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THE VIRTUAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY:

SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, some historians started to experiment with computer-generated virtual environments as a new medium for representing spatial history beyond the written language; unfolding new potentials for understanding and representing history. The new medium introduces often neglected sensory modalities and the exposition of some aspects of history that may otherwise go unnoticed. It affords the use of phenomenology and semiotics as theoretical lenses for interpreting the past in ways not possible in traditional media. It also often employs symbolic realism (the use of perspectival constructions that emulate everyday experience) to enable new forms of individual and social engagements with the past. In doing so, it raises new epistemological questions not typically encountered by historians using traditional media. This paper aims to clarify some of the assumptions and premises at work in reconstructing the past using computer-generated virtual environments. It examines some epistemological concerns with the use of phenomenology and semiotics as theoretical lenses. It also explores the potentials and limitations of symbolic realism and its offshoots: the suspension of disbelief and the suspension of imagination.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, some historians started to experiment with computer-generated virtual environments as a new medium for representing spatial history beyond the written language; unfolding new potentials for understanding and representing history. The technical model for the new medium is borrowed from and inspired by online social and gaming virtual environments, which enjoyed a colossal popularity lately.¹

In this paper, I explore some of the assumptions and premises at work in reconstructing the past using computer-generated virtual environments. I start by a very general and brief exposition of massively multi-user online games (MMOG), the game genre based on which virtual reconstructions of history places are constructed. Then, I examine the affordances of the medium, exposing some of the assumptions and premises at work in reconstructing the past using these environments, and raising some epistemological questions.

MASSIVELY MULTI-USER ONLINE GAMES (MMOG)

Massively multi-user online games (MMOG) seems to be the accepted term in academic scholarship that describes a genre of online virtual environments also known as massively multi-user online role-playing games (MMORPGs), multi-user virtual environments (MUVES), persistent worlds, or persistent universes. MMOGs are Internet-based computer generated environments that allow a large number of users to interact with each other and with the environment. Some are strictly for social interactions (e.g., Second Life and Active Worlds). Others are game-based environments where users interact to achieve structured goals (e.g., World of Warcraft and Lord of the Rings Online).

These environments are sometimes called “persistent worlds,” because they continue to exist and change due to users interactions around the clock even while some users are not in the environment. If no technical issues are at stake, the environment does not pause at any time and users cannot undo their actions which may have consequences that they must deal with.

Almost all virtual environments ground their social interactions in a realistic or quasi-realistic perspectival representation of space where users are represented as anthropomorphic self-representations called “avatars.”² MMOG users are required to create an avatar on their first

entry to the environment. These avatars are usually gendered and highly customizable. Users typically spend a considerable time manipulating facial and bodily features and purchasing outfits to make their avatars unique. Some game-based virtual places also allow users to select a fictional race for their avatars (e.g., human, elf, dwarf, etc.) and a template role (e.g., champion, hunter, minister, etc.) that have different strengths and vulnerabilities.

Avatars allow users to explore the environment and interact with other people's avatars and non-playing characters (NPCs)—characters controlled by artificial intelligence (AI) and not by real people. Avatars can also interact with objects in the environment and in some cases make temporary or permanent changes that can affect other people's experience.

MMOG: THE MEDIUM

Our thinking is always reconstituted by the medium through which we try externalize our ideas. The prolific philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in a response to a comment on a change in his writing style when he switched to a typewriter, once admitted that “our writing equipment takes part in the forming of our thoughts.”³ Historians are generally oblivious to the effect of text as a medium on their thinking. Some historians experiment with MMOGs for representing places, escaping the determinism of textual mediation and unfolding new potentials for understanding and representing history.

The question is not whether place is represented or not: there is no such a thing as an unrepresented place. Representations are integral to the perception of place, part of its being and essential to its manifestation.⁴ The question is how place is represented in MMOG environments.

As I mentioned before, social interactions in MMOGs are grounded in realistic or quasi-realistic perspectival representations using perspectival constructions and camera effects. The art historian Erwin Panofsky famously argued that perspectival constructions impose certain conceptions of space upon our perception in the name of objectivity. They are tools of control and symbolism.⁵ They reflect a specific way of understanding nature and the world as perceived by the dominant class in the West at a certain conjunction of time. On the other hand, the camera is a mechanical system of reproducing perspective “that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism.”⁶ We tend to look at still and moving images produced by the camera as a source of beauty and authenticity.⁷ To that purpose, perspectival constructions, photography and cinema have done much to mediate and alternate our habits of seeing (e.g., our natural affinity to vistas, our preference for saturated colors, etc) while their content remains highly symbolic.⁸ They “domesticated” the human senses.⁹

The central characteristic of MMOGs is the use of imagery and interactivity to achieve immersion and co-presence. The suggestive and emotional effects produced introduce new ways of “experiencing” the past on one hand. On the other hand, they also deprive the human subject from the right to make decisions and to imagine. The observer tends to naturally accept the objectivity of perspectival constructions. Even trained scholars who deliberately visit MMOGs for critical analysis marvel at the swiftness in which they become unified with their avatars and start interacting with other avatars as real-life persons and not representations of these persons.¹⁰ The more immersive the construction is; the higher the suspension of disbelief is, and the more effective the symbolic content is.

Therefore, I argue that representations of place in MMOGs have two major offshoots: the suspension of disbelief and the suspension of imagination. The suspension of disbelief is a well

established concept in film theory. It refers to the observer's tendency to overlook the limitations of the medium, so that these do not interfere with his acceptance of the embedded message. The suspension of imagination, on the other hand, refers to the medium's tendency to limit the observer's imagination.¹¹

EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

MMOG-based virtual reconstructions of place, as discussed before, seem to stress the individual and social experience of place. As such, they lend themselves to a phenomenological interpretation of history in ways not possible in traditional media. However, some assumptions at work in these interpretations must be clarified.

The perception of place is a social, historical and spatial phenomenon.¹² It is preconditioned by our habitus.¹³ The original dwellers of a historical place lived in a different society and were shaped by a different history. They perceived their place in ways different than ours. Users of MMOGs tend to become unified with their avatars in a playful uncritical environment. Virtual reconstructions that use MMOG as a medium tend to abolish the difference between the human subject and his avatar on one hand and the actual and represented place on the other, regardless of their spatial and temporal displacement. As such, these reconstructions risk falling in the fallacy of presentism: a historical representation in which present-day perspectives are projected on interpretations of the past.

Unlike conventional scholarship, there exists no convention to establish authority in MMOGs (e.g. style conventions and bibliographical references). Moreover, most MMOGs today do not allow direct links between represented artifacts and other Internet content outside of the

environment. Therefore, virtual reconstructions of places must find ways inside MMOGs to stress that they have no claims to the reconstruction of an original experience.

Place is a social, historical and spatial phenomenon. It is not fixed in any of these three dimensions; it is a process.¹⁴ Place is heterogeneous¹⁵ and often this heterogeneity results in incompatible and juxtaposed places; which are mostly exclusive and subject to a dialectic of domination and appropriation.¹⁶ It is an agent in the everyday life.

Free variation of imagination is at the core of a phenomenological analysis of place.¹⁷ However, different representations tend to signify some variations and to erase the others. MMOGs tend to suspend imagination and to provide a conspicuously narrow range of free imagination and thus stress one interpretation and marginalize the others. This is a potential and a limitation of the medium, depending on the purpose for which it is used.

The discussion of the potential and limitations of the suspension of disbelief and the suspension of imagination in the virtual reconstruction of place also invites a discussion on how and why historians using traditional media employ text, illustrations and photography. Architectural historians traditionally use text to interpret place but they also employ illustrations and photography depending on the topic at hand and the intentions of the author. Text opens up the object of historical investigation for imagination and poetic shadings. Illustrations and drawings, much like text, allow the historian to highlight certain features and eliminate the rest. They also eliminate speculations about the visual aspects of the object at hand. Photographs tend to call on authenticity and restrict imagination. They seem to document an unmediated perception of the object.

Immersive reconstructions of places in MMOGs introduce some interpretations of place and ignore others. Many historians insist that these reconstructions are inherently interpretive and they function largely like the wealth of interpretations found in academic literature. This argument is problematic for academic literature is exclusive, Internet-based MMOGs are not. Most MMOGs are free to play and only require a high speed Internet access. MMOG users are not trained for critical analysis and do not have the means to discriminate between different alternatives. Moreover, MMOG users, unlike scholars, cannot challenge the authority of an interpretation or present an alternate interpretation using the same medium.

In 2006, an online virtual reconstruction of a Tang dynasty government office in a Chinese MMOG called Netease was a source for arguably the largest political protest in an MMOG. The reason was that the Tang dynasty office, which is symbolic of the nation state of China, had a background that looked like the rising sun, symbolic of imperial Japan. Many government offices in China had a painting of the “Green Mountain Ocean Water Morning Sunrise” on the back wall, usually represented as a red circle in the center of a white background. But among rumors that the MMOG at stake is about to be acquired by a Japanese company, the symbol was misread by the Chinese users of the MMOG for the Japanese “Hinomaru.”¹⁸

A phenomenological analysis is inherently engaged in semiotics. As I argued before, virtual reconstructions of places are highly symbolic. Beside the denoted message that appears to our immediate perception, there is a connoted message that is often ignored. Synesthetic perception is embedded in social and historical interpretations of reality, technology and the medium that are specific to the society in which the environment was deployed and may be misinterpreted if deployed online for a global audience. The stake holders in the aforementioned example have symmetrical access to—and means for the production of—Internet-based content.

In many other situations, this is not the case. The so-called “digital divide” between different classes within developed countries and between developed and developing countries amplifies the problem. In most cases stake holders do not have symmetrical access to information.

A free and interactive exploration of a place is the premise of virtual reconstructions of place. The new medium introduces new sensory modalities often ignored or misrepresented by text. A reconstruction of a virtual synesthetic experience exposes some aspects of history that are usually ignored by traditional methods of inquiry and opens up new ways of questioning, documenting and representing the past. The challenge for the virtual reconstruction of place seems to be especially significant when attempting to interpret extinct or inaccessible places. Most traditional historic accounts of places are text based. As I explained before, text is a form of mediation that has a formative effect on our thinking. Text, as a medium, affords some interpretive methods more than others. A historian may find that a detailed phenomenological account of the smallest of places is too extensive and taxing. His audience may find it boring and irrelevant. The same details would be insufficient to virtually reconstruct this same place in an MMOG in which users will dwell for only a few seconds. Exploring few ways of representing places of history entails new methods of documenting it including new sensory modalities usually ignored, like sounds and smells.

CONCLUSION

In this short paper, I tried to shed light on some of the assumptions and premises at work in reconstructing the past using massively multi-user online games (MMOGs) with special emphasis on the use of phenomenology as a theoretical lens that the new medium often employs. I tried to explore new epistemological questions that are not typically encountered by historians

using traditional media. They relate to the impact of media on the ways we think about history and on the ways in which we document it. MMOGs have the potential to enrich our knowledge of the past by exploring new questions and new sensory modalities not afforded by conventional media. On the other hand, MMOGs as a medium have the limitation—and sometimes the potential—of suspending disbelief and imagination, raising some questions about power and freedom in historical interpretations.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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