Taking New World Notes: An embedded journalist’s rough guide to reporting from inside the Internet’s next evolution

Wagner James Au

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Abstract

In 2005, persistent online worlds — sometimes saddled with the unwieldy acronym MMORPGs, for “massively multiplayer online role playing games,” or somewhat less clumsily, MMOs — made the leap from niche entertainment to global mainstream medium. On a popularity metric, Worlds of Warcraft became the first game to surpass a million U.S. subscribers, while gaining a global audience over 4.5 million and counting (with a third of that from mainland China.) On an innovation scale, Second Life suggested the potential for MMOs to also be a development platform for commercial, educational, and research projects. As broadband and high end PCs saturate the international market, it’s time to consider MMOs as the likeliest candidate for the Internet’s next generation, supplanting the two dimensional, semi–interactive portal of the Web for an immersive, three–dimensional, fully interactive Metaverse of data. But a new medium requires new guidelines for understanding it, and it is here that many questions loom. What happens as users continue to employ MMOs for purposes beyond gaming or light socializing, when they become the first true meeting space for the world, where cultural, commercial, and political intercourse is conducted in real time in an immersive setting that feels real, even hyperreal? When they have a direct, measurable impact on real world news? And who will do the reporting to understand this profound shift? Unlike the Web revolution of the ‘90s, documenting the emergence of online worlds is something that will be conducted from the inside, immersed within the media itself. Some tentative guidelines are therefore proposed, a new kind of journalistic ethics for a world where reality and identity are mutable and anonymity is both hazard and godsend. Based on nearly three years as Second Life’s official embedded journalist, the author suggests several principles, with the object to preserve a separation between real life identity and virtual being, while sustaining the fantastic, otherworldly nature of online worlds. Paradoxically, it’s argued, maintaining the illusion increases the value of online worlds as a journalistic tool, enabling a direct, intimate form of communication with diverse people throughout the world. At the same time, it enables us to see these worlds as model and microcosm for the socioeconomic realm of the world at large. In either case, these worlds can help us understand the conflicts and values of our own material world — and for good and ill, begin to shape them. To emphasize how crucial the need to understand this next dramatic shift for the Internet, the author offers five likely futures in which online worlds directly impact national and international politics and the global economy — a time when MMOs help decide the outcomes of real–world elections and influence long–established jurisprudence, while authoritarian government attempt to repress them, and they become the next theater for terrorist and counterterrorist infiltration.