represent meritocracies otherwise unavailable in a world often filled with unfairness (Huizenga, 1949). Players are able to enter a world in which success is based not on out-of-game status but on in-game talent, wit, diligence, and hard work. This is not to claim that no social stratifications exist within virtual worlds. Such stratifications do exist, the most common being a disparity between elite "power gamers" and those who play casually (Jakobson & Taylor, 2003; Taylor, 2003). However, MMO players expect an equal distribution of opportunity (although not necessarily outcomes) regardless of out-of-game status and roles. This assumption is part of the ideological framework into which new-comers are tacitly enculturated (Steinkuehler, 2004) and harks back to the culture of early video game arcades: "It didn't matter what you drove to the arcade. If you sucked at *Asteroids*, you just sucked" (Herz, 1997).

Rarely is out-of-game social status evoked within such spaces. For example, players questing in a difficult area of *Asheron's Call's I* and *II* repeatedly found themselves in need of help and information. At no point did any player suggest to another that they deserved help or support because of their offline status. To do so would have invited immediate derision, because on those rare occasions when an individual or group does evoke "real world" power in some form, the community and culture of in-game worlds disciplines them.

III. Conversation Is the Main Activity
According to Oldenburg (1999), these first two characteristics of the third place (neutral ground and leveler) merely set the stage for the "cardinal and sustaining activity of third places everywhere" (p. 26): conversation. In MMOs, conversation

plays an analogous role. Text-based interaction in such worlds is incessant and ubiquitous. There is not just one chat channel but multiple simultaneous ones: public, private, and various group channels. Together, these function as both a one-to-many and one-to-one communicative space, as one informant called it, "a souped up form of instant messenger" (Steinkuehler, 2005). Figure 2 illustrates.

For most gamers, constant conversation through myriad chat channels is not only necessary to navigate the virtual world's diverse challenges (e.g., to barter virtual goods, to organize collaborations, to share information) but is the very fodder from which individuals create and maintain relationships of status and solidarity and, in part, in-game community and cultural norms (Steinkuehler, 2006b). As Cherny (1999) concluded in her study of MUDs, the technological predecessors of MMOs, "In all such systems, linguistic interactions have been primary: users exchange messages that cement the social bonds between them, messages that reflect shared history and understandings (or misunderstandings) about the always evolving local norms for these interactions" (p. 22).

Regardless of whether the core game mechanics driving interaction were competitive (*Lineage*), collaborative (*Asheron's Call*) or, most commonly, competitive
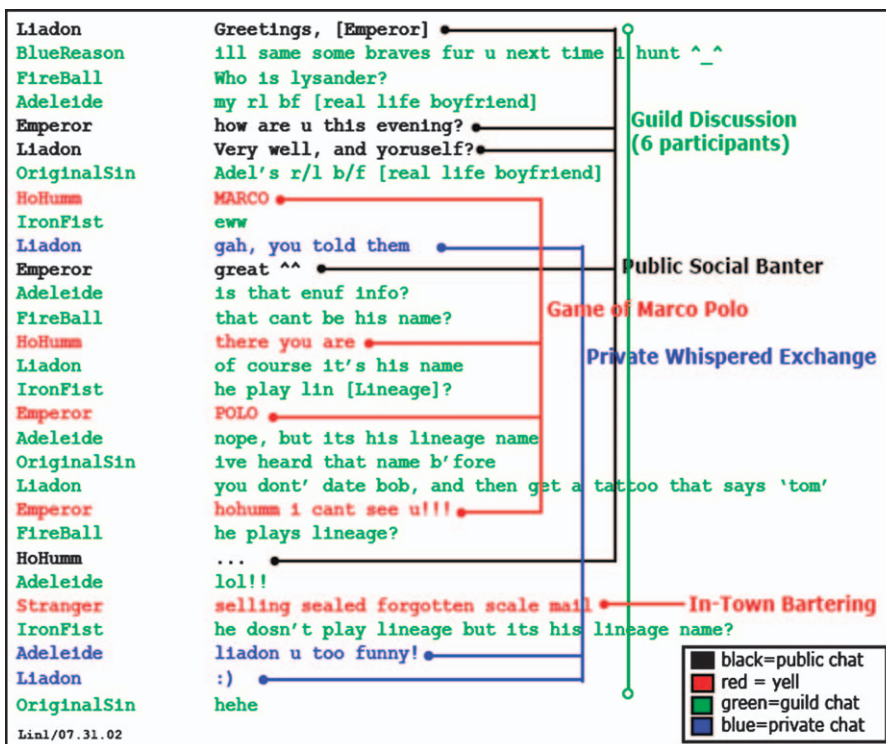

Figure 2 Transcription of roughly two minutes of multiple-threaded conversation during a regular evening in *Lineage I*

collaboration (both series), conversation was clearly a desired form of game content for MMO players. In virtual worlds, game play is constituted not only by joint in-game activities but also and overwhelmingly by constant conversation about the game and topics well beyond it, ranging from debates about the mechanics of the game and discussions of who did what to whom, to lively conversations about art, culture, sex, and politics—so much so that MUD developer J. C. Lawrence states, "The basic medium of multiplayer games is communication" (Koster, n.d.). Ongoing commentary on players' individual or shared adventures becomes a mainstay activity, especially among regular players, Still others use both public and private chat channels to talk "out of character" about offline mundanities. Such conversations extend to official and unofficial game-related discussion forums—both corporate sponsored and unofficially produced by fans—across all four titles.

IV. Accessibility & Accommodation

By definition, third places must also be easy to access, such that "one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 32). Because virtual worlds are perpetually accessible (barring the occasional software update) and played in real time, participants are free to log on and off as they see fit. Populations are commonly heaviest in the evening, reflecting the free time of most youth and adults, but there is always someone on at any hour. This is because individuals from different time zones often populate the same server and for some players game time is not constrained by a typical workweek schedule. Moreover, unlike brick-and-mortar third places, MMOs are accessible directly from one's home, making them even more accommodating to individual schedules and preferences. With the exception of scheduled activities common in large guilds (discussed below), most in-game activities are impromptu, depending on who is online when, and what the general mood happens to be.

Thus, the virtual worlds of MMOs would appear to "stand ready to serve people's needs for sociability and relaxation in the intervals before, between, and after their mandatory appearances elsewhere" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 32). In practice, however, there are barriers to initial access. Gaining access to such worlds requires an adequately powerful computer or console system, and while the costs for computer-processing power continually decrease, the games' requirements have only gone up. Moreover, the games themselves typically cost U.S. $50 per title with a U.S. $15 monthly service fee. These costs may represent significant barriers to entry for lower income households and younger players. Although data suggest that children from lower-income families spend more time playing video games than their higher-income counterparts (*Study, 2003*), it is unclear if these trends extend to subscription-based MMOs. Adolescents typically must gain access through their parents and their parents must be willing and able to indulge in and approve of the game. This may, in part, account for the fact that age levels for MMOs indicate an older player base (the average age for males is late twenties and slightly older for females, Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003; Yee, 2002). Thus, despite easy access and

accommodation in theory, the financial barriers to engagement in MMOs may remain significant for some.

V. The Regulars

"What attracts a regular visitor to a third place is supplied not by management but by the fellow customer," notes Oldenburg (1999). "It is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there" (pp. 33-34). Such regulars dominate not in a numerical sense but in an affective sense, setting the tone of conversation and the general mood of the space. In MMOs two types of in-game regulars shape the social ambience of a given title and server: (1) guild members and (2) squatters in specific virtual territories of the game world. Regulars of both types play a crucial role not only in establishing the social atmosphere of a given game server through their perpetual presence, but also in maintaining that atmosphere through the enculturation of newcomers to the game (Steinkuehler, 2004).

For the 79% of MMO players who join a guild (Yee, 2006), fellow guild members set the tone of sociability and daily mood through their ongoing interaction with others. Guildmates are ever-present within a dedicated chat channel, able to engage in social exchange with any other guild member regardless of in-game location or current activity. Access to fellow guild members' knowledge and skills is a crucial part of one's own success in the game, since it is the community's "collective intelligence" (Levy, 1999) that constitutes the most accurate and complete (living) "strategy guide" for a given title (Steinkuehler, 2005). Interaction with one's guildmates becomes, if nothing else, a vital and daily means toward one's own achievement. Fellow guild members are frequent in-game partners (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, in press), cultivating a shared reputation, shared riches, and an ongoing shared history. Thus, the "tone of conviviality" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 34) established in a given MMO is, for the majority of gamers who do join such groups, largely set by guildmates who are virtually omnipresent and constitute a vital means of sociability and support.

The second type of regulars, squatters, reside in specific virtual territories, providing a social context specific to various areas in the game.[2] In MMOs, virtual hunting grounds commonly vary not only in terms of level of difficulty but also in terms of who hangs out there and therefore can be heard in "local" chat. For example, an area in Lineage II called Cruma Tower is marked not only by the presence of serious "power-leveling" players (Squire & Steinkuehler, in press; Taylor, 2003), but also by scatological humor, sexist commentary, profanity, mom jokes, ritualistic insults, and the like. As one informant satirically commented in an interview, "You go for the experience [points], you stay for the enlightening conversation." All four titles in this study contain such areas, similarly marked by regulars who create an atmosphere, for good or ill. For example, in Asheron's Call I, regulars dwelled outside the shops in major towns where they engaged in crafting activities. These players help newcomers and tease those violating the social mores, thereby

socializing those around them and engendering a sense of reliable mentorship and community stability. This is illustrated in Figure 3, in which one *Asheron's Call II* player thanks a second for kindly healing his avatar while he stands outside of town center. In these ways, squatters, like guild members, shape the characteristic feel of a given MMO world.

VI. A Low Profile

Oldenburg argues that third places are characteristically homely, their décor defying tidiness and pretension whenever possible. MMOs do not fit this criterion in any literal sense. Whereas Oldenburg stresses that ideal third places are ordinary, MMO spaces are typically *extra*ordinary. The run-down real-world coffee shop or bar, complete with sawdust or scattered peanut shells, maximizes comfort by removing the trappings of pomposity, yet MMOs, even in their earliest incarnations, are characteristically fantastic, both literally and metaphorically, including a dazzling array of spectacular characters and creatures that range from delicately drawn elves to frightening ogres and beasts.

However, not all in-game territories are alike in these terms. If Oldenburg is correct and plainness is indeed crucial to deter pretension, it would follow that any

Figure 3 Screenshot from *Asheron's Call II* that shows two players standing outside of town center exchanging healing "buffs" (beneficial spells cast on oneself or other people's avatars) and thanks you's

in-game area that is particularly grandiose, such as a castle, would be less "third place" in nature than its plainer in-game locations, such as a seedy in-game tavern. The evidence, however, does not bear this out: In neither of our investigations did the degree of formality exhibited by players within the game bear any relation to the degree of visual ornamentation of the players' immediate vicinity. Instead, the social atmosphere of a given in-game territory appeared to stem more from the player population squatting there than from the visual context per se. For example, the Cruma Tower of *Lineage II*, described above as rife with adolescent buffoonery and bawdy talk, also happens to be a visually elaborate structure of no less stylistic formality or architectural decorum (see Figure 4) than the highly sought after in-game castles for which guilds compete.

Thus, while the visual form of MMO environments does not fit Oldenburg's (1999) criterion of "low profile," the social function of those environments does.

Figure 4 Inside virtual architecture of Cruma Tower in *Lineage II* illustrating the visual formality of an in-game area known for its irreverent parlance

This, in turn, is a function of player subscription levels. Woodcock's (2006) analysis of subscription growth indicates that MMO populations follow a parabolic curve, typically attracting a high number of transient customers only immediately after launch. Once this initial wave of gamers moves through a given title and onto the next new release, those who stay behind become the basis for a sustained community and the given game title goes the way of all game titles before it—appearing charmingly "retro" but technically less sophisticated, less broadly popular, and arguably more "homely" than those that come after. Our observations support this: A core

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Liadon        how are things coming along for you soul?
Soul          i think im gonna die
Adeleide      no dont die. death is bad
Liadon        If I were so mortally wounded that I thought I was going to
              die, logging on lin would be on the
Liadon        top ten list, but after calling 911 for sure
Soul          i feel like sh1t
Liadon        are you sick?
Clan member Zara has logged into the game.
Duncan        hihi Zara
Soul          my nose is stuffy my ear hurts and my throt is really sore
Duncan        sorry man, that stinks
Soul          my gf [girlfriend] cousin kissed me and she had streped
Adeleide      well there u go. off to the doc[tor] with u
Soul          on monday
Adeleide      er... why u kissing ur GFs cousin?
Liadon        ... did you just say you are dating your cousin?
Duncan        Thats an interesting story already
Soul          idk [i dont know]
Soul          it was weird
Duncan        It sounds weird.
Liadon        I heard about a porno like that once
Zara          i was 16 once
Duncan        Liadon - lets please not even go there. :P [grin]
Soul          i wasnt kissing my gf cousin she kisses me on the cheek
Zara          so, for clarification
Zara          is this like gf/cousin
Liadon        ah... the plot thins
Soul          thats just wrong guys
Zara          hey i'm not kissing my cousin's gf
Liadon        I thought it was his gf's cousin
Soul          i didnt tho
Duncan        My gf once kissed my cousin's gf
Adeleide      my cousin had a gf once
Liadon        I have a cousin
Soul          wow this is weird
Duncan        What sense of "had" are we using here?
Zara          eeewww                          ■ black=public chat
Adeleide      *gulp*                          ■ red = yell
Duncan        Feeling better yet Soul?        ■ green=guild chat
Soul          no                              ■ blue=private chat
Liadon        This is why I game... the interesting conversation
Lin2/10.23.04
```

Figure 5 Excerpt from a guild conversation in *Lineage II* illustrating the kind of verbal play that is characteristic of MMOs

audience remained on the game titles we examined after part of the population departed for a sequel or the next popular release, and many of those who remained behind functioned as regulars in the virtual community. Thus, by the time the latest "in" game was released (e.g., *World of Warcraft*), *Asheron's Call II* and *Lineage II* shared the fate of their predecessors, becoming, by all technical definitions, comparatively "low profile." In effect, large new releases of other MMO titles appear to have more of an impact on social patterns in a given MMO than the game's own visuals do.

VII. The Mood is Playful

MMOs are playful by definition, and the everyday social tone within them follows suit. Oldenburg (1999) argues that seriousness is anathema to a vibrant third place; instead, frivolity, verbal word play, and wit are essential. We observed this pattern time and again in the game contexts we researched. Players cracked jokes in the middle of epic battles, performed silly avatar-based gestures such as handstands, dances, and belly laughs, and mocked each other's (and their own) appearance on a regular basis. Although some of the research on MMOs tends to focus on forms of virtual activity marked by seriousness, the conclusion that such worlds are therefore normatively treated with gravity and consequence would be incorrect. Individuals play MMOs for a sense of achievement, a sense of immersion in another world, in order to socialize, in order to escape, to feel part of a group, because they like analyzing the game mechanics, and because they enjoy the competition—in that order (Yee, 2006). Rarely do they bring with them to the game matters of "real" consequence.

The playful nature of MMOs is perhaps most apparent in what happens when individuals *do* bring gravity to the game. In such cases, the introduction of seriousness is typically met with teasing and cajoling in order to return the group to a more playful and casual state. For example, consider the following in-game excerpt (see Figure 7) in which one guild member attempts to grouse about a real-world illness and a potentially uncomfortable relationship. In this exchange, fellow guildmates cheerfully twist the conversation into something more lighthearted.

As this example illustrates, on occasions when personal problems (unless of genuinely grave consequence to one's safety or well-being) are made topics for conversation, the tone is often redirected towards the humorous and lighthearted, thereby transforming a "troubles telling" episode into something more appropriate to the context. Those rare occasions when seriousness is allowed (e.g., during the dissolution of a guild or during large scale raiding type events, discussed below) are often circumscribed and marked as the unusual case. Thus it seems that the magic circle drawn around the third place relegates not only rank and status outside its purview, but also personal gripes, grouses, and moodiness.

VIII. A Home Away From Home

Finally, Oldenburg (1999) argues for the home-like quality of third places in rooting people (Seamon, 1979), providing a "physical center around which we organize our

comings and goings" (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 39), where we expect to see familiar faces, and where unusual absences are noticed and queried. MMOs, although virtual, root individuals who play them in much the same way. Participation becomes a regular part of daily life for players and, among regular gamemates such as guild members, exceptional absences (i.e., prolonged or unforeseen ones) are queried within the game or outside it (e.g., via email, Internet Relay Chat, or telephone). For example, one *Lineage II* player whose town was about to be hit by a hurricane sent his guildmates his contact information and let them know that he would be safe. In response, there were multiple forum replies of concern and well wishes, with guild officers sending text messages to his cellular phone in order to verify his safety. While the circumstances of this particular example are exceptional (hurricanes are a relatively rare event), the expressions of regard for a fellow player's genuine safety are not. In such ways, fellow MMO players create an atmosphere of mutual caring that, while avoiding entangling obligations per se, creates a sense of rootedness to the extent that regularities exist, irregularities are duly noted, and, when concerning the welfare of any one regular, checked into. Such feelings of rootedness within MMOs help create a shared sense of home, and with it the sense of support and warmth that some folks may very well lack in their own "real world" households and work places.

Bridging and Bonding in MMO Third Places

In the previous section, we examined the structural form of virtual worlds, demonstrating how MMOs satisfy Oldenburg's (1999) eight defining characteristics of the third place. In this section, we turn to the function of such spaces. Even with Oldenburg's eight criteria met, a fundamental question remains: Are virtual communities really communities, or is physical proximity necessary? Much scholarly work on the viability of online communities has been influenced by the work of Anderson (1991), who suggests that geographic proximity itself is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the emergence and preservation of "community." As he points out, conglomerations such as "America" or "Iraq" are no more face-to-face than networked, online ones, yet we generally acknowledge them as large "communities" based on their internally coherent, shared sense of history and information—collective characteristics made possible by a shared national media (Feenburg & Bakardjieva, 2004). Rather than presume that a shared medium (here, an MMO) alone suffices to enable community, however, we take the functional characteristics of "community" that can be operationalized and observed and examine them in MMOs in order to see whether or not such virtual contexts serve the same ends as "real world" communities do. Toward this end, we turn to the concept of social capital and its component parts, bridging and bonding (Putnam, 2000).

Social capital (Coleman, 1988) works analogously to financial capital; it can be acquired and spent, but for social and personal gains rather than financial. For example, by comforting a friend, a person is then more readily able to seek comfort in his or her own time of need. Thus social capital operates cyclically within social

networks because of their associated norms of reciprocity (Newton, 1997). Such patterns can occur online as well as offline (Resnick, 2001).

According to Putnam, *bridging* social capital is inclusive. It occurs when individuals from different backgrounds make connections between social networks, functioning as a kind of sociological lubricant. This form of social capital is marked by tentative relationships, yet what they lack in depth, they make up for in breadth. On the one hand, bridging social capital provides little in the way of emotional support; on the other hand, such relationships can broaden social horizons or worldviews, providing access to information and new resources. In contrast, *bonding* social capital is exclusive. It occurs when strongly tied individuals, such as family and close friends, provide emotional or substantive support for one another, functioning not as lubricant but more as a kind of social superglue. In contrast to bridging social capital, bonding social capital is marked by relationships with less diversity but stronger personal connections. It provides continued reciprocity among individuals who share strong emotional and substantive support. However, it can also result in insularity.

Granovetter's (1973, 1974) early work on tie strength shows that bridging and bonding social capital are tied to different social contexts, given the network of relationships they enable. In the context of MMOs, the question is whether the online communities found within them tend to be large, weak networks (bridging) or small, strong ones (bonding). Evidence from studies of the Internet generally suggests that online social networks are characteristically broad, bridging-oriented networks (Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1996; Pickering & King, 1995), although both weak and strong ties can be forged within them (Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, & Haythornthwaite, 1996). Our conclusion is that MMOs confirm this pattern: Virtual worlds appear to function best as bridging mechanisms rather than as bonding ones, although they do not entirely preclude social ties of the latter type.

Relationships and behaviors associated with bridging social capital were the most prevalent and noticeable across our MMO data corpus, especially in games with a vibrant social scene. Because *Asheron's Call II* was plagued by low subscription rates, it was not a strong source of either form of social capital simply because there were not enough people present; its low population rates (see Figure 6) demonstrated that a truly unpopular third place can lead to poor outcomes of either form.

Asheron's Call II players experienced the opposite outcomes from players in the other three titles: drops in the diversity of networks and drops in bringing social capital (Williams, 2006, in press). In this sense, it was the exception that proves the rule; a lonely game, much like an empty bar, produces effects opposite to those of a vibrant third place. All three other MMOs in our research generated positive and obvious bridging outcomes that one would associate with a real-world third place. Broad, weak social networks were common. Within such networks, individuals from a wide range of backgrounds mixed on the level playing fields that Oldenburg praises: Supervisor and supervisee, parent and child, classroom teacher and student generally left behind their out-of-game roles and participated as equals. Individuals with

Figure 6 Screenshot from *Asheron's Call II* showing a deserted town center in what is supposed to be a busy city

diverse worldviews found themselves interacting on a level playing field. For example, during the 2004 U.S. presidential election period, supporters of both presidential candidates cussed and discussed the televised debates while slaying monsters in game. This mixing extended to game play issues as well. In some cases, teenagers mentored adults twice their age and education in how to level their avatar, find the best territories for hunting, or lead a guild. However, while such bridging was frequent, it was more likely to lead to potential resources or new information within the longer-term groups such as "guilds" than within the temporary "pick up" groups that band together for short-term goals. Within the guild organizations in particular, players were able to establish enough of a relationship to exchange real-life information beyond the basic "a/s/l" ("age, sex, and location") to include a greater diversity of viewpoints and experiences.

In contrast, bonding social capital was much rarer. Across our combined data corpus, there were only a handful of cases in which deeper, more substantive relationships formed. In most such cases, the bonds formed within long-term guilds and over a period of at least several months. For example, one informant met his fiancé when, after gaming online together for several years, they decided to meet face-to-face. In another case, a long-term international friendship was formed through online gaming, with one guild member from Singapore visiting the other in the

U.S. In another instance, when a female guild member began living alone, a cadre of fellow guild members would call to check in on her when she was later than usual logging in. Such examples of the formation of bonding relationships are compelling, although for the most part (as in offline contexts) they are relatively infrequent. One could argue that, if the benchmark for bonding social capital is the ability to acquire emotional, practical, or substantive support, then MMOs are not well set up for the task: While deep affective relationships among players are possible, they are less likely to generate the same range of bonding benefits as real-world relationships because of players' geographic dispersion and the nature of third places themselves. As to the former, it is difficult to provide one another rides to work or a literal shoulder to cry on when friends live in different states and time zones. As to the latter, the persistent "playful mood" (Oldenburg, 1999) of the third place of MMOs often stymied players' attempts to engage in emotionally weighty conversation.

Conclusions

In this article, we presented a theoretical framework for understanding the form and function of MMOs based on the combined conclusions from two independent lines of MMO research. Despite differences in theoretical grounding and methodologies, our conclusions were remarkably similar across complementary macro- and micro-levels. The media effects analysis revealed broad and significant patterns of MMO use and effect, and the cognitive research explicated the micro-level processes by which those macro-level patterns are created, maintained, and transformed over time. Synthesizing the findings of these two lines of research, our conclusion is that MMOs are new (albeit virtual) "third places" for informal sociability that are particularly well suited to the formation of bridging social capital.

It is worth noting, however, that as gamers become more involved in long-term social networks such as guilds and their activities become more "hardcore" (e.g., marked by participation in large-scale collaborative problem-solving endeavors such as "raids" into difficult territories or castle sieges), the function of MMOs as "third places" begins to wane. Not all MMO players make this transition, but those who do are likely to experience relationships closer to bonding ones than bridging ones. It may be, then, that the structure and function of MMOs as third places is one part of the "life cycle" for some gamers in a given title. As complex, long-term collaborative activities become increasingly prevalent, the game becomes increasingly more entangling, time-consuming, and work-like.[3] Some guilds maintain a relatively militaristic culture during such events in which the MMOs become less conducive to third place phenomena and more like intense sports competitions. Across all four titles, when large player organizations develop the in-group hierarchies necessary for such activity, the function of MMOs as "neutral grounds" begins to break down. For some, this is accepted as a reasonable tradeoff for access to more complex collaborative game-play. In such cases, MMOs appear to enable a different kind of sociability, one ostensibly recognizable as a "community" nonetheless.

Ironically, in Oldenburg's (1999) assessment, contemporary media are a root cause for the decline of civic and social life in the United States rather than a mechanism for its maintenance (if not restoration). Putnam (2000) is more sanguine about the possible benefits of various online forms of community; but, according to Oldenburg (1999), "The home entertainment industry thrives in the dearth of the informal public life among the American middle class… Demand for all manner of electronic gadgetry to substitute vicarious watching and listening for more direct involvement is high" (p. 12). Here, the entertainment industry and its attending "electronic gadgetry" are framed as a substitute for direct involvement in the contemporary social world, with videogames given as the quintessential example. Oldenburg (1999) dismisses game play outright, stating, "a room full of individuals intent upon videogames is not a third place" (p. 31). However, our research findings indicate that this conclusion is uninformed. To argue that MMO game play is isolated and passive media consumption in place of informal social engagement is to ignore the nature of what participants actually do behind the computer screen. Game play is not a single, solitary interaction between an individual and a technology, contrary to worn-out stereotypes (Williams, 2006); in the case of MMOs, game play is more akin to playing five-person poker in a neighborhood tavern that is accessible from your own living room. Perhaps, then, it is time that we reconsider the causal direction of previous claims: Perhaps it is not that contemporary media use has led to a decline in civic and social engagement, but rather that a decline in civic and social engagement has led to retribalization through contemporary media (McLuhan, 1964).

Some scholars might argue that virtual environments more readily fostering bridging social capital than bonding capital is itself a cause for concern, citing Beniger's (1987) claim, for example, that online social networking fosters only "pseudo" communities. Such a view, however, ignores important nuances of what "community" means by pronouncing a given social group/place as either wholly "good" or "bad" without first specifying which functions the online community ought to fulfill. In the case of the "pseudo-community" critique in particular, there is an implicit bias toward bonding social capital over bridging social capital—despite the long line of social analysis demonstrating the vital functions that bridging social capital serves (Granovetter, 1973, 1974; Haythornthwaite, 2002). Moreover, despite the semantics of the term, "weak" ties have been shown to be vital in communities, relationships, and opportunities. A reliance on only one form of social capital over another is harmful: At one extreme, the individual is widely connected but unsupported and uncared for; at the other extreme, the individual is loved and sheltered but utterly isolated from newness (Galston, 1999). The question for scholars researching virtual communities such as MMOs, then, is to what extent such environments shift the existing balance between bridging and bonding. Our conclusion is that MMOs offer more bridging, at least initially. For the individual without enough bridging, they can be a helpful complement, providing a window into new worlds of people and ideas. However, for the individual seeking

emotional and substantive support, they are far less socially useful—at least in the short term.

In light of Putnam's evidence of the decline of crucial civic and social institutions, it may well be that the classification "lacking bridging social capital" best characterizes the everyday American citizen. This is, after all, the overall thrust of Oldenburg's (1999) argument:

> In comparison with home and work associations, which tend to cloister people among their own kind, the inclusive third place brings the individual into close, personal, and animated contact with fellow human beings who also happen to teach school, distribute pharmaceutical products, paint houses, sell office equipment, or write for the local newspaper. The habitué of the typical third place thus enjoys a richness of human contact that is denied the timid, the bigoted, the pretentious, and others who choose to insulate themselves from human variety (p. 45)

Without bridging relationships, individuals remain sheltered from alternative viewpoints and cultures and largely ignorant of opportunities and information beyond their own closely bound social network. Given the increasingly polarized political rhetoric of the United States, the rise of fundamentalism, and the general insularity with which many of us carry on our everyday activities (driving from home to work to the super WalMart and back again), it seems ironic that, now of all times, we would ignore one possible solution to our increasingly vexed relationship with diversity. This is not to say that MMOs are somehow the answer to complex national and transnational problems. However, it is surely in our best interest to consider bridging social capital an important variable in our calculus for social and civic engagement.

Notes

1 All transcript excerpts are verbatim save changes for ease of reading, such as typographical corrections and supplementation of deictic references or truncations with appropriate, expanded referents [in square brackets]. Pseudonyms replace all avatars names save the authors'.
2 For an interesting discussion of whether the entire virtual territory of an MMO constitutes a third space or only specific locations within the game, see Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell (2004).
3 The authors would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for helping articulate this general pattern.

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