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## MMOGs: The Avatar of Consumerism

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) continue to draw throngs of players every year with the promise of action, adventure, compelling stories, and untold riches and legendary artifacts that can be your very own. The most popular MMOG at this time, *World of Warcraft*, has over ten million paying subscribers while millions more are playing dozens of similar competing games (*MMOGCHART.com*). There is no doubt that, as a cultural product, the MMOG is enjoying a popularity to which few other forms of production can compare (except for perhaps popular music and television). What is perhaps most striking about this form of production is that in addition to being a commodity sold by global media corporations and thus, like all other products and creative projects, comment on the cultural logic—the MMOG is in an unusual position to actually replicate the dominate hegemonic conditions which commodify the participant in active, real-time alternate spaces. Taking a materialist approach to the subject, what follows is an analysis of how the MMOG fits among the contrivances and contradictions of the postmodern culture. But to begin, an examination of how the mystification of commodification relies on the delicate construction of the idea of “the self” will be necessary.

The ontological study of the “the self” has been the eternal battleground on which the bodies of countless philosophers and Swedish film makers have lain. Adding the layer of *virtual* reality onto what is already nearly indefinable and trying to then grasp *that* is like trying to train cats to herd cows; although, Sherry Turkle tackles the subject admirably in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* where she examines the way in which experience is mediated through artificial environments, and how this affects the way in which people alter their ideas of self—as well as extend their own identity into this construction. By way of illustrating how significant and contentious the idea of identity extension is, Turkle describes an

incident that occurred in the early 1990s (the dawning of Internet gaming as we know it today) on a MUD, or multi-user dungeon (the text-based online game, predecessor to the MMOG, in which the players fight virtual monsters, build virtual homes, and socialize with other participants). One player on a rather popular MUD was able to hack the system and take control of a female player's character, making the virtual person perform textualized sex acts before the eyes of other players and the victim herself. This event has since been characterized as a gross violation of personal sovereignty, a cause of shame and horror, and act of aggressive power considered by many (including the victim) as analogous to a physical sexual assault. This virtual rape created a firestorm of debate by both denizens of the online community and social critics regarding the nature of identity on the Internet: What implications does this have for people who extend their self, in a manner of speaking, to this electronic environment that is still anthropologically new? Turkle observes that, "Although some made light of the offender's actions by saying that the episode was just words, in text-based virtual realities such as MUDs, words *are* deeds" (15). She expands on this concept when she explains, "Discussion of the MUD rape occupied LambdaMOO for some time. In one of a series of online meetings that followed [the event], one character asked, 'Where does the body end and the mind begin? Is not the mind a part of the body?' Another answered, 'In [MUDs], the body is the mind'" (253).

This quandary exemplifies the question of how is identity defined in a world where people straddle the invisible boundary of existing in the physical world (where our corporeal bodies are), and an existence where we can have *virtual* bodies that represent and extend our consciousness and will. Is our identity, our "self," defined by our physical shell; or, can we say that what we are is contained in our minds? If the latter, what *is* our mind? Is it not *what* our brains produce: the thoughts, feelings, memories, and all the other existential signifiers we give to these abstractions we can not touch, see, photograph, nor dissect?

Fredric Jameson wrote that in a postmodern world, the subject is not alienated but fragmented. He explained that the notion of alienation presumes a centralized, unitary self who could become lost to himself or herself. But if, as a postmodernist sees it, the self is decentered and multiple, the concept of alienation breaks down. All that is left is an anxiety of identity.... In simulation, identity can be fluid and multiple, a signifier no longer clearly points to a thing that is signified, and understanding is less likely to proceed through analysis than by navigation through virtual space. (Turkle 49)

A thirteen-year-old girl, who, in matters involving the Internet, may be as wise as any philosopher, told Turkle, ““When you program a computer there is a little piece of your mind, and now it’s a little piece of the computer’s mind. And now you can see it”” (30-31). The computer serves as a medium between the human mind and the electronic existence allowing us to expand our identity beyond the constraints of the physical. Turkle writes:

As more people spend more time in these virtual spaces, some go so far as to challenge the idea of giving any priority to RL [real life] at all. “After all,” says one dedicated MUD player and [Internet chat] user, “why grant such superior status to the self that has the body when the selves that don’t have bodies are able to have different kinds of experiences?” When people can play at different genders and different lives, it isn’t surprising that for some this play has become as real as what we conventionally think of as their lives, although for them this is no longer a valid distinction. (14)

The visual virtual body which represents one's essence online is known as an *avatar*. It is no coincidence that the man who came up with this application of this term connected the electronic virtual identity with the Hindu religious concept of the avatar as a physical

representation of a divine being. Richard “Lord British” Garriott, creator of the wildly popular *Ultima* computer game series and *Ultima Online* (the first graphical MMOG), chose to apply the term avatar to the computer role-playing game character as a representation of a particular physical or “spiritual” trait as pursued by the character—such as strength, courage, or truth, as inspired by Hindu beliefs. The dual nature of the avatar, the character in-game as a representation of an iconic trait, and the representation of the player him or herself, captured the essence of the projection of identity into a fragmented representation—and so the word avatar has remained firmly embedded in the lexicon of computer gaming.

Once gaming moved from the text-based interfaces and simplistic graphics to realistic representations of people, places, and things, the advent of the avatar as mind and body extension opened the door on the subconscious, filling in the gaps where the conscious mind strove to embrace a projected existence. Celia Pearce, in her article “Communities of Play: The Social Construction of Identity in Persistent Online Game Worlds,” examines the way the evolution of the gaming character from textual abstraction to doppelganger elevated and refined the notion of identity extension and blurred even further the line between what is real and what is cynically described as shared hallucination. She observes that “the shift in affect that resulted from the introduction of the avatar cannot be overstated. One player described it as a feeling of ‘proprioception,’ or body awareness. Suddenly they could run, jump and physically interact with the world in ways they had not before” (312). Edward Castronova expands upon this interaction between mind and virtual, and its latent effects, in his book, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. Using an example of a new player in an MMOG as he or she experiences the strange new world of online gaming, Castronova shows how easy and inherently natural it is to extend one’s identity into this new environment. He describes the various stages an MMOG player might go through as they come to accept their avatar as an agent for their

perceptions and actions. Generally the first significant perceptual and epistemological change comes

at the moment the avatar's attributes felt like they were your own personal attributes. This step appears to be psychologically natural, because the avatar is just an extension of your body into a new space. The body is the tool by which the mind receives sensation and manipulates the environment, and this avatar body does exactly and only that.... No one ever says "My character's strength is depleted," or "My avatar owns a dune buggy." They say "my strength" and "my dune buggy". (45).

This approach illustrates what Jacques Lacan believed to be the decentering of the ego—a concept that extended the idea of the self away from any permanent, concrete construct and more toward an illusion of self that is defined by what linguistic structures we use to mediate the description of the Real. The self can not be defined and categorized by any unitary concept. By its very nature, the self is and can be continuously fragmented, and the fragments can exist in any number of conceptualizations and paradigms.

How then does one, *can* one, grasp what is "real" when the reality of the self is not something that has form or structure? What does this amorphous and troublesome condition of identity duality mean in the context of distinguishing real and virtual life? If the extension of identity is relatively easy with text-based MUDs and serious enough as to cause emotional crisis when that mode of identity is threatened, and the extension is made exponentially more substantial with the welcome acceptance of the avatar, how could the apprehension of reality in other ways which are not as arguably significant as that dealing with personal identity not be equally fragmented with the abstraction of a virtual, digital layer? Castronova observes a mirroring of the decentered, fractured identity through the veil that is supposed to divide the

realms of “in-game” and “out-of-game” when he says, “Our culture has moved beyond the point where such distinctions are helpful.... The membrane between synthetic worlds and daily life is definitely there but also definitely porous...” (159). He discusses how our brains are uniquely suited to assuming whatever it encounters as being real, more so when encountering an immersive artificial environment generated to simulate reality as we know it. Our higher evolved brain, or “new brain,” allows us to discern simulation from authenticity, but constantly works at reminding our primitive brain that what we are experiencing is not real—a task made all the more difficult when the shared ersatz reality is reinforced by *other* people accepting the simulation as genuine. As Castronova explains it:

the default and unconscious assumption of the brain is that everything seen is absolutely real. In the context of immersive computer-generated games, the old brain becomes insistent: everything perceived is acting in a way that is tremendously close to the jungles we grew up in.... The new brain must either engage in a constant stream of “it’s not real” reminders, or just give up and take the experience as is. In an environment populated by other people going through the same thing, the new brain is further discouraged from resisting by social forces that define Reality and Truth: if everyone pretends the dragon is real, and reacts as though the dragon is real, then for that society it *is* real, just as real as the value of a dollar. Thus as a result of both internal and external costs, it becomes more mentally and socially expensive to *disbelieve* the dragon than to believe it. The act that requires consciousness and will is suspension of *belief*, not disbelief. The default assumption of your mind, unless you fight against it, is that everything in an immersive game world is completely real. (73-74)

The communal, shared reality is remarked upon by Pearce: “In a persistent play community, flow has a cumulative effect. The group supports the individual and vice versa, allowing persistent avatar identities to evolve.... Within the context of their play community they feel both a sense of belonging and individual value that differs from other roles they may present in so-called 'real life'” (316).

Castronova's economics of reality plays a key role in the reality of capitalist economics, which will be dealt with more directly later in this essay. The shared acceptance of market value, which can be a so-called “objective reality” (if the belief of value is a shared belief by a community) is also a significant component in the way the MMOG supports and exploits the capitalist ideology of consumption and commodification. But to get to this understanding, we must examine the way the fragmented self alone is vulnerable to the hegemonic ideology—no less so when that self is not only affected by mediated reality but is itself a mediated reality.

As Turkle delves into Lacanian psychology to help identify and define what identity may mean as a discernible thing, so to does Castronova when he focuses much of his thesis upon the way desire defines the Real which underlies the structure of alternate reality—just as it does in our primary reality. He illustrates the ephemerally dual nature of reality, writing, “By this process [of transference], virtual things become real things; when most people agree that the thing has a real value to somebody, it genuinely does have that value. It is not virtual at all any more, but real and genuine” (148). Once again we see that what is considered *real* must be, because of some value projected upon it by a shared agreement among people in a community or society. Castronova, using a bound significance of virtual reality and economics, implies the inherent nature for something to be considered real is that it must have value—however “value” is to be defined. According to Lacan, when something has value, it becomes an object of desire, and desire is central to how it is we define who we are.

The issue of desire is central in Slavoj Žižek's book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, in which he explains the way desire helps to splinter and divide the subject and therefore subjective reality:

What notion of the subject is compatible with this paradoxical character of the Real? The basic feature of the Lacanian subject is, of course, its alienation in the signifier: as soon as the subject is caught in the radically external signifying network he is mortified, dismembered, divided.... Here we have the whole Lacanian problem of the reflexivity of desire: desire is always a desire of desire—the question is not immediately “What should I desire?” but “There are a lot of things that I desire, I have a lot of desires—which of them is worth being the object of my desire? Which one should I desire?” (173-4)

In simplest of terms, this is an illustration of the way in which we desire what we do not have, defining the lack which defines what we are, and how we determine what is real. “The Real,” according to Žižek:

is therefore simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization *and* a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency. To use Kripkean terminology, the Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic universes); but at the same time its status is thoroughly precarious; it is something that persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature. (169)

Žižek is explaining what Lacan believed to be at the root of our identity: we are what we lack. Our reality, in essence, is defined by what we do not have. In a sense, we are not the sum of our parts, but rather a negative gestalt. Our desires circle and gather around us like the accretion disk

of a black hole—where we are the nothing in space defined and made visible by what we attempt to consume. We constantly consume and are never satiated. We consume for the sake of consuming, with no end purpose but to try to fulfill some need even we do not recognize. And in our consumption we create a reality about us of nothing more than mere abstraction, a simulacrum of a Real comprised of our desires and the society created to support our desires—a reality that we find constantly more difficult to maintain.

Language is the mediator by which we attempt to define the Real which we can only interact with through our desire for what we lack. What happens when language, then, is appropriated by the digital culture vis-à-vis cyberspace and virtual reality? Jean Baudrillard in his article “The Murder of the Sign,” explains how “the object only exists as an exchange-value—caught up in an incessant process of sign differentiation” (9). In answer to the question of whether the digital has replaced signs, he explains:

Yes, the digital is not a sign, but a signal.... This isn't difference in the same sense that language makes differences. Language is a system of differences between signs. The interplay of signs in language through their differences is what allows for signification. In digital technology, this type of interplay is gone. It doesn't coordinate, it conceals signals. It is information: you can move about it in any direction because there is no longer any mediation. There is an immanence, an immediation of things. That's what is new. It isn't the death of reality since reality as a whole passed into the sign. The sign absorbs reality. Images devour reality. Then the Images devour themselves.... Then information technology reduced it all to the same level with an even greater abstraction where the sign disappears. It is not even sublimation. It's beyond sublimation. Sublimation in the strongest sense: transcendence. (11)

Since, according to Lacan, language is the means by which we define and constrain reality, our very subjective reality—when language, our basic signifying chain, is sublimated by a referentless sign, reality is in essence: virtual.

How so very apropos, Baudrillard's description of transcendence via cannibalistic absorption of reality by the sign, to the topic of identity in virtual spaces. Baudrillard's explanation of the way in which the digital layer of abstraction becomes more imperative when one considers how intertwined, or perhaps the proper word is "invasive," the digital culture has become. T. L. Taylor in her book *Play Between Worlds*, observes:

The common framing of games as "simply entertainment" often obscures the ways they act as key cultural sites in which forgoing participation may have real costs. We increasingly live in a world in which opting out of technological systems is more and more difficult and yet participation within those systems pushes us to accept structures we might oppose. Try eliminating a technology (especially a communication one) from your life for a week and see how you fare.

(135)

The difficulty of Taylor's rhetorical suggestion becomes, not only more obvious, but its implications more dire and metaphysical with serious implications regarding our identity, when you consider what Sherry Turkle suggests: "The objects on the screen have no simple physical referent. In this sense, life on the screen is without origins and foundation. It is a place where signs taken for reality may substitute for the real. Its aesthetic has to do with manipulation and recombination" (47). Although Žižek counters Baudrillard's "pessimistic" view that virtual reality, cyberspace, is purely a schizophrenic separation of boundless signs from the Real. While the digital world has sublimated and transcended sign in many ways, and has created another layer of mediation, Žižek is more inclined to see the social constructs and identity projection of

virtual reality as an extension of the narratives we create as we search for the Real. This concept is explored by Turkle: “When people talk about the computer as though it were a part of them as well as of the outside world, their words evoke the power of what the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott called transitional objects.... This experience has traditionally been associated with religion, spirituality, notions of beauty, sexual intimacy, and the sense of connection with nature. Now it is associated with using computers” (273). Although while he calls Baudrillard's and other's dismissal of virtual reality as a negative and incomplete assessment of the power cyberspace has for exploring identity beyond social and physical constraints, and a means of getting to the Real that we may not otherwise have the capacity to apprehend, it is not without its dangers and pitfalls:

The mystification operative in the perverse "just gaming" of cyberspace is thus double: not only are the games we are playing in it more serious than we tend to assume..., but the opposite also holds, i.e. the much celebrated playing with multiple, shifting personas (freely constructed identities) tends to obfuscate (and thus falsely liberate us from) the constraints of social space in which our existence is caught. (Cyberspace)

Žižek warns that without proper critical examination, MMOGs (as a component of the cyberspace he refers to) can mystify the workings of the culture we are required to live in (when not playing in cyber cultures). As we play in these false realities, we believe we are escaping the mundane and the banal of our culture—when in fact, we are continuing to participate (even more directly) in the very cultural dynamics we are seeking to escape.

All forms of cultural production serve the purposes and goals of the hegemony. To that end, if the cultural production can compel its subjects, participants, consumers, that they can not live without it—the domination of the ideology of those in power becomes even more entrenched

and safe from skeptical criticism, much less rebellion. In this way the simulacra of reality in the form of *virtual* reality (which houses and defines the extension of our already fragile constructed identities based upon external definitions of fulfillment of desire) as a substitution for the simulacra of reality in the form of our *actual* (but mediated reality), creates a recursive cycle of an unreal real. An inherently schizophrenic postmodern nightmare.

So, reality is what you make it, and the self is a fractured collection of desires (or, the desire of desires), and the digital culture takes everything we use to try to signify reality and absorbs the mediating language and turns it into a hyperreality—where the signs become meaningless and reality becomes the subjective projection of an identity upon us, in the way in which we place value in objects, labor, even in time itself. Whether it is something we need, something we want, something we are convinced (by outside agents) we want, if it is something that is not easily had—we place a “value” on it. Value: A concept as ethereal as the idea of “the self.”

Castronova illustrates this projection of value, writing, “Just as one cannot conclude that diamonds are worthless because they are said to 'have no valuable uses,' one also cannot conclude that the items in synthetic world are useless because 'they are only virtual.' Price indicates social value, virtual items have a price; therefore virtual items do have social value” (46). What Castronova is describing of course, is the core value of consumerist capitalism: It does not matter if the object of value is a lump of gold from a river, the afore mentioned diamond from an African mine, or, a cyber bottle of potion or a virtual sack of “Murlok Eyes”—whether it is something that has physical form but is intrinsically useless, or has no form except as a collection of 1s and 0s transmitted by moving electrons, if someone or a group infer it has value, then the reality of it is that it *has* value. And it is that agreed upon value, that socially accepted

value projected upon something that transmutes a completely virtual item into being “real”—an ironic condition considering its reality is predicated entirely upon abstraction and ideology.

If commodification and object consumerism is the result of the often arbitrary but socially agreed upon value in which we imbue an object, what can be said of the virtual objects and the labor involved in the crafting or accumulating of these objects? T. L. Taylor explains that *online* culture has become a mirror of the *capitalist* culture we live in. Taylor writes:

Over time the player base has become more experienced in the game, has acquired more wealth, and in turn can sustain not only a commodity orientation, but a fairly inflated pricing structure. The social norms of politeness and gift-giving [which had been a prominent social behavior early in the history of MMOs,] have in part morphed into a kind of capitalistic exchange in response to a combination of design and character demographics. (59-60)

Taylor observes how by creating an environment that intentionally promotes commodification of virtual items, as well as the labor of player-characters crafting and collecting the items, or performing class specific services in factory-like replication and repetition, this virtual market economy has gone through a fundamental shift from a generally egalitarian culture to one in which the behaviors of the player-characters have begun to emulate the commodification of labor in the off-line world. Early in the MMOG tradition, (while the market for acquisition of goods was and still is based partly on money-for-commodity and partly as loot from a kill), the participation of players practicing barter, trade, and charity, was so high as to make generosity and cooperation an expectation. And since the identity of characters were by and large relegated to “classes” (although unlike the Marxist idea of class, these game classes are more of a description of occupation or skill sets, like a guild or trade union), one could depend on a member of a particular class to be able to provide a solution to a need—such as a magic-using

class providing a “buff” to a character that might provide healing or agility or some other ability to aid them in their quests. “It was very unusual for such a request to be turned down as it was typically seen as costing the caster very little and was in some ways interpreted as part of the work associated with being a class that could bestow such spells. Casting particular spells could be seen as a public-service duty, a way of contributing to the larger player base” (Taylor 58-59).

But then predominant player-character behaviors began changing in the early versions of such games like *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*, which would then carry over and exist from the beginning of newer MMOGs. “We can see in the shift from a gift to market economy around buffs how the design choices—combining very powerful, highly sought-after spells with scarcity—has produced a companion effect in social behaviors” (Taylor 59). Unlike the “real-world” which arguably evolved naturally (in that by and large there has been no overarching plan driving the actions of those who have been in power and the cultural, social, and political changes that have resulted—unless one believes in the Illuminati), these artificial worlds are designed by people who are followers and subjects to a cultural logic. Naturally, then, the cultural product they create will reflect that logic. What that means is that the artificially created economies built into the environments are based on a system of wealth for commodity with contrived scarcity to increase the demand for the rarer items. As Taylor puts it:

Obtaining epic weapons or more generally owning impressive equipment (weapons, armor, robes, rare items—especially when won from a fight and not bought) all become artifacts of mastery and signal to both the user and the server community their skill at the game. In these cases while objects do play a role in creating the identity of the user, it is not simply a neutral performance but one tied up with signifying power and status—qualities rarely attributed to women.

Katinka described her relationship to the gear her character wears saying, “I’m

proud of myself. I have no problem with people inspecting me [clicking on an avatar to get a detailed look at their items] because you know, I've worked hard for what I have." (103)

The ideological axiom "You can achieve greatness—if you just work hard enough" is alive and well in the virtual realm. The greatness implied is the accumulation of more powerful, rarer items which you can use either to beat greater challenges to get more powerful and rare items, or to use as a symbol of status and wealth. The MMOGs are designed so that the primary goal of any character is to be able to be assessed as "great" based on what they have acquired in the game. For those players who have devoted a great deal of time and energy, and real money, to the game (like Katinka in the example above), their out-of-game identity is dependent upon how their in-game identity is perceived in the context of what virtual wealth they have acquired. Their virtual wealth, because it helps define their identity and sense of self, is as real to them as something which could exist out-of-game.

On the other hand, a player could look back on their gaming experience, often lasting months and even years of consistently in-game time, and feel as though they have gotten nothing out of it. In the documentary film *Virtual Worlds: Inside Online Games*, husband and wife players of *EverQuest* (an MMOG so popular and addictive as to be referred to as "Evercrack" even by its loving fans) James and Liz O'Donnell, describe how what began as a shared entertainment became an obsession fueled by the need to get the next big prize. Liz expresses a certain amount of painful regret as she looks back on her experience with the game and observes "you've got nothing at the end of it really...nothing material...no sword you can take with you." The player who plays by the rules and does not engage in out-of-game commodity exchange may not get anything material in the real-world in exchange for their time, but the game makers and publishers end up making a significant amount of real-world money from players by

intentionally structuring the game to compel players to stay on as long as possible—always in search of the boon at the end of the next inevitable quest. As James states, “The way the game was pushed and structured, you can't play for short periods of time.” This is by design, and the reasons are obvious: Co-creator of *EverQuest*, Brad McQuaid, states, “We don't want you to cancel your account—we want you to keep playing.” To do this, Geoffrey Zatkin, who worked for *EverQuest's* online global distribution company, Sonly Online Entertainment, explains: “We give people something called 'carrots.' We give people small goals to achieve,” a continuous stream of tasks and quests that keep the player engaged trying to get the next character level or next artifact from an enemy creature.

Though, while some players see value and worth in accumulating virtual items (which are not *supposed* to have any real-world material or monetary value), and some players walk away from gaming scornful of the single-directional flow of real-world material wealth, others have found ways to make real money from the value of virtual items in-game which end up extending its market value into the real economy. In 2003, journalist Julian Dibbell quit his job in order to try to earn a living by buying and selling virtual items and property for real money. Dibbell was able to make a better-than-reasonable living in this way and wrote the book *Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot* about his year as a virtual commodities trader. While Dibbell claimed appropriate taxes for the IRS, what he was doing by selling game items violated end-user license agreements (EULAs) which stipulated all virtual items in a game remain the property of the game publisher. Even so, many people, like Dibbell, have made money selling these intangible commodities—including Asian sweatshops which employ cadres of people to do nothing but grind virtual money and items to be sold online to players who are willing to pay real money for these goods, never realizing the exploitation of labor these games encourage. In an effort to deter this cottage industry, *EverQuest* publisher

Sony Online Entertainment secured an agreement with online auction site eBay to disallow the selling of online characters and items. But the legal system has yet to fully come to grips with what the new and dynamic merging of the virtual and the real means in the realm of property rights, ownership, and real-world wealth. Two of the first legal scholars to write on the subject wrote in their 2004 paper, “The Laws of the Virtual Worlds,” ““there is no descriptive disconnection between our real-world property system and virtual assets. From both descriptive and normative positions, owners of virtual assets do, or should, possess property rights’( 2004, 20)” (Taylor 134-5).

The prescient legal scholars, F. Gregory Lastowka and Dan Hunter, who wrote that article printed in the *California Law Review*, understood this issue of identity and assumed material value in the immaterial. They wrote in their article of the way individuals accept virtual reality, how it is used as a substitution and an extension of physical community, and how what is accepted in the virtual worlds in behavior and commodity exchange is analogous—for the preceding reasons—to real-world concepts of material wealth, ownership, and actionable behaviors.

As people increasingly come to live and work in these worlds, the domination of legal property issues by EULAs and practices of "wizardly fiat" may appear one-sided and unjust. If corporate wizards continue to assert complete ownership over virtual lives, cyborg inhabitants will bring their concerns to real-world courts to prevent certain fundamental rights from being contracted away. If constitutional speech protections extend to company towns like Chickasaw, Alabama, it seems likely that such rights will be asserted by, and eventually granted to those who live in virtual worlds.

When virtual-world lawsuits arise, as they inevitably will, it will not be a sufficient answer to say, "It's just a game." Nor can the wizards who create and maintain the worlds simply assert that they can do as they wish. The issues are more complex than that, and the users and community will need to have a say in the formation of the laws of virtual worlds. (72)

This is where we begin to see the contradiction inherent in the ideology and where the mechanisms of capitalism can be examined and critiqued. In her book *My Mother Was A Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*, N. Katherine Hayles (while primarily referring to the literary form of cultural production), identifies the crucible of cultural study:

To probe these complexities [struggle of open source utopianism against capitalistic greed, and an opposition between the command structures of code and the analogical surfaces of figurative language], we require critical strategies that are attentive to the technologies producing texts as well as to the texts linguistic/conceptual structures—that is to say, we require material ways of reading that recognize texts as more than sequences of words and spaces. Rather, they are artifacts whose materialities emerge from negotiations between their signifying structures and the technologies that produce them. (142)

The crossroads between technology and its production have within it the means by which we can examine the current ideology of postmodern global market capitalism. Current technologies are utilized to create a form of entertainment which, like nearly all forms of production, is designed to make its creators and publishers money. The product, the MMOGs, are crafted to mirror and support the cultural logic of consumption and compulsory labor. Some aspects of this in-game market economy can be charitably attributed to being the naive result of designers who are innocently subjected to the hegemony—but more likely the paradigm of wealth accumulation as

a sign of status and a necessary tool to continue playing the game is a cynically intentional component of the games in order to keep players hooked to their subscriptions. As a result of the time and work put in by the players to acquire all the virtual wealth the creators have made available, the players have absorbed the signification of the wealth into their sense of identity just as they do with the accumulation of wealth in the real-world to assuage the Lack that defines their sense of self! The inherent nature of identity extension created by the virtual avatar makes this material value sublimation inevitable. When the player feels that their senses, their being, extends into the virtual reality of their online identity, the wealth they acquire will also conversely be thought of as real to them as whatever concrete qualities they place upon their out-of-game self. In short: their avatar is them; their avatar's sword is theirs. But to the corporations which own the labor that created the game environment, all property of the MMOG (both real and virtual) is thought to belong to them. This position ironically validates the players' belief that the virtual property they have spent time and effort and money (real and virtual) on acquiring is indeed real in an ontological and legal sense. If the companies accept the virtual wealth is real enough to claim retention of ownership, then it is real enough for the players to demand ownership by right of effort and payment.

The promotion and contribution to the dominant ideology is manifest in MMOGs in more ways than wealth and property accumulation. Ian Bogost, in his book *Persuasive games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, examines some of the socio-political concepts found in the virtual world which reflect and support the ideology:

Videogames are particularly useful tools for visualizing the logics that make up a worldview (following Gramsci), the ideological distortions in political situations (following Žižek), or the state of such situations (following Badiou)... Political videogames use procedural rhetorics to expose how political structures operate, or

how they fail to operate, or how they could or should operate. Videogames that engage political topics codify the logic of a political system through procedural representation. By playing these games and unpacking the claims their procedural rhetorics make about political situations, we can gain an unusually detached perspective on the ideologies that drive them. (74-75)

Bogost invokes Žižek and Badiou's understanding of material ideology when he describes *America's Army* (an online action game in which the players take on roles as soldiers in a painstakingly accurate yet glorified representation of the U.S. military) as having dual ideological goals: one as a recruiting tool for the U.S. Army, and also, “as a manifestation of the ideology that propels the U.S. Army, the game encourages players to consider the logic of duty, honor, and singular global political truth as a desirable worldview” (79). The “political videogames” Bogost refers to include other warlike military and action games where the concepts of might-makes-right and xenophobia are elevated to the most pure forms of active representation. If all video games, as a form of cultural production, comment on the cultural logic and allow one to examine the values of the ideology, many of these game producers do not seem to work hard obfuscating their goals to encourage mass consumption and capitalist dominance. The same values of aggressive imperialism and encouragement to toe the line and support the status quo are found in what may be the most blatant expressions of capitalist culture in such games as *Chester Cheetah: Too Cool to Fool*, *Mountain Dew Skateboarding*, *Kool-Aid Man*, *Coca Cola Kid*, and *M.C. Kids* (while the product connection with first few titles may be obvious, the last one is a McDonald's based adventure game).

That gaming supports the capitalist ideology is not only not a secret but is often bandied about as a positive argument promoting its use as a teaching tool to kids in learning the ways of global market capitalism. One such example is found in Marc Prensky's book “*Don't Bother Me*

*Mom—I'm Learning*”: *How Computer and Video Games are Preparing Your Kids for Twenty-First Century Success and How You Can Help!* Prensky examines gaming as a form of cultural production, examines the way it fits within the greater picture of media and commodity promotion, and the various issues regarding identity projection and fragmentation—and uses this information to promote the idea that gaming is a positive tool for joining in, participating in, and becoming part of the cogs and wheels of capitalist hegemony. In the chapter of his book entitled “Economics and Business Lessons for a 10-Year-Old from a Computer Game,” Prensky describes all the ways his son was learning capitalist economics from playing in an MMOG. For example, “As a result of his game playing, this lively fifth grader understands other key economic concepts as well. He patiently explained to me that ores sell for more once they're smelted into bars, and even more after they're crafted into objects. *Why that's...value added!*” (103-4) (emphasis in original).

Among the contradictions found in capitalism is the one evident in MMOGs: allowing the participant to “escape” the consumerism culture into an alternate reality—only to find themselves in an environment where the consumerism is purified and presented in such a way as to magnify the commodification. Where, in the off-line world, we live through our lives of quiet desperation as half-awake zombies manipulated by the sweet siren’s song of consumerism without apparent harm (thanks to the sanitizing power of commodity fetishism)—online we can directly participate in the human devaluation by buying and selling the items that will allow us to buy *better* items that will permit us to defeat opponents that are contrived excuses to force the players to continue to participate in an unadulterated capitalist cycle—while at the same time contributing to *off-line* commodification by paying “real money” to continue enjoying the privilege of collecting virtual items for greater power, glory, and prestige!

Of course you could argue that the whole point is ridiculous, that because the synthetic world is a fantasy world, a game, no norms or laws can exist there. Yet we have seen... that these places are considered quite real by the people who go there, and that these people are not children by any means. Perhaps the synthetic world is a game; but then, our world is a game too. There's really no difference. If everyone thinks a certain piece of money has value, they will treat it as a valuable thing, and therefore it will have value. When I hand someone a worthless old scrap of paper that says "\$1," she will give me something valuable—a Coke—in return, because of the institution of money. And it is the institution, the patterns of behavior, that actually gives the dollar bill its value.... (102)

Value is subjective in the sense of what has monetary worth. The value of money is subjective to the arcane and mystified workings of global economics which has no anchor to anything considered objective or inherent. The value of the individual is subjective based upon the shifting and ethereal points of external reference the subject attempts to compare themselves to—in our culture usually tied to concepts of wealth and commodity acquisition. In none of these ways are there any fundamental differences between what we experience in the so-called real-world and what people experience in the virtual world of MMOGs.

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