Chapter 11

PLAY AND SOCIABILITY IN THERE: SOME LESSONS FROM ONLINE GAMES FOR COLLABORATIVE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

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1. Introduction

While online games have become increasingly popular in recent years, there has been very little overlap between games research and virtual environments researchers. Indeed, one could argue that for a number of years, the design of video games have been ahead of virtual environment research, not only in technical aspects such as graphics or networking, but also in how game designers have managed their online worlds as social environments. Designers of online games have had to take seriously both the details of social interaction between individuals, but also how these interactions play out in the broader socio-economic balance of their online worlds [1].

In this chapter, we explore the lessons which collaborative virtual environments (CVEs) could derive from online gaming environments, focusing on mundane interaction.

Our activities and experiences in the real world depend in many ways upon mundane interaction for their operation [2]. Organisations whatever their size, in meetings and elsewhere, rely on talk [3]. Even the market transactions of currency traders depend upon chat for their coherence and reproducibility [4]. In a similar way in virtual environments it is in avatar-to-avatar interaction that experiences are configured. For virtual environments to be successful, we need to be able to interact with others around objects, refer to objects in our talk and share our awareness of other players and their movements [5].

This chapter focuses on these interactions, exploring how in the seemingly simple building blocks of talk and interaction around objects, enjoyable experiences are formed. We focus on the study of one game in detail, the social environment There, examining how its flat displays of colour come to form

meaningful social experiences for its players. As with other virtual environments, *There* moves beyond text chat to support acting together around objects. These shared activities generate a qualitatively different experience to the textual interactions common in MUDs and MOOs.

We focus on how these interactions build two key features of social life: *play* and *sociability*. Play is a prevalent feature of our experiences both in leisure and work. Indeed, although often presented as distinct from work, play is an integral part of work as well as leisure. Play gives us an ability to rest, learn, or experience and experiment with new activities and experiences. In online games, play is a focal concern. In particular, in *There*, we discuss how its non-competitive nature makes it a more playful online environment than other, more competitive online environments. Yet this can present a challenge to players in deciding what to do next, and co-ordinating their activity with others.

The second feature we address is the role of *sociability*. While it is hardly surprising to see online environments as social environments, the more conventional meaning of “social”—as in “sociable”—has been somewhat neglected. We argue that the key issue is not necessarily what sorts or number of social relationships are formed online, but rather how those relationships are performed in online spaces. We use Simmel’s discussion of sociability to give traction on understanding what it is about online environments that does (or does not) allow us to socialise online. In particular, we will argue that since in online virtual environments we can do things with others, we can “perform” our friendships in these environments.

2. **Method: Studying There**

Our original interest in *There* came from its innovative design for supporting social interactions [6]. *There*’s designers paid special attention to supporting avatar to avatar interactions, and chat more generally. This environment was therefore from the start designed as a social environment. *There* (www.there.com) has been open to the public since October 2003, although at that time it had been in beta testing for over a year, and development for over six. It is an online commercial environment, charging around $4 a month for access. *There* shares many of the features of other online virtual environments, such as “Active Worlds” (www.activeworlds.com), “Second Life” (www.secondlife.com), and other online, persistent role-playing games such as Everquest or Star Wars Galaxies. *There* is a persistent world with objects which can be manipulated, customisable avatars representing each user, and various facilities for interactions between avatars, and between avatars and objects.

Rather than as a competitive game as such, *There* is marketed as a “virtual getaway”—a world where social interaction and play are the main activities. There is no overall goal to *There* and its environment supports a range of