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THE DIGITAL AGE, THE CYBORG AND THE CITY

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ABSTRACT: Urban sociological research examines the built environment, as well as the social and cultural happenings of the urban realm, exploring how structure and community affect society to make recommendations for planners and policy makers. Typically, urban sociologists have studied the material world. However, the presence of virtual worlds is an increasingly large phenomenon that must be investigated, as the role of community in virtual worlds reflects, contests and transcends established theories about community in urban sociology. This paper explores the history of the built environment from pastoralism, through the early development of cities, suburban sprawl, and finally, a small ethnography of the virtual world, Second Life. The findings of which highlight an interesting pattern of escapism that spans well over one hundred years. Virtual worlds like Second Life, can work as an efficient and inexpensive tool in researching and developing new methods of planning and design. Although Second Life provides a medium to explore renewed design of urban and rural form, further exploration and understanding of what features of renewed design society is in search of must also take place.
KEYWORDS: Virtual worlds; urban sociology; community; phenomenology.

I. Introduction

In an increasingly connected world, understanding that design is influenced by social and cultural mechanisms is critical in order to properly address the dynamic needs of the built environment. Established theory on social research regarding design and the urban realm has traditionally looked to the physical world for inquiry, however, outside of this medium much is left for examination. The development of virtual communities[1] has grown exponentially in recent years. Emerging in the form of online game rooms, or multi-user domains, cyber communities have quickly developed into virtual cities and entire online worlds that closely parallel the day-to-day ordinances of reality. These virtual worlds – designed for meeting people and building new environments – are particularly pertinent tools for exploring how digital technology affects the concept of place, context and identity. In these communities one can dance at concerts, attend lectures, gain meaningful employment, and even spend a day on the shores of a beach. Additionally, some of these worlds provide the opportunity to design, build, and develop new and unique digital experiences. As these virtual worlds *increase* their daily presence in the lives of a growing number of users, real space - or the traditional physical space people interact within - is *decreasing* in importance. Moreover, the role of community in the virtual world both reflects, contests and transcends established theories about community in urban sociology. What effect will the rise of these digital worlds hold for the future of communities, the city and the self? Some theorists predict disorder, chaos and negativity from the rise of digital space, perceiving its false, reclusive, and disingenuous nature a threat to the physical world. Others believe virtual communities and the rise of the digital age is positive, with the potential to eliminate oppression

[1] Virtual Communities / Worlds / Cities, Digital Cities / Worlds, Cybercities, Cyburbia, Technocities, Technoburbia are all terminology used to describe the same phenomena of online worlds.

and hierarchy that exists in the material world, bringing the global community closer together toward a more utopian tomorrow.

Until recently, social research has largely neglected the exploration and examination of virtual communities. Urban sociological theory is traditionally and ideologically connected to physical space. This, coupled with the recent rise of online communities is a likely cause for the gap in research between physical urban phenomena and virtual urban phenomena. However, the city, and more importantly the community that the urban environment fosters, will always be the determinant of one's sense of place. Therefore it is crucial to understand and examine the city in all forms. Important for architects, planners and sociologists, these worlds are both embracing and rejecting traditional notions of the physical city, creating new and interesting ways of examining culture, social norms, community, urban planning, design and architecture. By understanding where differences and similarities lie in cybercities, it may be possible to develop the communities we have always desired, both online and offline.

II. The Cyborg Self

Even before the creation of virtual communities, academics and authors were playing with the notion of the Cyborg. The concept of the Cyborg has most famously been defined and described by Donna Haraway as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction"(Haraway 2001, 117). In popular culture the Cyborg has been pictured in movies (Terminator, The Fifth Element, and The Matrix), and on television (Star Trek, Stargate Atlantis, and Battlestar Gallactica). As Haraway states, the Cyborg is not merely a character of science fiction; rather, the distinctions between human and machine is significantly blurred in contemporary life. While the human and the machine are not one organism, there is constant flirting and dependence upon each other to operate. Telephones, cars, computers and clocks are the most obvious examples, but machines infiltrate in many other ways too. The coffee machine, the hairdryer, the stove, electricity, the cash register and the gas pump; almost everything we come in contact with is machine. In fact, "our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves are frighteningly inert" (Haraway, 1991, 152). Genetically separate, but socially entwined, "without the agriculture machine, the housing machine, the media machine, or the fashion machine, almost all cyberorganized human beings cannot survive or thrive, because these concentrations of machine ensembles generate their basic environment" (Luke 2004, 109). Our dependence on the machine is widespread, but that does not necessarily make the extension of the human-machine evolution negative. Some proponents of the Cyborg view its presence and potential as a liberating force for the future of humanity.

Online in the digital realm, the Cyborg is projected to have the ability to equalize hierarchy and oppression present in the physical world (Haraway 1991; Mitchell 2003; Deleuze and Guattari 2004). "[People] ruthlessly use race and class categories as they navigate through life" (Duneier 1999, 315), as well as constraints of sex, sexual orientation, age, disability and location. However, the Cyborg can liberate humanity from these distinctions and restrictions, giving "our bodies a powerful means of countering the homogenizing power released by the nature-culture dichotomy" (Hillis 2004, 280). In other words, in the virtual world, the human self is not bound to the same discriminatory markings as in the material world and therefore the Cyborg does not have to face the same oppression of the material world.

In virtual worlds, the Cyborg is known as the avatar. The avatar is the digital representation of the self in the material world, who develops, changes and embodies the digital being. While the physical self controls the actions of the avatar, the avatar represents the physical self through appearance, speech, exploration and experience in the virtual world. The implications that the Cyborg and the avatar have for the physical world are profound. The physical self has the ability to embody whatever avatar it chooses, reflecting how the mind sees the body, how the mind wishes the body to appear, or how the mind depicts a fantasy of the body. Markings of sex, race or class are irrelevant because anyone can embody the avatar, completely changing the meaning of these distinctions. Race and sex are chosen markers in the virtual world and do not necessarily reflect the person sitting behind the computer. The liberating potential of the Cyborg is currently possible through the medium of virtual world technology. As an equalizer of space and of body, categories of oppression and hierarchy are capable of being redefined or extinguished all together.

III. Material Sprawl

America has a long tradition of anti-urbanist sentiment, with evidence that spans over a century. The city has traditionally been considered a social, or even a moral liability for the nation's future. Some have argued that rejection of the city has been traced back to the rural and agricultural character of America during its formative years (Robins 1999; Beamish 2001; Campanella 2001). After winning independence from Britain, America needed to establish a national identity, something to distinguish itself from the rest of the world. At the time, North America was a relatively untouched body of land, so the landscape was embraced as a core element of the American national identity, "offered as collateral to the artifactual and cultural riches of the Old World" (Campanella 2001, 239).

During the same time period, transcendentalist writers began expressing the spiritual and intrinsic value of nature, exacerbating hostile attitudes toward city life as impure and corrupt. The romanticized rural dream – indeed the foundation of the 'American Dream' – was yielded in an idealized image of rural life and nature. Before the 20th century, over 75% of the American population lived in rural areas (Parker 2004, 21). This would not last, as the future of modern economic prosperity in country was contingent on the development of the city, suppressing rural livelihood. However, exodus to the city only magnified the attraction of rural life, similar to a person whose desire increases as the object of their affection falls further out of reach. So too was pastoralism idealized, regardless of the difficult, often unromantic work it actually entailed. The rural dream became the antithesis to the urban nightmare. It was the push to the city and simultaneous pull to nature that resulted in the evolution of the suburb, a neighbourhood situated somewhere between what had to be done in the city and the quality of life dreamed of in the country. The suburb promised compromise but delivered neither the advantages of the city or rural life.

Following migration to the city, two important events took place that significantly aided in the expansion of suburban projects. The first was the automobile. A technology that was associated with freedom and independence, but more importantly the automobile allowed the average middle-class American citizen to escape back to nature. "It was assumed that cars would merely serve as wonderfully useful accessories in the human habitat as it was then, that they would make the city a better place, and cure all the troubles of rural life, without altering the arrangement of things in either place" (Kunstler 1996, 86). The automobile had an immense impact on American lifestyle, so much so that the government had to build a completely new infrastructure to accommodate for it – the Federal Highway. The latent consequence of highway expansion was the triggering of an unprecedented suburban sprawl explosion. With the infrastructure in place, housing development literally began swelling out of the city, spreading further into new communities, towns and eventually, suburbia. The car and suburb expanded hand in hand to modern day, where both the cars we drive and the environments we built are not longer designed to human scale.

The second event took place during the post-WWII years, when America's housing market began rapidly expanding. The Levittown development, or the first phase of rapid suburban expansion, was a project devised by William Levitt. After the War there was a wealth of ex-serviceman returning home in the hopes of starting families, and the new suburban communities promised just that. Returning from a long and mentally exhausting war, American veterans and their families hoped for a better life, a life away from the city but close enough to access useful amenities. There were other reasons for out-migration of the city, the 50's was a period of extreme, racially charged discrimination and the majority of families leaving for suburbia were white, a trend later described as 'white flight'. Therefore the rise of the suburb is also connected to escapism from diversity. Suburban communities were built to embrace the country living (without the work associated with a rural lifestyle), and to build strong, integrated communities based on shared values and beliefs – the post-war 'American Dream'. The resulting neighbourhood is the same suburbia built today; endless rows of houses, parks and subdivisions that look almost exactly the same.

Ironically, evidence suggests that suburban developments have resulted in far more harm than benefit, including increased pollution, traffic, obesity, drug use and isolation, with a decline in quality of land, water, social capital and aesthetic (Kunstler 1994; Gans 1999; Parker 2004).

IV. Techno Sprawl

Like the material world one century ago, digital communities are bearing witness to an even speedier virtual sprawl today. In many ways, cybercities are the second coming of the same 'American Dream' community that largely failed in the material world. At the very core of the cybercity is escapism, the same notion that spawned the creation of suburbia. However, the retreat is no longer to nature (or at least not nature in its traditional form) but "a retreat from the larger community (privatism) or a flight into collective or personal fantasy worlds that actively disregard the problems of real life" (Ellin 1997, 32). The virtual community is the response to an unfulfilling suburban life, built to escape an unfulfilling urban life. "It is one of the central paradoxes in American landscape history that technology, the fruit of the modern, urban civilization, became the primary means by which to escape the city and regain the 'lost' pastoral life of earlier age" (Campanella 2001, 241). History is repeating itself once again. Will this digital sprawl have the same effect on community that it had in the physical city? Will it further isolate people in gated virtual communities? Or, will these virtual worlds finally produce the liberation and freedom communities of the past promised but failed to deliver?

An important distinction between the material world and the virtual world is the concept of space. Material worlds are fundamentally connected to place, and these traditional limitations on mobility and communication gave rise to cities for necessary proximity. While telegrams, trains, cars, and eventually planes and email have decreased the need for propinquity, infrastructure of cities was built upon and still is dependent upon the time-space continuum. The places we live, work and eat all have to be relatively accessible by car or transit. Without these *basic* needs met, spatial geography fails the city, the suburban or the rural realm. However, virtual worlds are anti-spatial. The Internet allows people to access the city through computers, liberating people "who are no longer bounded by walls, but by the reach of our networks" (Mitchell 2003, 16). However, being anti-spatial should not be confused with being unbound by the constraints of physical existence, as there still are considerable requirements needed in the material world for virtual worlds to function properly. Bandwidth, necessary for online worlds to process information result in "80% of the cost of a network… associated with the traditional, messy business of getting it into the ground in highly congested, and contested urban areas… this hard material basis for the 'digital revolution' is neglected, but crucial" (Graham 2004, 139). Virtual worlds may liberate people from having to be in urban places, but virtual worlds are still contingent on the urban community and the infrastructure it is built upon.

While the Internet and virtual worlds are fundamentally connected to the material world, digital mediums still allow people to escape from urban life and the city. Although the question remains, to what are these people escaping to? While the city can produce emotions of anomie, it is also considered exciting, busy, and full of action - creating a dichotomy between the urban and suburban reflected in virtual cities. Anne Beamish (2001) identifies three reasons why digital worlds are appealing: sociability, creativity and identity play. All three of these features will be discussed through the paper, however most important to digital sprawl is the aspect of creativity that the digital world provides. In most of these virtual worlds, users have some ability to build, design and create objects and places for themselves and others. In other words, cybercities expose the underlying sentiments toward community, public space and the city through the way they are depicted and recreated online. "When digital environments are designed, the downtown is often seen as the Holy Grail – the vivid, exciting, teasing, tantalizing city is held up within sight, but always out of reach" (Beamish 2001, 296). Much like the real world, the city is defined as a necessary feature, but a feature that is preferably kept at a distance and only accessed when absolutely necessary. While the city is depicted as exciting, it is also depicted as a dark, sometimes even demonized place with "a dreary landscape of gas stations, all-night convenience stores, and triple X-rated 'desiplexes' (Campanella 2001, 249). The virtual world gives creators and even its users the ability to recreate environments online that could be more responsive to a community's needs than their sometimes hollow, suburban counterparts.

The aesthetic of virtual worlds may not 'save us' from ugly, cookie-cutter communities, but they have at the very least provided a means to establish a renewed sense of social interaction. In fact, virtual worlds allow users to socialize with people they probably would never have met otherwise, creating a cross-cultural platform to develop relationships with people all over the

world. The advantages of this could include understanding, tolerance, education and the integration of a global village.

Since many of these communities are specifically intended to meet and socialize, users should be more likely to strike up conversation with strangers, as there is the underlying assumption that everyone is participating in virtual worlds for that same purpose. Although, two obstacles will have to be reconciled before virtual worlds have the ability to revitalize community and sociability for everyone. First, the ability for people to participate in these worlds assumes that they have access to a computer, most likely a personal computer, given the intimate nature of these relationships. "The image of absolute mobility and unbounded space is one which ignores gross inequalities of mobility and connection, lines of inequality between both social groups and parts of the world" (Robins 1999, 93). The utopian notion of cross-cultural celebration, understanding and integration of the global village will not be met because of the 'digital divide' – the gap between those who have access to communication technology and those who do not. This divide is also reflected between the global north and the global south, albeit the elite who do have access to such technology. Second, those who are able to access communication technology, and do so through virtual worlds, have the ability to hide their real life self, suggesting the possibility of fake and superficial relationships. In actuality users do not have to give much of themselves at all because users participate in socialization with others "without having to venture from behind the real-life 'spatial walls', such as gated communities" (Hillis 2004, 281). In addition to this, since our bodies are not physically present, there should be little expectation for common social norms to exist, such as courtesy and politeness, as there will be no repercussions to our physical selves.

The potential to progress and develop new types of urban planning and community are available within virtual worlds. However, it is a matter of understanding what aspects of urban planning and community are 'better' for the people using these worlds. Additionally, it is a matter of understanding what is 'worse' in the physical world, from which we are searching for alternatives in the virtual world. Until people understand and make sense of why some communities and neighbourhoods are well developed, and why others are not, the reproduction of material sprawl in techno sprawl is likely to continue through the future.

V. Case Study: Second Life

Many online communities have sprouted up over the last ten to fifteen years. Many have remained relatively small and minimalist (Cleveland Free-Net, VZone and V-Chat), while others are revolutionizing digital animation and boast user populations outnumbering some of the largest cities in the world (World of Warcraft, There.com, Whyville, Deuxieme Monde, and Metatropolis). The Cyberpunk literary movement in the 80's and 90's largely influenced the development of virtual worlds. The Cyberpunk genre was pioneered by sci-fi writers like William Gibson, Neal Stephenson and Bruce Sterling and has been described as "a *noir*world were the boundaries between real and virtual experience and human and artificial intelligence dissolve" (Warren et al 2004, 396). Although, the rise of digital worlds is a reflection of the Cyberpunk movement, online communities have interpreted Cyberpunk in new and interesting ways. Promoters of virtual worlds stress that these communities not be dismissed as just an extension of the Cyberpunk fantasy, as they are having a tremendous impact in people's lives (Rheingold 1993; Graham & Aurigi 1997; Mitchell 2004; Ducheneaut, Moore & Nickell 2007). Each year more people are becoming members of virtual cities through which they are mediating human contact and intimacy.

The largest and fastest growing example of a virtual world is the community known as Second Life (SL). Second Life isn't a game. In fact, the users of SL are known as *residents* – stressing the communal and social aspect of the network. Established in 2003 by Linden Research Inc., it boasts a user population of over 20 million avatars – making it the largest online world in existence, and among the top 5 largest cities in the world (Second Life). Additionally, there are two major reasons this virtual world has become so popular and has garnered so much attention in the media. First, SL's built world has had little development input from its initial creators, the majority of the environment created in SL is developed by its residents, who could be artists, architects, planners or otherwise in real life (RL) (Second Life). Building in SL is done through a program called *scripts*, a menu that supplies the tools to build anything from a chair to an entire castle. While every resident in SL has the ability to build with this software, learning and mastering scripts can be time consuming. Although challenging, by supplying scripting software

to residents, SL gives its members the tools to potentially recreate landscape. Second, SL has a strong and thriving economy, expanding the potential for business and entrepreneurialism. The SL virtual currency is known as the Linden Dollar (L$ or Linden) and can be traded in American dollars at the Linden Exchange (the LindenX) (Second Life). SL as well as other virtual worlds, which have virtual economies that translate into physical profit, are uniquely positioned in an income tax loophole. Currently, there are no provisions in place to tax entrepreneurs in SL on their earnings, making the economy a lucrative one for business until legalities are sorted out. This allows residents in SL to build malls to sell clothing, bodies (or skins), pets, cars, planes, homes, furniture and just about anything that exists in the physical world and then some with an almost 100% profit return. SL is free to join and roam, however if residents choose to buy land in SL they must pay a land use fee of $9.95/month as well as a monthly property tax (depending on the size of the lot) ranging from $5 to $195 (Second Life). The highest tax bracket gives you land, equivalent in size to over 65 000 m2, so a typical business office or retail store, which costs thousands of dollars a month to rent in RL would cost between $5 and $20 in SL.

With the advantages SL offers, being a part of the SL community must be an exciting and rewarding experience for residents. Since research on these communities - specifically SL - has been thin, I decided to undertake a virtual-ethnography to determine whether the merits of SL were accurate, or whether SL reflects the 'worst aspects of our material worlds'? Earlier, I mentioned Anne Beamish (2001), and the three identifying features that make virtual worlds so appealing (sociability, creativity and identity play). In this section I will discuss sociability and identity play through my exploration of SL.

Being a social network, SL should uphold previously stated expectations that talking and meeting people would be a primary reason for membership and therefore easy to establish conversation. On one of my first experiences through SL, I discovered that someone had rebuilt Greenwich Village, New York. Given the busy and diverse nature of this place in RL, I thought this would be the perfect place to meet and socialize with people in SL. The area constructed as a mini-Greenwich Village is complete with galleries, studios and trendy cafes and as I found out, along with many other areas of SL that I explored, was consistently and almost completely empty of other residents. Of the people I did meet in SL, the communication and socialization with them varied. Some people were very friendly and helpful; giving me information about which areas of SL are fun, and which areas should be avoided. Others were rude and insensitive, walking away or teleporting to another location when they were dissatisfied with the conversation or simply not replying at all. A particularly interesting example of hostile sociability in SL is regarding how new residents, or "newbies" and "noobs", are treated in certain areas. Some residents will purposely harass, abuse and discriminate against these residents because of their status, a symptom known as 'griefing'. When I visited the area known as 'new citizens incorporated', I asked some of the officers why this was.

> Darcy: Why are new residents harassed in SL?
> Phor Darkside: Some find it fun to torment.
> Jimpskey Rhode: It's a sign of insecurity for some.
> Xavier Felwitch: Some think because they can script or build that they have no time for others. They project themselves as superior.
> Phor Darkside: Some look at newcomers as suspect until they get to know them.

This hostile attitude toward new residents in SL is similar to hostile attitudes that newly immigrated populations sometimes face in RL, and for very similar reasons. Newly immigrated members of society can be discriminated against because they are a vulnerable population (to torment / insecurity), because they do not have the same level of social capital (to look at as inferior), or because native-born populations feel threatened by them (considered suspect). Of both the favourable and unfavourable encounters I experienced in SL, I did not speak with the people I met more than once or twice. In my experience at least, SL has not lived up to expectations that virtual worlds can create a renewed sense of community and sociability that the supporters of these worlds suggest.

SL is a resident created virtual world, giving its users the opportunity to build a new and exciting environment. Upon running a search for popular locations in SL I found the top-20 most

popular places (which is determined by how many people spend time there). The top 4 included "the pharm', 'welfare island ',' Money Island' and 'neva naughty'. These places were areas to earn a few Linden Dollars through menial labour (i.e. washing the floor or windows), to spend your Linden Dollars at a mall, to go to dancing at a club, or find a partner in an adult area (the remainder 16 places were all variations of these four). The places to earn money and the malls either looked like rundown areas of downtown or a dystopic nightmare of never-ending strip malls and billboard advertising. The clubs and the adult areas were picturesque of the red light district in Amsterdam (there is also one in SL), with bright neon lights and dark dingy alleys. It seems that these ugly extensions of the material world were the places people actually wanted to be. Alternatively, there are places in SL that recreate the natural world. Gardens and tropical paradises in SL are without a doubt the most lavish and beautiful places that I have come across. Filled with flora and fauna, waterfalls, sandy beaches with the sound of birds in the distance, these areas comprise vast areas of land. Again, upon visiting these areas of SL I was never able to encounter more than a few residents at any time. The pastoral regions seemed to represent the very anti-urban rural retreat – the first notion of that 'American Dream' community – that people have longed for, but have never been able to attain. Ironically, in all of these beautiful, serene, 'natural' areas that I visited, there was never a single home or residence in which members of SL could retreat and live.

Identity play is definitely rampant in SL, and as Beamish (2001) notes, a major attraction for virtual world and SL users alike. Identity play allows residents to pursue lives, relationships and interests that people may be unable to in real life. The possibility for identity play is also the possibility for people to transcend physical and social barriers that may restrict them in RL. "From people with gender concerns or disabilities to those dealing with the aftermath of cancer and stroke, this popular virtual world is becoming a uniquely comforting place for those who find reality challenging or hostile" (Ananthaswamy 2007, 195). For example, a quadriplegic that has limited mobility would be able to experience life without the confines of a wheelchair through his or her avatar. They could walk, run, speak, build, and make love, as if the disability did not exist. The same possibilities exist for a wide variety of people who wish to change their physical reality but are unable to. Identity play also allows people to put themselves in different shoes, to understand conditions other people face. SL offers the experience of being sent to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba as a political prisoner. Your avatar becomes blindfolded, restricted, tortured and held without legal appeal, "such simulations are more powerful than a library or museum, because they exist 24 hours a day, and anyone from around the world can enter, keeping issues alive even when they fall out of the public eye" (Ananthaswamy 2007, 195). The potential for activism and change is powerful through these mediums, and currently SL is planning to recreate other politically charged spaces such as Palestine and the US-Mexico border. While other social mediums, like facebook, evidently won't allow any kind of union organizing. The opportunity to occupy another body, or experience the pain of others, is a significant tool for people trying to make sense of their lives and others in the real world. Since race and sex no longer have the same meanings in SL as they do in RL, I expected to come in contact with a wide variety of avatars. Although in my experience, the majority of SL residents are tall, white, skinny and looked almost identical to one another, albeit hair colour and style. While Identity play is one of the most promising aspects of virtual worlds for change, whether these changes will translate into the material world is unclear.

Virtual communities are not perfect, and many of the proponents of these worlds who praise the potential for renewed community and better designed neighbourhoods have yet to be proven correct, or at least in Second Life. However, the people that do use SL report rewarding relationships and experiences from them. At the very least, virtual worlds like SL give people who wish to change community and aesthetic in the real world the skills and tools to recreate them as they wish online.

VI. Simulacra and Simulations

Important to the understanding of virtual worlds is the concept of simulacra. Virtual worlds are pushing and redefining the idea of simulacra in new and unprecedented ways, which has become incredibly important in the field of media culture and the digital age. Baudrillard (1996) asserts that in the modern world humans have replaced all reality with symbols and signs, and that the human experience is a simulation of reality rather than reality itself. Perhaps most famously, was Baudrillard's 'orders of the simulacra', the four stages through which the Western

world has transcended into pure simulacra: 1) the copy of the original, 2) the counterfeit of the copy, 3) the mechanical copy, absent of reality, and 4) pure simulacrum, with no relation to the original. The simulacra specifically referred to are the signs of culture and media that create the perceived reality. However, the virtual worlds and communities created on the Internet are modern continuations of the same simulation. In fact, these digital spaces are an exacerbation of this so-called 'false reality', from which the connection to reality from the fantasy is entering the third order of the simulacra.

The distinction between real and virtual is not always as clear as the distinction between the communities in cyberspace and the communities in the real world. In fact, these two worlds are becoming superimposed upon one another with human dependence on technology and the computer as well as the need to express our fantasy worlds. The digital age is evident in our organization, our communication and our architecture. Anti-urbanist sentiments, evidenced throughout history, come up in this example again through cities we live and the places we vacation, which mirror the fantasy we long for in cyberspace. "The crisis of place in America has led to the creation of a gigantic industry dedicated to the temporary escape from the crisis" (Kunstler 1994, 217). Kunstler's most poignant examples of urban simulacra include Disney World and Las Vegas, which are used as verification of American's need to escape 'scary [suburban] places', allowing their fantasy to come to life. Disney World and Las Vegas are very similar (except for the lack of cars in Disney World), because they are both playgrounds – the former designed for the single adult and the latter designed for the adult with a family. They are fantasy places, full of simulacra; "space had ceased to be about forms… it was now about symbols" (Kunstler 1994, 82). The same is true of virtual worlds, on an even more plastic level than Vegas or Disney. The built environment in worlds like Second Life acts as a mere backdrop, or a symbol for the landscape that is *expected* to be there. Virtual communities also act as a type of playground, escaping into a blur of real and digital, chalked full of simulacra and advertising.

On a more philosophical note, what evidence is there that we live in a 'real' world to begin with? What distinction is there between the online world and the word in which you are reading this paper, if any at all? Leading theory in quantum physics states that besides observation nothing can be verified about physical existence. The tiny particles that construct the human body are the same particles that construct everything else in the material world. On a purely scientific level, there is no difference between virtual worlds and material worlds because we are all constructed of the same matter.

VII. Conclusion

The creation of virtual worlds was developed in response to the same anti-urbanist sentiments that spawned suburbia. The continual search for a better community, both within the material world and within the virtual world is a reflection of our discontent with the places we currently live and suggests something is missing in the physical world. Instead of readdressing the notion of community and design in the physical world, significant segments of the population are recreating new fantasy worlds online. Yet, "we appear to have succeed in only duplicating some of the worst aspects of the physical world – dark, empty, bland cities and landscapes – the very ones we wish to escape from in the first place" (Beamish 2001, 299). These worlds are being constructed in much the same way as the material worlds we live, whether an extension of suburbia, the city, or fantasy places. In fact, what we apparently attempt to redevelop in virtual worlds and what we actually build in virtual worlds is riddled with paradoxes. Why do we continue to re-build the same places over and over again, while simultaneously trying to escape the new places we create?

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus is helpful in understanding why we are apparently destined to re-create the same places over and over. Habitus can be defined as a system of dispositions, lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action that the individual agent develops in response to the objective conditions they encounter (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992). Modern cities in North America, built in the late 1800's and early 1900's, and the suburbs that consequently followed, are all we really know how to build. North American populations have not envisioned different arrangements of living for over one hundred and fifty years. Maybe we have forgotten how to build communities, maybe we never really knew how, or maybe there is just no way of possibly taking the developments of the past and incorporating them into the present to suit modern needs. By no means am I suggesting a return to pastoralism, or primitivism, but urban

sociologists have discovered time and time again that the modern urban and suburban form is not one that achieves a satisfactory level of happiness from the people who live there.

Virtual worlds like Second Life offer a fantastic medium to explore new ways of developing our neighbourhoods and communities without actually experimenting in the real world and with relatively little cost to the developer. For under $200/month developers, architects and urban planners can lease land in Second Life the size of a small country, experiment with new designs and techniques, and get feedback from the people who meet and socialize there. "The *software* model of your city, once set up, will be available to however many people are interested, hundreds or thousands, or millions at the same time" (Gelernter 1991, 5). The challenge will ultimately lie in actually creating an attraction for residents to go these areas of Second Life, although other virtual worlds may be different. Even if developers, architects and planners had to attract residents through some kind of monetary reward, the costs of doing so would be very minimal, while the benefits could be tremendous.

Virtual worlds are strange, unique, but ultimately very popular places. They have developed for reasons pertaining to the undesirable worlds we have created in our material existence. If searching for a renewed design of urban and rural form it is of utmost importance to understand what features of renewed design people are in search of? A simple question, one that begs a much more complex answer; an answer that has been sought after for over a century and one which developers, architects and planners must devote serious consideration, if we are ever going to succeed in building 'better places'.

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