

From Mountain Ranges to Markets: Historicising Virtual Worlds

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INTRODUCTION

My paper will explore an under-discussed area of early games studies history: the changing ways that the concept of virtual worlds has been defined. A common object of analysis for scholars examining social interactions in online video games (e.g. Bainbridge 2007; Castronova 2001; Castronova 2006; Klastrop 2003; Taylor 2006), the term has influenced how we discuss any computer-generated environment where users can experience the presence of others (Schroeder 2008), most notably *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive & 989 Studios 1999) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004). In this paper, I will utilise an historical analysis to place four different formal definitions of virtual worlds within their politico-economic and institutional contexts. Doing so, I will show how shifts in the ways we talk about virtual worlds reflected a tendency to quantify and rationalise game worlds—often with the purpose of creating a parallelism between virtual and real worlds—dulling the utopian edge they were originally purported to have. This will unveil the political history that underpins a central concept within games studies, showing how many of the definitions we take for granted are the product of political and institutional histories.

I start by examining virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier's definition of a virtual world as a 'post-symbolic' space, having the utopian potential to allow us to experience a world that is aesthetically, formally, and socially different from our own (Lanier 1989). From there, I look at Jean-Claude Heudin's early attempt to define virtual worlds, which understands them as digital spaces that model complex biological relations (Heudin 1998). I will then closely analyse the works of Edward Castronova – particularly his landmark 2001 essay 'Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier' which forwards a definition of virtual world game spaces as mirrors of capitalist social relations. Finally, I will discuss TL Taylor's landmark *Play Between Worlds* (2006), which argued for a more expansive definition in the mid-'00s. Following Fredric Jameson's call to 'always historicize!' (Jameson 2013) I will use a mixture of textual and historical analysis to place these authors within their wider politico-economic contexts, demonstrating how early attempts to talk about games were informed by material histories well before 'game studies' became widely accepted as an academic discipline. Additionally, I will show how many of these discussions were marked by questions as to whether these spaces were fundamentally games, or something else entirely. This will give a comprehensive sense of how many of the definitions within early games studies were shaped by a variety of ideological and institutional factors, and will also trace a key

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historical discussion in the field beyond the often-discussed ‘ludology/narratology’ debate (Aarseth 2019).

What emerges from my study is an image of the formal and political struggle over the definition of virtual worlds, as competing voices attempted to get discursive dominance over defining digital spaces in relation to ‘real’ lived space. While the definition has been taken for granted by many scholars, some authors (Lehdonvirta 2010; Taylor 2006) have critiqued the ways it represents (and has established) a clear distinction between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’, essentially replicating Huizinga’s famous ‘magic circle’ (Salen and Zimmerman 2003). Nonetheless, it is a common first principle in games studies to assume that virtual worlds exist as an inherent element of some kinds of software—or even as a medium in themselves—though the way these worlds exist and their relationship to our ‘real’ world has been a site of conflict. Closely analysing this conflict, I will show how this difference between virtual and real worlds has had a central place in how we talk about, think about, and create virtual worlds, as well as how we imagine the purpose of digital mediums: as either replications of social and aesthetic forms that already exist, or as radically new ways for humans to socially organise. I will finish the paper with a call to historicise many of the formal definitions we hold as self-evident within games studies and beyond.

BIO

Finn Dawson (he/him) is a PhD student at the University of Sydney, researching the politics of worlds and world-building in digital games. He is deeply interested in the entangled relationship between aesthetics and capitalist social relations in games.

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