

Versioning Worlds: Digital Histories, Temporalities, and Change

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PANEL ABSTRACT

As virtual worlds in video games arose and quickly established themselves, questions surrounding digital platforms captured anthropological attention. Researchers such as Boellstorff (2008), Malaby (2009), Nardi (2010), Pearce (2009), and Taylor (2006) gave us ethnographic glimpses into the daily workings of life amongst the pixels, asking what it means to be virtual, to create, to be a team, to share, and to watch your world die. This panel continues to expand upon this work by focusing specifically on the dynamism of virtual worlds as ever-changing sociotechnical spaces with multiple temporalities. Notably, virtual worlds are subject to versioning—digital objects are recreated and reconstructed with each new release. Although these versions are often fashioned as technological updates, the changes invested in digital platforms often reshape user experience, gameplay, and the visual landscape of the digital space.

This panel proposes we understand a virtual world as we do the actual: as complex, processual, and indeterminant. In looking at multiple facets of virtual worlds, be it the versioning implicit in the labeling of *Final Fantasy XIV* expansions as 3.0, 4.0, or 5.0, the shifting affordances of bodies over time in *VRChat*, or the death of a virtual world's creator, this panel explores the multiplicitous ways in which virtual worlds change over time.

In doing so, the panelists encounter similar questions: why should the understandings of virtual worlds remain fixed in particular moments in time? How have the surrounding communities influenced the requirement for alterations of digital platforms? And, how do they change our interactions and sociality? With this, this panel seeks to extend the study of virtual worlds in games in ways that give nuanced understandings of their histories, evolutions, and present temporalities.

The panel will begin with Malone's presentation, titled, "Nothing Lasts Forever Online: A Look at

Endings and Failures Beyond Player Perspectives,” wherein she explores the notion that the social spaces that live within digital spaces and the companies that create them do not last forever, noting that they are ephemeral and precious. Malone remarks, by means of her ethnographic industry work, how quickly everything changes and how suddenly it can all disappear when the company she worked for went under and *Talking Island* (紐約說話島) was shuttered. The presentation ultimately focuses on endings and failures to continue a line of inquiry (Pearce 2008, Márquez 2013, Consalvo and Begy 2012) that can sometimes be uncomfortable but is crucial to a holistic understanding of the intersection between design and sociality within and around virtual spaces.

After Malone, Josh Rivers will present, “The Versioning of *Final Fantasy XIV*: An -Emic Perspective.” Drawing on a year of ethnographic data from the virtual world of *Final Fantasy XIV*, Rivers uses M’Charek’s (2014) concept of the *folded object* as a lens for examining the explicit versioning language of *FFXIV* in its labeling as 3.0, 4.0 and 5.0. This analysis, in turn, makes evident the multiple temporalities and histories that are often folded in on one another to create singular temporal objects in the form of virtual worlds. Ultimately, the presentation aims to shed light on the processes of change present across digital platforms as they are erased within said folded objects.

Following Rivers, Andrew Groen will present the methodology underlying *Empires of EVE*. The virtual world *EVE Online* has been host to an entirely player-driven history unlike any other in the

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realm of online worlds. Author Andrew Groen has spent more than five years interviewing players and researching its history to create *Empires of EVE*, a non-fiction book series based on its history. Groen will discuss the process of reporting the series, and creating a singular history out of the disparate personal experiences of hundreds of thousands of players.

Cody Mejeur will follow Groen, presenting “‘The Dark Bitches’: Strong Women, Toxic Masculinity, and Accusations of Bad Writing in Games.” The past ten years have seen many arguments that representation in games is improving, though studies claiming such rarely go beyond a few prominent examples of diverse representation (Cassell and Jenkins 2000; Jansz and Martis 2007; Sarkeesian 2013; Malkowski & Russworm 2017; Greer 2018). This paper focuses on *Guild Wars 2* (ArenaNet 2012) and *World of Warcraft: Battle for Azeroth* (2018) to trace how long-standing problems with gender representation and toxic masculinity in games are currently evolving. In particular, both games recently featured women as the leaders in their stories, but male gamers responded to these strong female characters by calling them examples of “bad writing” and even harassing writers working on the game. This suggests that sexism is finding new masks in games and further that merely increasing representation of women does little to destabilize power structures or combat toxic masculinity in gaming (Jones 2018; Salter & Blodgett 2017).

Concluding the panel, Noel Brett will present, “Discrete and Continuous Becoming: Temporality, and design practices in *VRChat* and *World of Warcraft*.” Utilizing a relational framework that follows Coleman’s *Becoming of Bodies* (Coleman 2008) and *Radical Relationality* (Powell 2013), Brett’s talk examines elements of problematic design surrounding two virtual worlds: *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) and *VRChat* (VRChat Inc. 2017). Expanding previous work on the erasure of *queer bugs* in *WoW* (Brett 2018), Brett works to map how the production, maintenance, or transformations of avatar bodies are limited or extended via material implications of misogyny and transphobia embedded in

provided avatar design features and community expectations. Through an understanding of avatar bodies as either becoming through discrete or continuous time, digital scholarship can more holistically work to uncover how hateful rhetoric materializes on avatar bodies through the effects of the relations between time, online communities, platforms, and development teams.

Keywords

temporality, virtual worlds, multiplicity, methodology

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Noel Brett is a PhD candidate in the Computing and Software department at McMaster University. Aside from his research on programming languages & mathematics, Brett's work uses theories to understand how bodies are materialized in digital worlds. Primarily, examining the ways in which digital games construct and perpetuate sexualized standards on avatar bodies, resulting in straightening devices which aim to remove queerness in online digital games. Particularly, Brett has been looking at temporal materialities of gender and sexualization by tracing the changes applied to avatar bodies in the digital worlds of VRChat and World of Warcraft.

Andrew Groen is the author of the *Empires of EVE* series of non-fiction books about the history of EVE Online. A former journalist with WIRED, Groen began a long-term research project into the virtual history of the EVE community in 2014. Since then he has conducted a wide investigation including more than 150 interviews with influential players to chart the political structure of the game as it developed shortly after EVE launched in 2003 and was shaped throughout the years in an ongoing power struggle. The *Empires of EVE* series documents more than ten years of the game's history in detail and introduces readers to the ideologies that developed, the groups that gained power, and the people who controlled them.

Krista-Lee Malone is a faculty associate with the department of Curriculum & Instruction's Game Design program at UW-Madison. Her research includes studies on raiding guilds in World of Warcraft, the making of educational games in Taiwan, and examining gender issues and educational uses within the live-streaming platform Twitch.tv. Dr. Malone is currently teaching game design at UW-Madison and working on designing accessible games for classrooms and using game design in the social sciences.

Cody Mejeur is Visiting Assistant Professor of Game Studies at University at Buffalo. Their work uses games to theorize narrative as an embodied and playful process that constructs how we understand ourselves and our realities. They have published on games pedagogy, gender and queerness in games, and the narrative construction of reality. They currently work with the LGBTQ Video Game Archive on preserving and visualizing LGBTQ representation. They are editor at One Shot: A Journal of Critical Games & Play and serve as Diversity Officer for the Digital Games Research Association.

Josh Rivers is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and holds a Master's of Science in Social Science from the University of Amsterdam. An experienced ethnographer of virtual worlds and offline locales, Rivers has conducted over a year's worth of ethnographic fieldwork within the virtual world of *Final Fantasy XIV*, where he explored notions of queer embodiment, queer community-making, and 'queer time.' At present, Rivers is ethnographically embedded in CCP Games, where he studies the multiplicity inherent in corporate enactments of image and brand in worlds both virtual and actual.