



Do avatars dream of electronic picket lines?

The blurring of work and play in virtual environments

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to define and articulate the concept of digital protestainment, to address how technologies have enabled boundaries to become more permeable, and in which this permeability leads to the engendering of new cultures.

Design/methodology/approach – Two case studies, within Second Life and EVE Online, are examined to see how digital protestainment, through the lens of cultural borderlands, creates a hybridized culture. Recorded interviews and textual analysis of web sites are used to illustrate the concepts of play, work, and blended activities.

Findings – Within virtual environments the process of hybridization is not only increased in size, scope, form, and function. The borderlands process draws in cultural elements through a complex interchange between the online and the offline, in which hybridized cultural bits are carried out into other spaces.

Research limitations/implications – The success of the cases does not represent all digital protest examples and so this study is limited in its ability to generalize to the population of virtual protests. This study limits the realm of digital protestainment to virtual worlds but the concept could be applied to any form of virtual community.

Practical implications – Companies that host these worlds will need to become aware not only of what their audience is but also how that audience will mobilize and the likely outcomes of their mobilization. Virtual worlds offer organizational leaders a new resource for training, support, and recruitment.

Originality/value – The theoretical concept of cultural borderlands is expanded to the digital environment and introduced as a potentially new and useful tool to internet researchers.

Keywords Virtual work, Virtual worlds, Strikes, Group behaviour, Entertainment, Computer games

Paper type Case study

1. Introduction

In this paper we present a case for digital protestainment. Protestainment is the blurring of boundaries between protest and entertainment (Taylor *et al.*, 2004; Oliver and Maney, 2000). Digital protestainment is the blurring of protest and entertainment, which occurs when a group engages in protest in a virtual environment. We are interested in the settings in which technologies have enabled boundaries between protest, entertainment, work, and play to become more permeable and in which this permeability leads to the engendering of new, hybrid cultures.

In this paper, we present two case studies of virtual protest, a labor strike against IBM, which occurred in Second Life and a protest in EVE Online against its owners, CCP. In both cases, we see elements of work-like behaviors and play-like behaviors occurring side by side. In addition, we see the offline world drawn into the virtual world and the virtual environment having repercussions in the offline. We see elements



of protest interwoven with entertainment and creativity. This paper makes that argument that using virtual worlds as sites for protestenable digital protestainment, as well as, new forms of interaction and organization.

Research in virtual worlds

A virtual world is a computer-based simulated environment intended for its users to inhabit and interact via avatars, personal three-dimensional representations of a body. It is through these avatars that the players speak and interact with one another and the larger environment. The world being simulated appears similar to the real world, with rules such as topography, locomotion, and communication. These virtual worlds are active and available 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

Virtual worlds provide a complex but limited view of human behavior and interaction that can be examined to find the underlying structure (Boellstorff, 2008). Relationships in virtual worlds often mimic those that are found in the offline one (Smith, 2004, Ducheneaut and Moore, 2004). Many events in the offline world have been translated into their digital equivalents so that all the denizens of the digital realm can experience them. For example, the virtual plagues that erupted in World of Warcraft and Whoville that allowed the Center for Disease Control to examine the flow of plague through a population and human reactions to the outbreak.

More importantly for the information sciences, virtual worlds have made new kinds of research possible. Virtual worlds allow for societal level research with no harm to humans, large numbers of experiments and participants, and make longitudinal and panel studies possible. Virtual Worlds mimic a scientific environment where the researcher can construct a facility comparable to a real-world laboratory and recruit research subjects. Virtual worlds present possibilities for gathering social data both because it provides non-intrusive methods and it naturally generates a vast trove of data about social and economic interactions. Virtual worlds provide environments and tools that facilitate creating online laboratories to automatically recruit potentially thousands of research subjects at minimal cost.

Protest and ICT usage

Even before it became popular, many activists had moved part of their political life online. Sigrid Baringhorst has examined the ability of grassroots political actors, as well as, the actions of well funded political regimes to use the internet and associated communication technologies as a tool to garner collective support (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; Baringhorst, 2009). She and other authors find that groups can make effective use of these technologies but limit the true power of discussion and communication (Baringhorst, 2009; Bennett, 2004).

Others have found that the internet enables the expansion of protest and information in repressive areas where technology has bypassed foundational industrial infrastructure (Saeed *et al.*, 2008; Lusoli and Ward, 2005). As Neumayer and Raffl (2008) found, the very groups that can benefit the most from changes being pushed using the internet and ICTs can also be the groups most likely to fall within the digital divide, left voiceless despite apparent technological availability.

Many authors have tried to theorize why these protest groups are drawn to the internet. Kreimer (2001) succinctly summarizes these viewpoints by placing the new medium of the internet into a continuum of strategies used by protestors throughout

American history. Other authors have focused on the fact that internet based protest and mobilizations often employ the same theories as their offline counterparts but with only limited results due to limited implementation (Brunsting and Postmes, 2002; Russell, 2005; Wall, 2007).

The view of the use of internet as a simple continuation of current protest theory is felt to be too narrow. Theory must be revised or rewritten before real understanding about protest and the internet can move forward (Clarks and Thernado, 2005). These authors believe that politically active web sites help to create “transnational action, leaderlessness, profusion of concerns, tactical schisms, and digital/language divides” (Clarks and Thernado, 2005). This is a large break with most social movement theories that have traditionally relied on the organization around charismatic leaders, formal organizations, and state level interactions (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Tarrow, 1998). Other authors point out that these breaks in traditional social theory have arisen because the motivators for mobilization have also changed due to the globalized nature of the internet or altered the defining characteristics of traditional protest dimensions (Langman, 2005; Schussman and Earl, 2004; Peckham, 1998).

2. Theoretical and cultural borderlands

The essential argument of this paper is that, within technologically-enabled virtual environments, the cultural elements of work/play and protest/entertainment blend. In order to fully understand this process, we draw from theories of cultural borderlands originating within the field of Anthropology. Foley (1995, p. 25) defined a cultural borderland as a “space” created when two or more cultures occupy the same territory. Clifford (1997) refers to this as the cultural border zone, a “place of hybrid experiences”. Rosaldo (1989, p. 119) described the cultural borderland as the conjunction of two cultures, a space in which culturally distinct groups actively blend cultures.

The cultural borderland is often characterized as having three distinct cultural zones. There are two “pure” or traditional zones and a borderland area in between. This implies that within the borderlands area a cultural metamorphosis takes place in which individuals create plural and multicultural identities and practices. The concept of cultural borderlands has most often been applied to those who live between physical, national cultures like Chicanos in the USA living between mainstream Mexican and American cultures (Saenz, 1997).

This notion of territory-fixed culture has been challenged and individuals are seen as the carriers, movers, consumers, and inventors of a culture. Mattingly (2006, p. 495) describes this as a space of encounter rather than enclosure, a space of “noisy, pluralistic, contested, ever-changing public sphere rather than a substance, common property or shared commitment to a way of life”. This is a constructionist, rather than essentialist, view of culture and has implications for the creation of culture within virtual settings. Within the constructionist viewpoint, the role of context is elevated to center stage. Instead of basing the intersections of cultures around a fixed geographic point, the context that the individuals of a culture or cultures operate within becomes the grounds over which these cultural battles are fought and new hybrids develop.

With the development of social movements theory and ICT usage, the context of virtual worlds expands our understanding of what it means to be a cultural borderland. Individuals within virtual worlds come from many different countries and bring aspects of their home cultures to the virtual world. In addition, given that several cultures tend to

dominate online activities, the individuals logging in to a virtual world may also be bringing the dominant culture of a particular online area to the virtual world. Within the individuals, these two forms of culture are already made into a hybrid through their blending within the cultural borderlands of other technologies. Added to this is the unique society that virtual worlds develop, adding another layer to the hybridization. Virtual worlds are not only the cultural borderlands where the multiple cultural contexts of one individual are played out, but are also the borderlands where the interactions of all these individual hybridized cultures come together to interact. It can be claimed that society within virtual worlds is entirely hybridized, drawing on elements from multiple cultures but changing their meaning by altering the context.

3. Methods

This study employs comparative case studies since they excel at placing a problem of interest within its contextual setting. The complex and social nature of cases make it difficult to separate a problem from the context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003). It is by looking at a problem contextually that the richness can best be understood (Yin, 2003).

While there are many potential cases for this type of research, these two were selected for several reasons. These protests were selected because they occurred in well-known virtual worlds whose populations are large enough to develop an independent in-world society. The differences in the context between these two cases allow them to represent a potentially broader sample of actions. For example, Second Life is open-ended and more realistic while EVE Online is a science fiction game with specific goals and activities. In addition, the Second Life protest was focused on a problem that occurred in the offline world while in EVE Online the protest was focused entirely upon events that happened in the digital realm. In addition, the organization of the protesters, the groups that the protesters drew support from, their desired outcomes, and their impact upon the virtual world itself differed from one another.

Other cases may have been selected for this study based upon how well they complement or contrast with the existing cases, however, it is unlikely they would differ as greatly and therefore would provide less useful points for comparison. One limitation of the selected cases lies in the success of both protests. Since both protests achieved many of their major goals, there is no comparison about how the organization of a protest could affect its outcome. Other cases were considered but they would only provide significant data on this single point of comparison and may bias the overall sample if they significantly overlap with one of the existing cases.

This study used many sources for this research including: news web sites, forums, web logs and journals, and general web sites which were saved as html files for later review and coding. The basic measure for the files gathered is the page. Using the term page balances weighting across the different document sources and types. A single news headline would be counted as 1 page. If the event were to be covered on two separate days by the same web site it would then count as two pages. However, if a forum thread has 30 pages of discussion each one will count separately. Counting all the information out of a single source as a page is possible but it downplays the wealth of data that could be gathered from a single site that has many long detailed topics covered in it. The documents were drawn from 82 web pages, 34 from EVE Online and 48 from Second Life. The text-based pages were collected from an initial web search based on terms related to each case protest. The terms used for the initial selection of pages included "EVE Online corruption, EVE Online scandal, Second Life IBM strike/protest/union" as

well as permutations of each of these in order to find sources with different viewpoints or biases. Once pages had been found they were searched for additional keywords that could yield alternative potential search terms. From these saved pages a list of known participants was collected. This list was then parsed for available contact information.

Five interviews have been conducted during the first round of data collection. Several interviewees were selected through the careful parsing of the saved html pages for identification and contact information. At the conclusion of each interview, the participant was asked to identify other individuals who may be willing to speak with the researchers or whose information may be valuable to the research in a method called snowball sampling (Heckathorn, 1997; Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004). Protest organizers were the first stakeholders targeted for interview that sought to develop an understanding of the organizational factors considered in virtual world protests. Given the nature of these protests, a small group of individuals were able to organize very large protest actions. While protest organization occurs at many levels, interviews were focused on organizers who developed the high level goals and outlined the actions of the entire group. The organizers, as a group, had to address many aspects of virtual world protest that are theoretically key for the success of the research. They also had the broadest social networks within each case, which allowed for an excellent introduction to the social networks of the protests. Within this research, this group of interviewees compromise only one of potentially many groups of stakeholders within each protest. Additional stakeholder groups, such as the mass media or the company owners, are addressed through the collected pages discussed previously. In later rounds of data collection, additional stakeholder groups will be interviewed in order to create a well-rounded data sample. Each interview was conducted using a semi-structured format that has its basis in an interview guide focusing on the important organizational and social factors of a social movement (Patton, 2002). However, additional topics beyond the scope of the interview guide were also pursued during interviews if they were interesting or potentially fruitful (Berg, 1989). These interviews will be used to supplement or provide further quotations where appropriate.

This study used a mix of coding approaches combining deductive and inductive coding, often called analytic induction. Preliminary codes were developed from the research questions and theoretically derived interview guide. These codes were used deductively in the first round of analysis. This form of coding is very useful when semi-structured interviews are used since the first round of interviews are based on theoretically derived questions and assumptions (Hicks, 1994). Afterwards, an open and selective coding was carried out on each interview and saved page, resulting in a set of themes and categories that emerged from the data, similar to the methods used when employing grounded theory. This is an inductive approach to coding that allows patterns within the data set to come forward so that they may be compared not only across the data gathered but also to the theoretically derived codes. This coding occurs in an iterative process that is meant to capitalize on the ability to compare the data as they are collected (Seidel, 1998). Given the socio-technical nature of the cases in this study not all elements that are important to a virtual world protest will be captured in existing theoretical literature. At the same time it would be easy to overwhelm research participants or overestimate the importance of purely inductive codes since it becomes difficult to separate important aspects to a protest when it is embedded within a unique culture. In order to combat these difficulties, a combination of both approaches to data analysis is required.

4. Case introduction

We chose two cases to highlight the blending of work and play, offline and online, and social protest and entertainment. Both cases draw in elements of these dichotomies—but in different ways. Second Life is an open platform that focuses on creating business partnerships. EVE Online is marketed as a science fiction online role-playing game but often is said to appeal to those who like to enact the fantasy of work, cutthroat corporations and industrial spying.

Case 1: labor strike in Second Life

During the summer of 2007, IBM and Rappresentanza Sindacale Unitaria (RSU) were in union contract negotiations. RSU asked for a “small salary increase” of 60 Euros per year, along with “health and pension investments, informative rights, etc”. IBM responded by offering a six Euros increase and canceling the workers’ “productive results benefit”, a yearly bonus of 1,000 Euros. RSU decided to stage the first virtual strike, with the help of Union Network International Global Union (UNI Global Union).

In August and September, UNI Global Union asked the Second Life community, as well as other union workers, to join in the strike (see Plate 1). On their web site they offered a comprehensive tutorial which covered the basics of Second Life. The instructions also informed people about obtaining and equipping a custom “Strike Kit” created for the occasion. In addition to these text instructions, UNI Global Union ran training courses inside Second Life.

The protest took place on September 27, 2007 from 4 a.m. – 4 p.m. EST. Protest staffers counted 1,853 participants from over 30 different countries. The protest spanned 7 IBM locations within Second Life, primarily IBM Italia and the IBM Business Center. During the strike, IBM’s workers did their jobs unperturbed, providing information to Second Life residents. When asked about the strike, staffers simply replied, “No comment”. or said nothing at all. At one point during the day, parts of IBM’s Business Center had to be shut down to lock out protesting avatars.

On October 24, UNI Global Union reported that Andrea Pontremoli, CEO of IBM Italy had resigned with no specific reasons given. On November 5, after threat of an offline strike, UNI Global Union reported that a new contract between RSU and IBM Italy had been signed, reinstating the 1,000 euro bonus for three years. IBM also agreed



Plate 1.
Example of Second Life
protester

to make payments into a national health insurance fund and to continue negotiations regarding industrial and business strategies in Italy and the improvement of internal communication policies.

Case 2: corruption in EVE Online

EVE Online is a science fiction based massively multi-user online role-playing game (MMORPG) that focuses heavily on economic development and militaristic rivalry between player organizations for the control of important sections of space. Players can have a number of different roles within the game, from deep space miners to merchants (see Plate 2).

During 2007, allegations of corruption were revealed to the EVE public. A series of posts from a far-reaching spy network shared secret information about player organizations within the game. In early 2007, the network had intercepted private messages sent between the leaders of one extremely powerful player organization, Band of Brothers (BoB). These messages indicated one player was not only an important member of the player organization but that he was also employed by CCP, the company that develops EVE Online. The spies' information seemed to suggest that at least one person in BoB was aware of this player's status as an employee of CCP, which is a direct violation of CCP's player contract. The second part of the spies' report revealed even more. They outlined the story of another member of the player organization. The spies detailed that this player had not only broken the game's user contract by sharing account information with others but was also a developer who had used his status to get rare in-game items for his friends.

This post set off a firestorm across the EVE community. Many people called into question the validity of the claims, as well as the ethics involved in obtaining the information. In February of 2007, a CCP developer posted an announcement with an official acknowledgement of the situation, stating that CCP would investigate the allegations. Several of the corrupt developers were forced to publicly acknowledge their actions, had their avatars and the ill gained items deleted. In addition, the bad



Plate 2.
View from within
EVE Online

publicity and continual ill will of the community caused the player organization, Band of Brothers, to disband almost a year later in mid-2008.

Cross case comparison

The view of work and play are very different within each environment. For many, Second Life may be a part of their current job and contracts, or it could be a place they go to as their second career, creating and selling digital goods in their free time. For others, it is a place to socially interact and escape real world pressures. EVE Online is marketed as a game but can be described as a second job where players spend large amounts of time completing repetitive tasks for little to no reward.

Both terms draw from real world understanding of the nature of work and play. This third realm, the real world, adds another level of understanding, which players draw from when trying to describe how they participate within a virtual community or protest. Work and play are considered separate and opposing forces in the offline world. While enjoyment of one's job is considered a good trait, it is not often the same as having fun at one's job. Similarly, many individuals seek to spend their free time in activities that have as little to do with their work functions as possible. Since virtual worlds are classified as video games, they are grouped with playtime activities and not often associated with work. However, the unique nature of culture within virtual worlds makes it much harder to clearly define work and play as oppositional forces, unlike in the real world.

As Table I shows, these two cases may be compared at several different layers (motivation, environment, culture, goals, targets, and outcomes) in how work and play exist and interact.

Within the two cases of protest, the boundaries between work and play are both crystallized and blurred. Within Second Life, there was a clearer focus on the work-based business practices of IBM as a motivation for and outcome of the protest but this focus was achieved using a fun setting, which incorporated play-like elements. For EVE Online, the motivations and outcomes could be more clearly defined as play-based but the company and players faced real world consequences including the loss of jobs, friends, and avatars they spent a great deal of time developing. However,

	Second Life	EVE Online
Motivation	Breakdown of offline union negotiation	Favoritism and nepotism within the game
Environment	Professional union pickets incorporating fun, unique in-world elements	Setting is fictional and fantastic
Culture	Focus on work grievances but with an undercurrent of camaraderie	Social structure mimics corporate organization. Overall method of playing very work-like
Goals	Achieve a fair contract between union and IBM as well as introduce new union platforms	Level the playing field to create a fairer game experience for all
Targets	Offline company	Player organization and offline company
Outcomes	Some immediate impacts upon IBM productivity but longer impacts on the business of IBM	Mainly in-game although serious real world implications for developers who were cheating

Table I.
Work and play within Second Life and EVE Online

neither case remains clear, as the actions and goals of the protest exaggerate the boundaries of the real and create a bonding, fraternal atmosphere in the case of Second Life and the dedication and ferocity in EVE Online.

5. Data

In this section we present data from our two cases. We present three sub-sections for each case:

- (1) work;
- (2) play; and
- (3) blended.

We provide some supporting evidence for each subsection and use as many rich, qualitative quotes as space allows.

Work: labor strike in Second Life

The entire process of creating a protest in a virtual world draws upon organizations, norms, and business plans from the offline world. This strike was organized and enacted by offline union organizations and many of the participants were motivated to participate through offline social networks. As one organizer discusses, word of the original idea of a virtual protest was spread through union communication networks:

We used UNI's communication channels that we've built over the years with communicators forums. All of the mailing list that we have from people subscribing online or through our address book. We relied on people forwarding messages regarding the strike onto others (Interview 1).

These networks were then utilized, along with Second Life, to help organize and plan the protest among geographically dispersed groups. The nature of the virtual worlds allowed these individuals to come together into a planning committee and leverage their experience and knowledge to develop a work plan.

Many of the organizers drew on their experiences as union members. There were committees established to examine legal precedence, not only within Second Life but also among the different participating countries. In many cases, these meetings were held in private locations within Second Life so that they could reduce potential spying. As another organizer states:

Also, what we were trying to do is keep it as secret as possible to the date of the protest for IBM so we used different spaces in Second Life that were protected so we could only invite a certain number of people to come in these areas where we couldn't be seen or heard to guarantee the fact that our meetings to plan the date would be secret to IBM workers (Interview 2).

Within this environment, mission critical information must be handled carefully so that protests retain their impact. The setting for these meetings helped to meet this goal by allowing individuals to attend in a semi-anonymous form, as well as, easily create a environment where security precautions were possible.

There were members of each committee who checked the identity of the attending members, not only protecting against spying, but also as a method of record keeping. One interviewee who handled this job found it difficult:

It's a really odd feeling and it's kind of awkward having to ask people really personal questions so you can try to hopefully identify them and sometimes it was really quite hard to actually find out that I was being maybe too familiar or too inquisitive with people that are way high up in the ranks of trade unions (Interview 2).

For an individual who is handling a job much like ones they may perform in their offline capabilities, addressing others in an informal and somewhat anonymous setting made the etiquette of the offline workplace come into conflict with the requirements of operating in the virtual environment.

There was an understanding that this strike presented something new to the world of organized labor. The strike was used as a testing ground to “demonstrate to our unions that we can start a new battlefield operation”. Organizers understood that the changing nature of business meant that unions had to find new avenues of engaging their employees. As one web site explains, there is a great value in expanding on the role of virtual worlds in union operations:

This has the effect of breaking down isolated employees working for multinational corporations and strengthens international communication between unions and the IBM workforce worldwide (www.amipp.org.uk/phorum5/read.php?8,3314).

Using a virtual world as a testing ground for new business practices allows unions and other involved organizations to create new experts in a technology as well as test the limits of that technology to see how well it could be adapted to their purposes.

Play: labor strike in Second Life

There was a playful element to the strike that arose from the culture of Second Life itself. The protest took on an atmosphere of part picket, part party. The arrival of non-union support spread the message of the protesters while also entertaining many of the attendees:

There is this SL performer artist that does all of these duplication of elements that just invade the entire space. So at one point she just projected millions of this super Mario boss figurine so we couldn't see anymore where we were or what we were doing (Interview 2).

This particular participant leveraged in-game abilities to create a unique and artistic interpretation of the disruption tactics used by the protesters. A new interpretation became possible in a virtual world as items can be duplicated quickly creating a similar affect in a more entertaining fashion.

In addition, the nature of the players' characters within Second Life remained ambiguous. One organizer points out the confusion that adding a second identity to communications between distant organizers can cause. An avatar doesn't always have to appear human:

IBM has a widely reported presence on Second Life which is now set to face, at the very least, a picket line of characters that come straight out of the darker recesses of wild imaginings (www.theregister.co.uk/2007/08/24/ibm_italy_strike/).

Given the nature of many virtual worlds in allowing users to appear in any number of forms, the visual appearance of other players often leads to encounters where details about the person are difficult to ascertain from a glance at their avatar.

These very features of entertainment that arise can often lead to the protest being dismissed or not taken seriously. As one organizer stated:

The novelty is too much. [My company] don't like this kind of initiative so I was fired out (Interview 3).

The traditional union organization could not place a value upon a system that was so divergent from their methods and values. The union groups involved in this protest were well-established organizations that did not align with the relaxed and game-like nature of this protest.

Second Life encouraged protesters to adopt a welcoming attitude to individuals who approach the picket or strike areas. In some cases, this included courteous directions to confused users or counter-protesters:

I don't remember seeing that many of them [counter protestors]. That would have banners above their head or holding something that would say "I had a peanut for lunch" kind of thing. And we would just kindly approach them and say "you're not holding the right sign. Would you like one of mine?" (Interview 2).

The more relaxed and welcoming nature of the strike within Second Life was a result of the medium used for the strike. Besides an environment of openness, the organizers acknowledge that they had little control over the spaces in which they were protesting. The fact that the organizers could not remove or silence counter-protesters forced a more open approach to deal with them when they arrived.

Blended: labor strike in Second Life

Both work and play were combined to create a new form of interaction that could be defined as a standalone area. The incorporation of modern technologies and their openness and communicative ability allowed for the creation of a new form of union organizing. As one key figure stated:

So the first example shows us the number of people involved, the numbers of countries, the number of discussions started from that experience can demonstrate from our unions that we can start a new battlefield operation (Interview 3).

Friendly communication encouraged by the play aspects of the virtual world combined with their use as tools for organization and dissemination to create new union structures that could make use of this hybridization.

In particular, this technology appealed to younger individuals who had been disenfranchised by traditional European unions. Many unions took advantage to move forward after the first protest and create a support base within the Second Life (SL) environment that would allow them to continue the image and trend that they had started:

One interesting thing is that after the first virtual strike in SL. We created the first virtual union office in SL. So that we can in this way contact all the young union workers that are entering SL and they can find just like a real union office to meet a real worker representative (Interview 1).

For these users there is an inherent appeal in using technology that they engage within their free time to approach work. It removes many of the strictures that modern workplaces put on employee communication and socialization by giving them a third space that is work approved. This removes barriers of location, social practice, and time from the occasion, creating a more approachable union.

Utilizing this form allowed the protest organizers to spread information about the protest in a way that is culturally relevant. The protesters chose to make use of technologies like YouTube to create videos about the Second Life protest that not only speak about the good of union action but create a common narrative. As the end of the video asks:

Are you thinking it was only a funny game? 20 days after the virtual strike, the IBM ITALY CEO resigned and the works council signed the union agreement. YES IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY (www.youtube.com/user/rsuibmvime#p/u/4/dja5r1SGo0s).

This video highlights the unique new form of hybridized work and play that virtual worlds have helped to facilitate. The organizers recognize that the protest was a lot of fun, with its “bad boys” and “good girls”, but that important work can also be accomplished while having this fun.

Work: protest in EVE Online

There are two connections between EVE Online and work. The first connection is through the impact that scandals have on the lives of CCP employees. Individuals lost their job because of actions that happened within a game. The second way is through the creation of work or work-like systems within the game.

The first way that work and the game world overlap is through security used by the individuals. One recurring theme throughout this protest is the availability of detailed, private information about individuals due to a lack of good security. As one participant states:

Most people are really dumb with security and they reuse passwords so the password they use for e-mail they will reuse everywhere else. If they set a password on your forum they will reuse that password everywhere else (Interview 4)**

Owing to this fact, the developers’ personal information became directly tied to how they handled security for their private accounts. Gaining information, such as a common password would allow the spies access to the developer’s private game information and possibly to company information that they may abuse.

Participating in games, like EVE Online, has been described as like having a second job (Williams *et al.*, 2008; Yee, 2003). These games involve a great deal of routine player communication and repetition of monotonous tasks. Within EVE Online this is further heightened through the complex player created organizations that gather in-game information. Well-placed individuals can create a work-like organization that refines the raw data collected by the spies into usable information:

That’s the thing playing inside the game takes me too much time so I’m still involved in the game spying on corporations, creating scandals, exposing cheaters and corruption between developers and players but I don’t play in the game anymore (Interview 4).

As this player states, logging into the game takes too much time, they spend all of their time “playing” the game through the organization and delegation of duties, much like a manager delegates regular tasks to employees. These individuals handle menial jobs like writing summaries of information, pattern recognition, and basic reconnaissance. This is done for rewards similar to an offline job: recognition of their talents, increased trust, advancement, increasing fortunes, power, etc. Through the completion of these

routine jobs it becomes possible to move up in the player-created organization and advance an in-game character using the benefits of a new position.

This level of dedication to advancement in a game-like setting can have some interesting implications for work. Blending the two previous points together is what happens when the creation of such a work-like system targets company employees. Players can use all types of information they have gathered through these player organizations against their opposition when they discuss claims about fairness:

What this means is that the people responsible for these infractions (which basically amounts to outright cheating if the rumors are to be believed) are very high up in CCP's infrastructure. The people who have enough access to the game to actually achieve an impact on this scale and level are not some newly hired twenty year old geek junior GM or customer support rep or something. Or even a higher-level programmer for that matter (www.eveonline.com/ingameboard.asp?a=topic&threadID=471868).

Based on the transgressions data that the player organizations had gathered, protest organizers were able to determine the security level of certain game developers within CCP. As this shows, the dedicated work of many players uncovered potentially dangerous information. As the lack of security and dedicated work-like player organizations interact, there is the potential for more extreme consequences to the actions of "workers" in a game. The actual hierarchy of CCP was altered and a player-based organization was created to act as an oversight committee.

Play: protest in EVE Online

While the content of the protest in EVE Online is bound to the social context of the game, the idea of a scandal captured the interest of many individuals. Within the game, this scandal moved from a fight between two different player organizations to a topic of choice for the entire community. Outside of the players of EVE Online, the larger gaming and technology communities were alerted to the protest through news sources.

The level of dedication that players develop through their interaction with the game shapes their actions within and outside of the game world. This is highlighted by the degree of anger within the community over in-game actions. For example, the CEO of CCP threatened to resign if certain players were allowed back into the game. This can shape their actions in other ways, such as extending their interpretations of the game's story to the solution:

Political troubles. Accusations, counter-accusations, allegations, the works. Very messy. Their solution? Introduce democracy to the game world. The game's community will now vote for its own anti-corruption police (<http://kotaku.com/267069/ccp-bring-democracy-to-eve-online>).

This quote recontextualizes the actions taken by CCP outside of the game world to be in line with the game's storyline. Such types of "very messy" troubles or descriptions can often be found in the in-game chatter that occurs between players talking about their own organizations.

However, this seriousness also lends itself to the systematic undermining of such patterns of thought. Several players within the game admit that they derive their enjoyment by purposefully targeting other players to make them unhappy. This "griefing" behavior, any action meant only to annoy another player, is an attempt to undermine the overtly serious attitude that many players take. As one web site quotes:

EVE prides itself on having the most cutthroat and back-stabbing players in any MMO. Is anyone really gonna trust 8-9 people you don't personally know to do anything [about] EVE? (www.gongumenn.com/forum/viewthread.php?forum_id = 32&thread_id = 346).

This type of play can be seen as a way of subverting cultural understandings while also pulling individuals further into the game. The individuals targeted by the backlash began around the clock damage control to handle the leaked information.

Blurred: protest in EVE Online

EVE Online effectively changed what it meant to work and to play. Both work and play are closely tied to the story and culture of the game world. It becomes possible to turn the playing of a game into a form of work, while the repercussions of playing the game can stretch back to real jobs. The nature of the virtual world allowed this inversion to take place. The perception that this is “just a game” makes it more likely that individuals will be much riskier in their actions and push the boundaries of the socially acceptable.

The protest in EVE Online combined work and play together, making the act of playing the game an actual form of work. Within this scandal, playing of the game became not just a series of actions but a strategic assault that focused on routine data gathering and processing to create an organized response to the scandal:

And they will say ok now you should post about this topic. And then they will post in every thread about the thing they want to protest about. Not only post in EVE Online forum but also post in every MMO related forum (Interview 4).

This organization shows how the players approached engaging with the game through a systematic and work-like process of repetitive tasks that remove the process of playing the game from the context.

The work-like attitude that players use to approach EVE Online further highlights how the act of playing has merged with the act of working. Complex player organizations arise to meet the demands of the in-game community for information and entertainment. These organizations gather, process, and distribute data in a variety of ways but in this instance they purposefully targeted how to do so:

We even calculated when we were going to do the release so there would be a maximum impact. And also presented in a way, so I wasn't so good at writing them [the posts] so I courted help from [an outside group] (Interview 5).

The nature of EVE Online, when combined with the ease of finding information on the internet, has helped to create the rise of such organizations. The existing setting of making player organizations fight against one another for limited resources creates an interesting story background that players can take as far as they want, shaping the playing of the game as they go.

6. Discussion: digital protestainment

In both of the cases, there are clear elements of work and play that shape and are shaped by the actions of protesters. Work remains the unrewarding, repetitive, or systemized approach to reaching goals. It includes a hierarchal system of rewards that benefits individuals at the top while pushing the majority of responsibilities onto the individuals at the bottom. Play encompassed the fun, rewarding, engaging, and free form activities that individuals participate in during their free time. A new form of

interaction emerges that meets the requirements of the work process while still engaging its participants. In particular, the elements of play and work interact with protest in a virtual setting to create a new type of protest, one that strategically meets its goals while also engaging participants in the fun of organizing and participating. In both cases, the protests were not only meant to achieve some particular goal in either the on- or off-line, but also, acted as entertainment for the protesters as they got to explore a new environment, chat with friends, and participate in rewarding action.

Digital protestainment aids in the blending of work and play, protest and entertainment within each case. Each of these ideas can be considered as opposing forces pulling on the actions of the protesters in order to shape the eventual outcome. The digital nature of the protests in these cases causes the acting forces to change, balancing them in new ways that cause them to lie between the traditional boundaries of the serious/work aspects of protest, and the frivolous/play aspects of entertainment in virtual environments (Figure 1).

Theoretically, virtual environments can be considered a cultural borderland between the overarching cultural categories of the serious and of the frivolous. Within these larger categories, cultures of work, social protest, and offline responsibilities blend with play, entertainment and online social interaction. The virtual environment allows for cultural elements from the various “camps” to be pulled together into an individually constructed hybrid. Virtual environments empower both the individual and the group to select from disparate and heterogeneous cultural bits, combining and re-combining them into new shapes that fit the needs of the experience. Virtual worlds and digital protestainment highlight the fluid nature of a constructivist view of cultural borderlands. Culture is constructed and re-constructed, as individuals interact and encounter other individuals, groups and experiences. In the past, this cultural construction was limited by the boundaries of the physical world, how fast and how widely any one individual could travel or disseminate cultural bits. With the advent of electronic communication this exposure to cultural bits has dramatically increased in speed and scope due to the removal of limitations that the offline world imposes. The

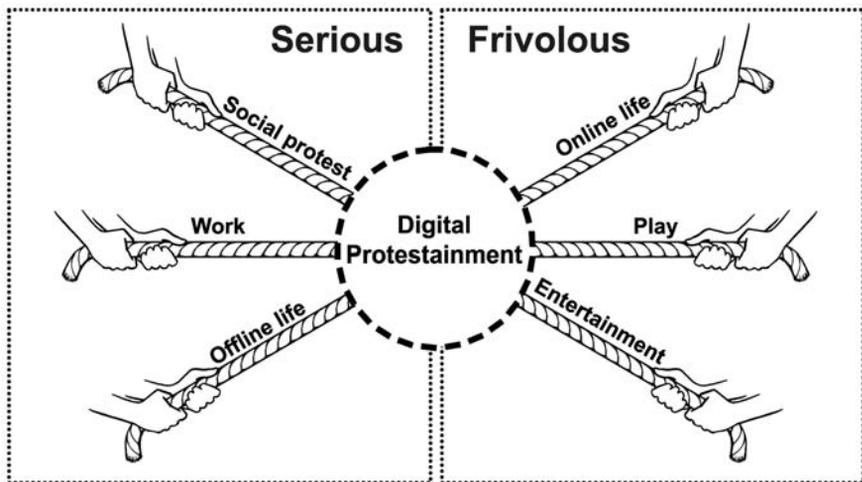


Figure 1.
Tensions between work
and play within
protestainment

nature of society in virtual worlds means that the existing hybridized culture within the world rewards groups that make use of the ability of cultural borderlands to shape and re-shape culture and cultural expectations.

Virtual environments have taken this process several steps further. In virtual environments, not only do individuals with different cultural backgrounds readily come to interact with one another, thus exposing each other to potentially new cultural elements, but the ability to create new cultural elements altogether, is made possible. In virtual environments individuals are no longer limited by the physical, the possible, or the practical. Avatars in virtual environments can play with identity, physics, time and setting, among others. Individuals can incorporate foreign cultural concepts into their own hybrid identities and spread them through the society in this way. The fact that virtual worlds are wholly created universes unto themselves, encourages the creation of unique cultures or societies that only exist within that world. These societies blend concepts from the many different offline cultures that the players belong to with the unique in-world culture, creating a dynamic and developing social environment. Socio-technical artifacts are unique platforms for interaction since it becomes impossible to separate the social from the technical, the context cannot be picked apart or separated into its individual elements since our understanding of the whole is reliant upon the operation each piece. As Blodgett and Tapia (2010) acknowledge, these in-world cultures are often unique when compared to their offline equivalents and first time users can experience culture shock.

Cultural borderlands have always been of interest to scholars because of the process of creation and hybridization that occur within. We assert that within virtual environments this process is not only increased in size and scope, but also in terms of form and function. While size and scope have played their parts in the creation of digital protestainment, they are not where the story ends. In the two cases presented here, the setting of a virtual protest, the actors brought in cultural elements from the workplace, from videogames and fantasy, from traditional offline organizations such as labor unions and marketing cartels, and blended it together into a carnival-like spectacle that drew participants and bystanders alike. We also assert that this borderlands process is not only a “drawing in” of cultural elements, but also a complex interchange between the online and the offline in which newly created or hybridized cultural bits formed within the digital-cultural borderlands are sent or carried out in to other worlds and spaces. Both online and offline communities understanding of play, work, and virtual worlds was fundamentally altered after the hybridized impact of protest. For players, protesting within a virtual environment firmed their understanding of cultural borderlands. Avatars recognize the blurred boundaries of work and play within the virtual world and will respond with embarrassment when the topic is raised. They know that the interview is operating in an area outside of the virtual world’s cultural borderland. To break that boundary, by discussing events that happen within the borderland, feels awkward since interviewees are not immersed in the mindset and culture of the environment. Although players are the minds behind avatars, the avatar’s actions feel as if they were occurring within another world. The avatar’s act of protesting is assigned to the cultural borderland of the virtual world, seen as separate but overlapping with the real world person.

The nature of virtual worlds turns actions that are meant to be an escape from work into a different form of the very thing they are attempting to avoid. This can often lead

to players considering the game a “second job” that they perform after they get home. Within EVE Online, players come home to take on the tasks of tedious data collection, analysis, and rewriting. The spy organizations base themselves on a pyramid structure that places a few players at the top, having access to all the organization’s information and resources, while many players make up the bottom. These players are expected to make use of the little they have to provide value to those above them. This system creates a type of work that many players engage in to try and advance their characters. For these players their playtime has become work-like.

At the same time, the applicability of virtual worlds within the workforce encourages the acceptance of virtual worlds for work-based tasks and tests. It is all but impossible to exclude the culture and society of a virtual world from these interactions. Because of this, there is a certain level of socialization and non-work interaction that will result. IBM allows employees to engage with Second Life during their time at work and actively encourages employees to make use of this environment for meetings and other collaborative work. Within this case study, this policy made it easier for the organization of a protest since many of the employees within the company were able to access and protest against IBM while they were at work. As mentioned previously, engaging in this protest was seen as both purposeful and entertaining, allowing people to socialize, appreciate art, and meet others in Second Life. Within a work setting like this work becomes more lively and entertaining since the environment expands the social possibilities. The encroachment of an unavoidable social scene when using virtual worlds for work creates a bubble of playtime.

One outcome of this collusion of work and play is the blurring between protest and entertainment. The traditional concept that strikes are often dismal, grey, and dreary is contrasted to a more entertaining form of protest that offers, not only the chance for change, building of social networks, and solidarity of the traditional strike, but also offers a more engaging form of interaction such as funny avatars, unique and engaging environments, and new forms of interaction. It has been shown that achieving this combination has helped engagement of younger generations in union activities. Protesters within EVE Online took the issue to many other gaming and technology sites to spread the word of what was happening within their community. Since many individuals within these sites were at least familiar with the concepts of virtual worlds they avidly followed all the details of the scandal, some even joining the worlds in order to participate. The protesters used this additional scrutiny to their advantage, highlighting the discrepancy within CCP and pressuring the company to follow through with changes. Groups in both cases used the entertainment factor to attract attention to their causes and to push for change. Entertainment could be as important an influence within protest in virtual worlds as the media is in offline ones, shaping the ability of protesters to attract attention and achieve their goals.

7. Conclusions and implications for future research

Digital protestainment is fundamentally different from similar actions in the offline world. The fact that virtual protests occurred in a socio-technical artifact cannot be ignored. The social structure and actions of citizens of a virtual world cannot be separated from the technological development of that world. Unlike the offline world, this imposes limitations and changes to what is possible within these artifacts and forces their users to improvise and develop new methods for interaction that have no

offline equivalents. While the actions of the digital world may appear to be a simple continuation of existing protest functions or activities, the blending of the social and technical creates a break in our ability to apply existing social theories. For example, while many unions have incorporated some form of art or humor in their protests, they do not engage in the protest in an environment meant to be for play, a labor protest against IBM in a theme park would not make much sense. It is because of the hybridized nature of digital protestainment that the feature of fun and entertainment become blended with work and protest in a virtual world. Because of this the term digital protestainment can be applied to many cases outside of virtual worlds where the artifact under examination acts as a socio-technical object, including web sites such as Facebook and Youtube, or forums like 4chan. Since digital protestainment breaks with the conceptualization of technology in many existing social movements theory, where it is seen as a simple tool or communication device much like letter writing or billboards, the existing theories regarding social movements are inadequate for explaining the rise of protest in virtual environments.

There are several limitations to the study detailed in this paper. The first is in the selection of cases for analysis. Both cases detailed here were successful protests that achieved many of the organizers' main goals. For a more theoretically complete understanding of how the outcome of how virtual protests are impacted by their organization, the addition of cases dealing with failed or unsuccessful protests must be included. Second, while the two cases within this paper are representative of the many different types of virtual worlds and virtual protests that exist they do not exhaust all possible permutations of both. In particular, virtual worlds are not a homogeneous group, sharing all the same populations, characteristics, or interactions. As such this study is limited in its ability to describe or generalize to the population of virtual worlds and virtual protests. Instead, this study attempts to generalize to the theory of cultural borderlands and expand our understanding of how the translation of social processes to the socio-technical artifact of virtual worlds changes our understanding of those processes. This study is not meant to build a complete theoretical understanding of this change but to introduce the topic to the academic community and support the future development of such a theoretical undertaking. In addition, this study limits the realm of digital protestainment to virtual worlds. Digital protestainment as a concept could be applied to any form of virtual community that has developed around the web.

As virtual worlds continue to grow in popularity, this type of collective action will also become more common. In particular, as the diversity of the audience for virtual worlds increases, there will likely be more collective action against the worlds and their inherent political nature. People and their avatars, who may believe that they are engaged in play, may be drawn into protests and new forms of mobilization. Leaders of offline organizations may turn to virtual worlds to recruit new followers, indoctrinate and train adherents, support their organization operationally and financially, and stage protests, demonstrations and, perhaps, attacks. Companies that host these worlds will need to become aware not only of what their audience is but also how that audience will mobilize and the likely outcomes of their mobilization. The makers and enforcers of law will need to develop new understandings as virtual world technologies enable behavior that may be labeled as deviant, anti-social and criminal both within virtual worlds and those that cross the virtual threshold. It is essential that we scholars build on the decades of solid research exploring mobilization and protest action in an offline

setting and note the changes and implications of moving those behaviors into a virtual setting. It is equally important that scholars of virtual world protests draw upon qualitative and interpretive tools in their research so that the social sciences gain an understanding of the basic processes of generating meaning in virtual settings.

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