From 3D Space to Third Place: The Social Life of Small Virtual Spaces

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Massively multiplayer online (MMO) environments are an emerging computer technology that makes possible new kinds of distributed communities and online sociability. What distinguishes MMOs from other Internet media is that they take face-to-face conversation as their primary metaphor for user interaction, rather than, say, the page or the bulletin board. Because they simulate 3D spaces and contain thousands of people who do not know each other, MMOs constitute public spaces, although virtual ones. As such, they can be studied in ways analogous to those of public places in the physical world. Inspired by the work of William H. Whyte and Ray Oldenburg on sociability in real-life public places, we take a similar approach toward the study of MMOs. We ask the question: what makes some virtual public spaces in MMOs successful "third places" while other similar places fail? Through our virtual ethnography of dance clubs and corner bars in three MMO environments, we find four features of virtual public places that appear critical for their success: accessibility, social density, activity resources, and hosts. We further argue that MMO sociability is just as authentic as that in "real-life" contexts while highlighting ways in which it is distinctly different.

Key words: sociability, third place, virtual world

Introduction

Since the emergence of the Internet, ethnographers have adapted ways of studying communities in the physical world to the study of their online counterparts (Boellstorff 2008; Churchill and Bly 2000; Hine 2000, 2005; Mason 2003; Rutter 2005; Schiano and White 1998). Online communities take many forms including newsgroups, chat rooms, online forums, blogs, social networking sites, online games, and more. Members of online communities, although they rarely meet face-to-face, nonetheless interact on a regular basis, form relationships, share knowledge and practices, and share identities as members of a community.

Massively multiplayer online (MMO) environments are a recent form of computer-mediated communication. What distinguishes them from other Internet media is that they take face-to-face conversation as their primary metaphor for user interaction, rather than, say, the page or the bulletin board. MMOs are "massively" multiplayer in that thousands of concurrent users can inhabit the same virtual space. Millions of people worldwide are spending an average of 20 hours a week (Yee 2008) playing together in MMO worlds. For example, World of Warcraft alone has over 10 million active users worldwide. As a result of this number of people interacting on a regular basis, communities and cultures are emerging both within and between virtual worlds. And not surprisingly, ethnographic research on MMO communities is beginning to flourish (Dibbell 2006; Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell 2004, 2007; Nardi and Harris 2006; Steinkuehler 2005; Taylor 1999).

In terms of their basic demographics, we know that for MMO players in North America, the average age is 26; only 25 percent are teens; 85 percent are male; 50 percent are employed full-time; 36 percent are married; and 22 percent are parents (Yee 2008). If we consider second life in particular (analyzed below), the average age jumps to 30 and the proportion of males drops to 57 percent ( Linden Lab 2007).

MMOs are persistent 3D environments that are usually extensive in their geographic scale; they often simulate small continents that contain cities constructed from individual buildings and wilderness areas complete with mountains, trees, rivers, and even weather. Players experience these environments from a near first-person perspective by moving a 3D character (known as an "avatar") through the landscape. But MMOs are not simply "worlds" in a three-dimensional sense, they are also social worlds inhabited by other real people. Players interact by bringing their avatars into close proximity, animating them using gesture commands and talking by typing text chat messages, which often appear in comic-strip-style bubbles over avatars' heads.

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Because they simulate 3D spaces and contain thousands of concurrent users who do not know each other, MMOs constitute public spaces. As such, we argue that they can be studied in ways analogous to those of public places in the physical world. For example, in his pioneering Street Life project, William H. Whyte (1988) uses ethnographic observation and time-lapse photography to study how people inhabit public spaces in city centers, such as those in New York City. He examines how the design of the physical spaces enables and constrains interaction among city goers, and asks: why do some public spaces support lively sociability while others are dead?

Georg Simmel is perhaps the first sociologist to seriously examine "sociability" in its own right. He writes, "Sociability extracts the serious substance of life leaving only "togetherness," the sheer pleasure of the company of others" (Simmel 1949:255). While the social sciences tend to focus on the many instrumental reasons that people interact with each other, for example, because of work or family obligations, Simmel reminds us that humans are truly social animals who sometimes seek out social interaction purely for its own sake. Simmel gives examples of "sociability" in the many varieties of playful conversation (e.g., anecdote, humor, witticism, or flirting) that tend to emerge around play activities such as games, music, or sports.

Ray Oldenburg extends Simmel's work by analyzing the places in which sociability tends to emerge. He calls such settings "third places," and defines them as "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work [the so-called first and second places]" (Oldenburg 1991:16). He argues that such informal public gathering places (e.g., cafes, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, etc.) are essential to the health of communities, claiming that all great civilizations and great cities have had their characteristic public gathering spaces, but that in post-World War II America, which is characterized by the "automobile suburb," third places have largely disappeared (Oldenburg 1991). Like Oldenburg, Whyte (1988) critiques certain urban centers, such as those of Los Angeles, for their conspicuous absence of sociable public life and identifies elements of urban design that inhibit urban sociability.

While Simmel, Oldenburg, and Whyte describe activities and public places in the physical world, their approach has also been applied to the virtual. About the WELL, one of the first text-based virtual communities, Rheingold (1993:26) writes, "It might not be the same kind of place that Oldenburg had in mind, but so many of his descriptions of third places could also describe the WELL." The WELL is an imagined space created purely through text description, yet even with such a simple technology, users could nonetheless construct engaging social experiences. MMOs take this kind of community to the next level by introducing simulated 3D spaces and bodies. This virtual "material" world provides new resources for social interaction.

Oldenburg's (1991) concept of "third places" has been applied specifically to MMO environments in prior research. Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) ask whether entire MMOs fit Oldenburg's definition of "third place" and conclude that they do indeed. However, they also acknowledge that some situations within MMOs do not fit the definition quite as well. For example, when players participate in "guild raids," group combat in which dozens work as a team for two to five hours, the social experience "becomes increasingly more entangling, time-consuming, and work-like" and "the function of MMOs as 'third places' begins to wane" (Steinkuehler and Williams 2006:903).

In contrast to Steinkuehler and Williams (2006), we take an alternative approach in this study, as well as in our prior work (Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell 2004, 2007). Recognizing the fact that MMOs are multifaceted environments in which players engage in a range of different activities, we focus only on certain kinds of places within them, namely dance club and bar-like locations. Unlike Steinkuehler and Williams (2006), we specifically examine how the design of 3D spaces themselves shapes sociability, building on work by William H. Whyte (1988). Understanding how 3D spaces and 3D avatars' impact social interaction is critical for understanding the social dynamics of MMOs because it is virtual 3D space that makes them unique.

In this paper, we explore the relationship between virtual space, social interaction, and sociability. Like their real-world counterparts, virtual cities in MMO environments tend to lack sociable public life. We ask: what makes some virtual public spaces successful "third places" while other similar places fail? To explore this question, we focus on social life in three MMO environments: City of Heroes (CoH), Star Wars Galaxies (SWG), and Second Life (SL). For each, we analyze four factors that impact their success: accessibility, social density, activity resources, and hosts.

**Data and Methods**

For this study, we employed methods of virtual ethnography (Boellstorff 2008; Hine 2000, 2005). We began by gaining a player's perspective through participant observation in several virtual worlds including SWG, CoH, SL, EverQuest II, World of Warcraft, EverQuest Online Adventures, and There. We inhabited each world (during different phases of the study) on a regular basis for an average of 10 hours a week, learned the gamer lingo and practices, observed lively public spaces, joined player groups and associations, formed online friendships, and more.

As is true with most virtual ethnographies, we studied the players through their online personae—as embodied in their 3D "avatars" and text chat messages—rather than their real-life identities (Mason 2003:63). Although participants' offline identities and lives are a very important area of research, we did not attempt to collect such data for this study. The analytic stance we take in this paper, informed by ethnomethodology, is that in order to understand the endogenous organization.
of online social life itself, the primary data is public action in those online environments. Indeed, the participants themselves do not necessarily have access to their fellow participants' real-world identities or circumstances, except of course to the extent that they are brought into the online world through social interaction.

As we observed virtual public spaces, other players were generally unaware that we were researchers. Conversely, we were unaware of the real-world identities of the players, only their in-game pseudonyms and personae. They know us, as we know them, only in the form of our self-representations, our avatars. We give our participants an additional level of privacy by anonymizing these pseudonyms; their real-world identities are, thus, doubly protected.

Finally, we collected over 250 hours of screen-capture video from various virtual worlds including the three we discuss in this paper. Screen-capture video provides much more detail than auto-generated system logs. In particular, system logs give very little information about how players move their avatars through space and how avatar animations appear.

Sociable Public Spaces in Three Virtual Worlds

In most MMOs, there are many public spaces that remain empty most of the time. It is not uncommon to enter a “city” only to find that you are the only one in it, apart from the non-player characters (computer controlled) strategically placed to create an illusion of life. In some cases, this emptiness is due simply to poor game design, that is, a lack of instrumental reasons for players to go to that particular location. In other cases, the overall server population is too low; that is, there are not enough players to fill the world adequately. Nonetheless, there are always certain locations at which high concentrations of players can be found. These may be spaces through which players routinely pass or spaces in which they congregate. Players tend to dwell in locations that are required by gameplay, such as merchants or quest-givers, and they tend to travel along transportation corridors linking such key locations. In other words, just like in a real-world city, most of the densely populated locations are filled with people pursuing instrumental goals.

Yet in the physical world, there are also places in which people take a break from work and errands and congregate purely for sociability. Public plazas, pubs, bars, and clubs are often places where people-watching and conversation are abundant (Oldenburg 1991; Simmel 1949; Whyte 1988). Designers and players often attempt to recreate such real-life sociable spaces in virtual worlds. In each of the MMOs we have studied, we have found “corner bars” and “dance clubs” in which avatars dance while players chat and listen to music. Below we describe three such sociable public spaces in three different virtual worlds. For each, we examine four features of the space that shape sociability: (1) accessibility: how easy it is to discover and travel to the place, (2) social density: the ratio of the number of visitors to the size of the space; (3) activity resources: the resources available for supporting social activities in the space; and (4) hosting resources: the options available to a host for managing the space.

“Pocket D” in City of Heroes

CoH was launched in 2004 and peaked in total subscribers in January 2006 at nearly 200,000 players (Woodcock 2005). The majority of the fieldwork for this study was conducted in 2006. CoH is a superhero-themed MMO game, in which players typically team up to battle against computer-controlled villains, within a sprawling cityscape. CoH is perhaps best known for its character creation system. Players have a high level of control in customizing the appearance and powers of their characters. Thus, no two superheroes are identical.

In CoH, the primary social hotspot is under the statue of Atlas in Atlas Park (see Figure 1, left), which serves as a convenient place for impromptu public gatherings, such as costume contests. Unfortunately, the congregation of many characters in one place can cause “server lag,” the online counterpart of overcrowding in real-world public spaces, which slows down system performance for everyone. In an attempt to alleviate this pressure on the system, CoH developers tried to relocate such gatherings by creating a new zone specifically for socializing. The new zone, called “Pocket D,” is designed as a large dance club with multiple entrances.

But despite the developers’ best social engineering efforts, impromptu costume contests continue in Atlas Park while Pocket D remains largely unused. Players occasionally host events in Pocket D, but for the most part, on the majority of game servers, it sits empty. Only on a single server, the “role playing” server (on which players tend to play their characters almost as if they were improvising on stage), did we observe any regular attendance by players.

One major reason for this underuse of Pocket D is that it is not as easily accessible as Atlas Park. Oldenburg (1991:32) argues, “Access to them [third places] must be easy if they are to survive and serve, and the ease with which one may visit a third place is a matter of both time and location.” There are many instrumental reasons for players to pass through Atlas Park: it is a place in which new characters start out, it contains many non-player characters who give out missions and provide services (e.g., power upgrades), and it is a location involved in many game missions. In other words, it is a “multifunctional space” (Jacobs 1961). Pocket D, on the other hand, is unfunctional: the only reason to go there is to socialize. Players have to travel relatively far from the spaces in which they pursue their other game activities in order to get to Pocket D. One result of this is that Pocket D receives virtually no incidental foot traffic—players passing through for other reasons—who may discover a public gathering and stop for a while to chat. As Whyte (1988:166) writes, “A lot of people have to pass by to provide a number of [bench or ledge] sitters, and, thus, there is bound to be a relationship between the number of sitters and the pedestrian flow.”
The first thing that one notices upon entering Pocket D itself is its massive size. One must take an elevator and pass through mock game rooms and bars before entering the main hall, which feels like a convention center at airport terminal (see Figure 1, right). The central focus of this huge space is a single small elevated dance floor. Due to the large size of the space, it appears oddly deserted, even when there are several players present somewhere in the building. Pocket D is very much like a “megastructure” as Whyte (1988) conceives of it: massive labyrinthine complexes—including convention centers, hotels, and shopping malls—that are entirely self-contained and cut off from the street. But as Whyte (1988:10) discovered, “What attracts people most, in sum, is other people.... Many urban spaces are being designed as though the opposite were true....”

Recently, video game designer, Damion Schubert (2005), commented on the tendency of virtual worlds to be built too large. He references work by Bill Friedman on real-life casino design which shows that people do not spend much time in the “mega casinos.” They walk in to see the spectacle, but then leave and go to smaller, “cozier” casinos to spend time gambling. Schubert (2005), thus, invites MMO designers to heed this lesson and start making “cozy worlds.” We, too, find that the size of a virtual public space and the resulting impact on social density, appear to be a critical factor in fostering sociability.

In MMO environments, to a greater extent than physical environments, players are at the mercy of the designers to provide them with resources for social action and play. While players can say (or describe) anything through text chat, they cannot perform particular actions with their avatar unless the world designers have enabled the appropriate command and provided an animation showing the avatar perform it. Pocket D is no exception. It is filled with non-functional objects and furniture, such as booths, chairs, and stools on which players cannot sit; bars at which players cannot buy or consume drinks; and pool tables, pinball machines, and slot machines that one cannot play. In other words, Pocket D is filled with virtual objects that are mere props, decorative but non-functional and non-interactive. Players cannot use the props in Pocket D to engage in public activity, which could in turn become the locus of public interaction. In other words, in Pocket D, the designers have provided players with few resources for public social activity. Simply being able to sit on chairs and move them around would enable arbitrary configurations of avatars into visible social groupings, an ability which Whyte (1988) argues is important for sociability in real-life public spaces.

Pocket D does, however, make available two critical activity resources: dancing and music. It provides a dim nightclub-like atmosphere in which there is dance music and a small floor upon which avatars can dance. By activating a single command, players can initiate one of four looping dance animations for their avatars. This is comparable to the number of dances available to players in other games such as World of Warcraft, but dramatically fewer than the number available in SWG or SL, as we discuss below. However, the dance loops themselves are extremely simple and somewhat inelegant. Given this relatively poor quality of the dance animations plus the fact that it requires no effort or skill, dancing in CoH is not a very engaging activity. Consequently players in CoH seem to spend less time dancing than in SWG or SL and, thus, dance is less of a catalyst for sociability in CoH.

But one player practice that makes dancing somewhat more engaging in CoH is the repurposing of combat abilities. Characters have multiple combat-related “super powers,” some of which create impressive lighting effects. Players use such powers in Pocket D, not for their instrumental effects, but purely for their visuals, which help create a dance-club-like atmosphere. In addition, players sometimes tune in to the same Internet radio station in order to listen to more interesting music than that which ordinarily plays in Pocket D (a simple trick we also observed in SWG and SL). We observed that music in these settings tends to provide endless topics for public conversation. Despite its low traffic on most servers, Pocket D nonetheless hosted by live DJs on a regular basis.
“Ven Tavia” in Star Wars Galaxies

SWG, launched in 2003, is an outer-space-themed MMO set in the Star Wars universe popularized by the movies of filmmaker George Lucas. At its peak in July 2003, SWG had nearly 300,000 subscribers (Woodcock 2005). The majority of the fieldwork for this study was conducted in 2004. SWG is notable among the major commercial MMOs for the way in which it expanded the types of instrumental gameplay. While most previous MMOs provided only combat and crafting professions, SWG created a whole new set of professions. Players could play merchants, doctors, mayors, tailors, engineers, architects, dancers, and musicians, just to name a few.

SWG offered players an enormous landscape with 10 planets and numerous cities from the Star Wars movies. Players visited these game cities to upgrade their characters’ skills, receive missions, trade items at the bazaar, travel between starports and shuttle stops, and more. While they could access services in the game cities, players could not modify any part of the cities themselves. On the other hand, players could also erect their own cities in wilderness areas. They had control over the location of the city, the types of buildings it contained, and who could reside there. Players had a wide library of objects—furniture, paintings, plants, etc.—with which they could decorate their houses. Beyond the fun of interior decorating, players tended to use their houses for extra storage or for setting up shops from which other players could buy their crafted goods. Since avatars do not require a safe place to sleep every night, players are not as closely tied to their virtual homes as they are to their real-life ones.

While many players set up houses, few actually used them to host organized social or role-playing events. An exception we observed was one such player city, Ven Tavia, which was the site of multiple well-attended player-hosted events. Among these events were an inaugural celebration for the city itself, a role-playing dance (or “rave”) event, a regular Friday night dance club, and a Saturday morning live market.

But despite the success of the player-hosted events in Ven Tavia, the city was relatively short-lived. The period from the city’s inaugural event to the beginning of its decline spanned less than six months. The primary reason for its collapse was the departure of a key member of the city, Sin’thea. She was the city’s event planner and self-proclaimed “Master Socialite.” In her absence, no other city members stepped in to fill this organizational gap. Shortly after the player-hosted events ended, the city itself began to die.

The greatest weakness of the design of player cities in SWG was its urban planning. By design, players could not maintain personal residences in the major, centrally located game cities, such as Theed or Coronet City. Nor could they place their own cities immediately next to the major game cities. Player cities could only be erected in wilderness areas. This created major problems for drawing other players out to social events. Because of the constraints on their placement,
player cities tended to receive virtually no incidental foot traffic (Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell 2007:157). Most players did not seem to understand urban planning, either. City founders tended to be attracted to scenic views rather than the convenience of locating as close as possible to transportation hubs. The founders of Ven Tavia were no different. They erected the city on a remote stretch of coastline on Naboo, which afforded pleasant views of a virtual ocean but which was a several-minute trip from the nearest “urban center.” Thedro.

In order to draw people out to a player city, SWG event planners had a few options. First, they could personally invite everyone on their Friends List to the event by sending an in-game email. Second, they could announce the event to their guild or player association via in-game email, guild chat, or external guild website. This is often effective but limited to the size of the particular guild which is typically a few dozen. Third, they could post their event on an official SWG web page that lists “player-hosted events” on all servers. The problem with this method is that it is external to the game and not so easy to find. Fourth, they could go to heavily trafficked star ports in the major game cities and promote their event. Some hosts did this by talking to passersby directly, while many others simply “spammed” the areas with automated announcements, which became lost in a larger sea of spam. Thus, there were no easy and effective ways for hosts to announce their events to the wider player population, nor attract passersby.

Compared to Pocket D, the buildings in SWG used for social gatherings were significantly smaller. The cantinas in game cities felt about the same size as a moderately sized American restaurant, while those in player cities were even cozier. Player city planners had the choice of several types of generic structures—cantinas, player association halls, medical centers, and three styles of houses—which all varied in size. So the hosts of social events could choose the building whose size best suited the particular event and thereby exercise some control over the resulting social density.

The greatest strength of the design of SWG’s player cities was the resources it provided to players for hosting their own social events. Players had several different types of buildings to choose from as well as numerous (partially functional) objects with which to furnish and decorate them. For example, in setting up the Ven Tavia Saturday-morning live market, Sin’thea used bookshelves, tables, and other objects to reconfigure a standard player association hall into a “craft fair” complete with merchant stalls. On a different occasion, she configured an identical player association hall with a DJ station and other decorations to look like a “dance club” (see Figure 3).

SWG also provided players with many resources for dancing. The “dancer” profession enabled players to gain access to up to 21 unique looping dance animations, each with eight unique “flourishes” or moves, and seven light show effects. Furthermore, the dance animations themselves were well crafted, in most cases using motion-capture techniques on real-life dancers. Thus, dancing in SWG was an engaging activity in itself, rather than an afterthought as it is in most MMOs. Consequently, the core group of organizers and participants in Ven Tavia’s social events played dancers or musicians. And these dancing abilities were critical for enabling players to create an event that felt like a dance club.

At the same time, the musician profession provided avatar animations and visual effects that greatly contributed to a “dance club” atmosphere, although the songs themselves were far less compelling. Most of the songs were interpretive variations of recognizable melodies from the Star Wars movies and did not foster a dance club atmosphere. To circumvent this, however, we observed players doing the same thing that was done in Pocket D: replacing the game music with that of a preferred streaming Internet radio station. After one of the residents of Ven Tavia suggested tuning in to an Internet station that played techno music, Sin’thea began to use it regularly in her dance club events. On some occasions, one of the hosts would play the role of DJ by streaming his own selection of songs from a URL accessible to all participants. Control over the selection of music was key in throwing a successful dance event.

In addition to dances and music, clothing served as a major resource in Ven Tavia social events. Compared to
many MMOs, SWG offers a wide range of avatar customization especially in terms of clothing. Avatar clothing is a frequent topic of conversation in both CoH and SWG, as well as in SL.

The primary reason for the success of Ven Tavia’s social events was its event planner, Sin’thea. It was her creativity and hard work that made the city’s player-hosted events succeed. Oldenburg (1991:171) writes, “Hosting is not the only consideration in the evolution of a third place, but few factors are more important. A tavern always reflects the personalities behind its bar.” Even when planning efforts involved multiple city residents, it was Sin’thea who was the primary organizer and leader. In addition to planning the activities at the events, Sin’thea also assumed primary responsibility for promotion. Personal invitations allowed for the kind of gatekeeping that Oldenburg (1991) suggests is often implicitly done by avoiding ostentation that might attract too many strangers in the exteriors of buildings that house third places.

Below, Sin’thea describes the work involved in event planning on the guild’s online forum in an effort to recruit assistants: “Running any sort of event is a TREMENDOUS effort in organization and promotion (not to mention decorating and setup if need be) by the event organizer, ...leaving little time for other activities such as hunting, question, socializing, etc. And then, on top of preparation, I actually have to be PRESENT for my own event...” Given the burden of organizing events, Sin’thea attempted to create some regular weekly events that would occur whether she was there or not. In the following quote from an online forum, she contrasts her expectations for one such event with her others:

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Basically, I’m just providing a backdrop upon which ppl [people] can gather, RP [role play], and relax. The differentiation from my regular parties is that for these, I have very little lifting and prep to do other than send out invites and show up at the club. No RP storylines to plan, extravagant deco to do, or prizes to gather and raffle away.
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Sin’thea was attempting to create a “third place” that would run by itself with minimal effort on her part.

Despite Sin’thea’s aspirations, however, the Friday night dance club never evolved into a third place. It was well-attended for the first few weeks, but when she did not show up, attendance suffered, and the club died after a couple of months. In the absence of incidental foot traffic, Sin’thea’s promotion efforts proved critical in drawing participants to any Ven Tavia event. When her attempts at creating self-sustaining city events failed, Sin’thea left the game entirely, saying only that she was “burned out” and had to “spend more time with other parts of her life.” The social activity in that player city, thus, lived and died with a single player who was unable to bear the burden of always being the hostess so that others could enjoy the benefits of a third place.

As a sociable space, Ven Tavia enjoyed partial success. It proved to be well suited for parties, but it was not a “third place,” that is, a place where players spontaneously show up even when no particular event has been planned. We see then that SWG provided excellent support for players who wished to create sociable events in terms of multi-sized buildings and activity resources, but provided poor urban planning and resources for event hosting.

“The Broom Closet” in Second Life

The third public space we analyze comes from the virtual world SL, which was launched in 2003. The majority of the fieldwork for this study was conducted in 2004 and 2005. Unlike SWG and CoH, SL is not a “game” per se. Instead, SL is a platform in which players can create their own content. Using in-world editors, players create all manner of objects for their avatars or the environment from primitive geometric shapes, or “prims.” But despite the differences between SL and MMO games, socializing is often very similar across settings.

One social hotspot we discovered in SL was The Broom Closet. Reminiscent of a Midwest neighborhood bar, The
Broom Closet, as the name implies, is tiny compared to the average dance club in SL. Despite its small size, however, players still dance there. Compared to many other public places in SL, The Broom Closet was inhabited by players throughout the day, everyday, and has maintained this level of activity (with some ups and downs) for over two years. Its owner, Alan Night, was frequently present in the bar, greeting everyone who entered. In addition to Alan, The Broom Closet also had other “regulars,” like MadBill, who would be asked to account for any lengthy absences. The Broom Closet also attracts a fairly steady stream of new SL users. As Oldenburg (1991) suggests, good third places should maintain a certain level of openness to new participants who may in time become regulars as well.

The primary activity in The Broom Closet is public conversation, the mark of “sociability” (Simmel 1949) and a good “third place” (Oldenburg 1991). Visitors to The Broom Closet seem to engage in relatively more public conversation than in the average SL club. One reason for this seems to be that The Broom Closet does not hold sexually themed events, like most SL clubs, and therefore provides less incentive for private chat and “cybersex.” Instead, playful flirting and humorous conversation are common. The high volume of public talk in the space creates a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers.

Unlike most virtual worlds, SL is not navigated in ways analogous to a physical space. Although the world has a particular “landscape,” players do not tend to walk from place to place. Instead, they use the in-game search engine to find places based on shops, clubs, or events and then “teleport” directly to the zone, or “sim,” in which it is located. Thus, what matters more than geographic location in SL is a venue’s presence on the event board and search results page. Alan used a strategy of posting multiple event listings everyday and held one at midnight, which then appears as the first entry on the event board. Unlike a physical tavern owner, he does not compete for a prime physical location, only the awareness of users that his bar exists and is active.

Because players are themselves content creators in SL, they have control over the size of the structures they build, and like Pocket D, the average SL dance club looks very much like one of Friedman’s “mega casinos” or Whyte’s “mega-structures” (see Figure 5).

But unlike real-life, there is an arbitrary technical limit on how many players can inhabit the same space or server in SL. At the time of this study, each server or “sim,” had a maximum occupancy of 50 avatars, only 30 of which could be rendered on a player’s computer at a time (SL Knowledge Base). So the largest gathering a player could experience at any given time had only 30 avatars. Given this technical constraint, most SL clubs are too large for optimal social density. It is technically impossible for SL “mega clubs” to fill up to anything near capacity.

The Broom Closet is of course an exception to the general trend of “mega clubs” in SL. While most popular dance clubs are between 45,000 and 65,000 m² in size, The Broom Closet measures a mere 96 m² (or 1,033 ft²). It is basically a dance floor with four walls and a roof—nothing impressive to look at. However, the unusually small size facilitates social interaction among strangers. It is impossible to watch from a distance. Upon entering the bar, one’s avatar must rub elbows with the other participants, if not bump them, just to get inside. This forced close proximity also insures that everyone is within chat range (30 m), and, therefore, everyone can hear the public conversation. Alan Night has, thus, discovered an important generic design principle for sociable public places: tight spaces increase social density and facilitate social interaction (Whyte 1988). Given that Whyte (1988) finds that about 5,000-10,000 ft² (465-930 m²) is the ideal size for a sociable outdoor urban plaza, the 1,033 ft² of The Broom Closet seems about the right size for a “cozy” bar.

As in Ven Tavia and Pocket D, good music is critical. Unlike other MMOs, SL enables players to stream audio or video directly into the environment. Not only does The Broom Closet stream music from an Internet site, the site enables participants to choose songs themselves. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that most if not all of the people present in The Broom Closet are listening to the same music, even if they aren’t all making requests. This easy access to a “virtual jukebox,” we observed, facilitates conversation. The current song and especially the fact that players can select songs are perhaps the most prevalent topics of conversation.

Like most clubs in SL, The Broom Closet provides dance animations for its visitors, or they can also bring their own. Dance loops are perhaps ideal for online conversation: they automate avatar movement and free players up to concentrate on chatting. At the time of this study, the quality of most dance animations in SL was quite poor, but there was a wide variety.

Oldenburg (1991:170) argues that a good host is critical for the sociable atmosphere of a third place: “Most deadly bars do not have hosts or hostesses who promote conversation.
Table 1. Comparison of Public Spaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessibility</th>
<th>Social Density</th>
<th>Activity Resources</th>
<th>Hosting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pocket D</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ven Tavia</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broom Closet</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
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</table>

in the place. Good bartenders have a knack of getting their customers together and of making sure that the return patron will have at least one personal greeting each time he or she stops in.” Like Ven Tavia, The Broom Closet had an active and ever-present host, Alan Night. During this study, he was present in the bar most nights and indeed the visitors expected him to be there and inquired about his absence when he was not. He tended to stand behind the bar like a bartender, although he dispensed no drinks, and greeted every guest as they entered the bar and said goodbye as they left. Although the greetings were no doubt semi-automated, they nonetheless made visitors, especially first-timers, feel like they had been noticed. Furthermore, like a good bartender, Alan would also facilitate the public conversation in the bar, making comments or cracking jokes whenever the room experienced extended lulls. Over the course of the study, Alan’s attendance has gradually decreased, but he has grown a volunteer staff to play the role of host in his absence.

Of the three virtual public places we observed, only The Broom Closet seemed to achieve the status of a virtual third place. While it was by no means the busiest bar or club in SL in terms of raw traffic scores (which users tend to manipulate), The Broom Closet appeared to have a disproportionately high amount of public conversation. Furthermore, although it is certainly not the only third place in SL, it is one of the best, and the fact that its physical design and regular events are so simple makes it especially interesting analytically.

Discussion

We argue that the relative success of The Broom Closet, compared to Pocket D and Ven Tavia, is due to the ways both its design and the design of the SL platform provide for accessibility, social density, social activities, and hosting (see Table). It scores high on each of these four dimensions: it is easily accessible due largely to teleportation and the in-world events board; it enforces high social density through its intentionally tiny size; it has rich resources for avatar-watching, dancing, and music selection; and it has active and dedicated hosts.

In contrast, Ven Tavia suffers primarily from lack of accessibility and difficulty promoting events. Although Pocket D has regular hosts provided through w00t and Cape radio, it suffers in the other three categories: it is hard to get to, it is much too large, and it provides too little to do.

Our analysis highlights a particular limitation of Oldenburg’s “third place” concept, namely, that third places must be second places for someone (that is, places of work). In order for patrons to enjoy the “unplanned, unscheduled, unorganized, and unstructured” visits to third places, someone must do the work of supporting them (Oldenburg 1991:33). Neither the beer nor the coffee will pour itself. We saw in Ven Tavia and the Broom Closet that the work of organizing, supporting, and hosting fell upon individual players themselves. For Sin’t heater and Alan Night, play was intertwined with work and could be too overwhelming in the long run.

One of our own assumptions underpinning this study is that avatar-mediated interaction is in fact a reliable index of sociability on par with face-to-face interaction or telephone-mediated interaction. Of course, this is not to say that these forms of communication are the same. For example, avatar-mediated communication, despite the virtual body, is much less rich in terms of non-verbal cues than face-to-face (Moore, Ducheneaut, and Nickell 2007), although it can be argued that it is richer than telephone-mediated interaction in that regard. And, of course, text chat does not enable as wide a range of nuance as the prosodic features of voice. Nonetheless, if we look at what people do with text chat and avatars, we see that they engage in a rather wide range of social actions. In all of the MMOs we studied, players engaged in small talk, joking, teasing, flirting, congratulating, celebrating, and sometimes even harassing. Or they would engage in explicit “cybersex.” Or they would share their deepest real-life convictions and fears or convey major events in their offline lives, such as engagements, pregnancies, and deaths. Players indeed use avatar-mediated interaction and text chat for sociability. However, different from other forms of sociability, we regard it as authentic human interaction as do many other researchers of virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2008; Churchill and Bly 2000; Dibbell 2006; Hine 2000, 2005; Mason 2003; Nardi and Harris 2006; Rutter 2005; Schiano and White 1998; Steinkuehler 2005; Taylor 1999). It can even be argued that in certain ways, avatar-mediated interaction is better suited for sociability or intimacy than face-to-face because the suppression of social and physical characteristics of the individual enables a purer form of association or “hyperpersonal” communication (Walther 1996).

Conclusion

In this paper, we asked very similar questions to those that Whyte (1988) and Oldenburg (1991) asked of real-life public places. And we found many parallels across these online and offline spaces. By observing Pocket D, Ven Tavia, and The Broom Closet, we conclude that there are at least four factors that are critical for success in building a successful place for sociable interaction: accessibility, social density, activity resources, and hosting. Each of these is also an important factor for sociable public places in the physical world.

Like Whyte (1988) and Oldenburg (1991), we are of course interested in lively virtual spaces, in part, to better understand how to reproduce them. Whyte (1988:172) suggests that this is relatively straightforward in the physical world:

HUMAN ORGANIZATION
It is wonderfully encouraging to find that the places that people like best are the most replicable of spaces: relatively small—5,000 to 10,000 ft. —marked by a high density of people and an efficient use of space.

Whyte no doubt oversimplifies the "replicability" of lively public spaces, otherwise we would expect to see many more of them. Yet the idea of identifying the formula for successful public spaces is intriguing, and such design principles are badly needed in emerging virtual worlds as well.

But while we have focused on the similarities between virtual and physical public spaces in this paper, we should also highlight some interesting differences. For example, although the virtual dance clubs and bars we have observed indeed look and feel much like their real-life counterparts, the social dynamics are actually quite different. In real-life dance clubs, multi-party conversation is difficult given the loud music and the physical strain of dancing. Yet in a virtual club, the conversation is not competing with the music since it is conducted through text and a looping "dance" animation requires no effort. So players are freed up to concentrate on the text-based conversation. In addition, text chat enables multiple people to "speak" at the same time and to talk to people whose avatars may be across the room. Virtual dance clubs are actually better suited for group conversation among strangers than real-life clubs and even bars.

In sum, our virtual ethnography has taken us to some emerging sites of sociability. While Oldenburg (1991), Whyte (1988), and Putnam (2000) argue that "community" in America is in decline, MMO environments are one way in which some people around the world are creating new relationships. Perhaps this is a response to the decrease in thriving urban centers and third places in real life, or perhaps it is just a natural human response to new technologies. Regardless, virtual worlds provide an interesting alternative to face-to-face sociability. For the house-bound parent, the suburban or rural resident, or the physically disabled, virtual public places offer opportunities for real human sociability at times when a trip to a physical dance club or corner bar might not be possible.

Notes

1 For more on how 3D avatars impact social interaction in MMOs, see our prior work (Moore, Ducheneaut, and Nickell 2007; Moore et al. 2007).

2 There is a trick of placing venues on the boundaries of up to four sim, thus accommodating social gatherings of up to 200 players; however, the average club owner can barely afford to pay rent, or "tax" fees, on one sim let alone four.

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